

# CONNECTIONS

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**INNOVATING FOR DEMOCRACY**

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

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# The Work of the Kettering Foundation: Challenges and Changes Ahead

By Sharon L. Davies



In 2027, the Kettering Foundation will celebrate its 100-year anniversary. It was founded in 1927 by Charles F. Kettering, one of the world's most prolific innovator-inventors. He invented the automatic self-starter for automobiles, and he also helped to invent things like Freon for our refrigerators and our air conditioners, a mechanism for cash registers that made them automatic, and many, many other things. Indeed, Charles Kettering had an innovator's mind, and his greatest philosophy in life was to embrace change and innovation as the path to progress and a better future.

For the past 40-plus years, the Kettering Foundation has focused on the question, What does it take to make democracy work as it should? Since its shift to democracy-focused work, the Kettering Foundation has been an important contributor to the field of public deliberation, guided by the philosophy that democratic societies progress through rights and mechanisms that enable citizen engagement, citizen deliberation, and concerted citizen action. Over the last few decades, the foundation has very intentionally built a rich body of research and resources; however, we made these important contributions in the context of a changing world. In recent years, democracies around the world are under threat, and it is



*Charles F. Kettering*

important for those of us who are committed to defending democracy to take notice of those threats, understand their seriousness, and, when necessary, evolve and adapt our work in response to them.

If democracy watchdog organizations like Freedom House and others who create respected democracy indexes are correct, after years of ascendance, conditions for democracy around the globe have worsened over the last 16 consecutive years. Almost nightly, we hear distressing reports of growing authoritarian threats, and we see leaders fomenting division in their societies, instilling fears of others instead of encouraging the cross-cultural understanding

and consensus-building efforts that bolster democracies. These are leaders, Freedom House writes, who “once in power” suggest that “their responsibility is only to their own demographic or partisan base, disregarding other interests and segments of society and warping the institutions in their care so as to prolong their rule.”

In some countries, including the United States, antidemocratic rhetoric about increasingly diverse demographics have been used to stoke fear and anxiety. In fact, recently, the prime minister of Hungary, Viktor Orbán, denounced “mixing races,” saying that places where European and non-European



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people intermingled had essentially forfeited their nationhood and were “no longer nations,” as if some imagined form of racial purity should be Europe’s goal. That mindset for many harkened back to the days of Nazism. It even caused a longtime staffer of Orbán’s to resign in protest. Orbán’s remarks attracted rebuke from leaders worldwide, but he shrugged off the criticism claiming to be misunderstood and, just weeks later, he received a hero’s welcome at the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) held in Texas.

So, unfortunately, we are living in a time when such events are being normalized, and it is important for all defenders of democracy to be attentive of those political leaders who play on voters’ fears of diversifying populations. Rather than recognizing the potential and promise in that diversification—and all the creative and innovative power that diversity holds—leaders with antidemocratic and authoritarian tendencies do the opposite, spreading fear and division.

There are other threats to democracy about which we are rightly concerned. In many nations we see an erosion in the rule of law, which democracies rely upon to constrain the impulses of authoritarian-minded leaders. We see waning public confidence in democratic institutions, and the erosion of democratic norms, the soft guardrails of democracy. In the United States, we have seen hard-won rights, like voting rights, imperiled by new efforts to make voting more difficult, particularly in localities where minorities reside. We have seen attacks on the independence of our press, in its role as watchdog.

There is also concerning evidence of the fraying of the checks and balances that our framers designed to guard against tyranny. The United States Supreme Court is increasingly accused of ideological activism. It has enhanced the rights of personhood

enjoyed by corporations, stripped rights of reproductive freedom from women, eroded voting rights, and sanctioned the expansion of gun rights at a time of exploding gun violence. The legislative branch is largely gridlocked along partisan lines, with historically low public approval ratings.

An assault on the ways in which certain topics are being taught in our public schools is afoot as well. Underway in the United States is a sweeping effort to restrict how teachers explore the topics of race and gender in public schools. More than 35 of the 50 states have taken steps to restrict classroom discussions of the nation's history of racism and how

the toxic fruits of that history might continue to constrict opportunities today. There are bills in a number of state legislatures forbidding teachers from offering instruction that “promotes division” between the races, or “promotes resentment” of members of a particular race, or teaching that causes student “discomfort,” “guilt,” or “anguish” due to their race. In Iowa, lawmakers proposed that teachers be banned from describing the United States as “systemically racist or sexist.”

Critics of such bans have made the argument that, among other things, the new restrictions would prohibit a teacher from assigning her students to read the collection of Pulitzer



Prize-winning essays published by the *New York Times* called *The 1619 Project*, which reframed the history of the United States by putting the enslavement and contributions of Black Americans at the center of our national narrative. Once such bans are in place, violations can lead to teacher termination or cuts to school funding. Online forms have been created to enable parents of students who resent being taught about race or gender in ways they find objectionable to complain. Teachers have already reported decisions to self-censor out of fear of the consequences. Other bills and governmental restrictions have targeted teaching students about

sexual orientation or instruction that promotes “gender fluidity.”

It is significant that these restrictions will apply to public school systems in the United States that continue to be largely segregated by race, at a time when suicides and suicide attempts among the young are disproportionately high in the LGBTQIA+ community. Recently, a Texas school board near Dallas voted to limit discussion on gender identity and nonbinary pronouns. Other schools have limits confining students’ identity to the biological sex listed on their birth certificates or confining students to restrooms that correspond to their biological sex. One state ban broadly prohibited educational materials that “promote, normalize, support or address” LGBTQIA+ issues.

These new assaults on democracy ring familiar. For much of our history, democracy was more of an idea than an actual practice, and in many ways, we’re still in the stage of becoming democratically minded people. When our founders described our democracy as a system of governance by “We the people,” they used the word *people* in a very expansive way—far more expansive than they actually meant. Women—half of the population—were not included. Certainly, African Americans were not included. They were enslaved and



**For much of our history, democracy was more of an idea than an actual practice, and in many ways, we’re still in the stage of becoming democratically minded people.**



not even considered full people to begin with. The native people of the land were also totally neglected. A part of the democratic project from the very start has been to become a democracy, and major movement toward that goal was made during the civil rights era. Unfortunately, we have entered a new period of backlash, despite all the progress that we made in the United States in the 1950s and the 1960s.

On January 6, 2021, for the first time in the history of the United States, we witnessed an attempt to prevent the peaceful transfer of presidential power. It was not a military coup, but a congressional commission has made the case that the attack on the US Capitol was the result of our past president's effort to remain in power after the vote of the people had gone against him, and that he did that by sowing distrust in the integrity of the vote counts of the states he did not carry, against all credible evidence to the contrary, and by encouraging violence to prevent the certification of the election results in favor of his opponent. This was a new experience for the people of the United States—and a threat to democracies worldwide. Although Donald Trump's effort did not succeed, it must continue to concern us because, more than a year into President Biden's administration, many of

his predecessor's supporters continue to repeat the lie that the election was stolen, and many elected officials in his party in Congress refuse to refute that falsehood.

Work in support of democracy in the 21st century has to confront the realities of inequality in our systems. If you read some of the major works of scholars who are writing about democracy today, extreme levels of inequality in our community are often cited as one of the major threats to democracy. Democracy should mean, at minimum, that we have a system that is providing shared opportunities for self-actualization of all our citizens. Democracy works when all members of a community are free to engage in the project of self-governance as civic equals, when they are encouraged to listen to each other with a desire to understand their different lived experiences and different points of view, and where they search for ways to achieve some mutually desired good or collective course of action that is in the service of all. Leaders committed to democracy understand the value of such an engaged community, embrace the strength of their community's diversity, and are prepared to protect the rights of all to participate in the project of democratic self-governance. Yet, if we have citizens who are that dramatically different, living



dramatically different lives, are they equally situated to engage in the kind of deliberation that has been such an important focus of the Kettering Foundation?

At the foundation, we have long recognized the critical role of citizens—of an engaged public—at the center of American life. Our work has centered around the essential role of citizens actively engaged with one another in the work of self-governance and the shaping of our own communities. Not passive

subjects of our government, but the active directors of our own affairs. And, while it is important to be able to deliberate across lines of difference among citizens who are committed to democracy—not all persons are. A *New York Times*/Siena College poll recently reported that a large percentage of Americans believe that democracy is under threat, but not all are moved to defend against that threat. We don't know why, and we must take steps to better understand this phenomenon. We also will make a very big mistake, as defenders of democracy, if we do not accept the difficult truth that not everyone believes that all voices are equal or need to be equally heard.

Since I joined the foundation, we at Kettering have been in deep reflection about our work and our place in the landscape of organizations that seek to advance democracy. This reflection has led us to a series of critical questions that will drive our next steps. How can we as a foundation go beyond the expertise that we have developed in the field of deliberative democracy to think about inequalities and how those inequalities are threatening our democracy? What does the prodemocracy movement demand of us? What is our role in bringing about an inclusive and equitable democracy? How might we contribute to the dismantling of



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barriers that serve some but disserve others?

Now is the time for us to harness the strengths and resources of this foundation to support those things that we cannot afford to deliberate about—the absolute requisites of democracy. In the days ahead, our world will depend on all of us to safeguard and to build the kind of inclusive democratic systems that make space for all. ■

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*Sharon L. Davies is the president and CEO of the Kettering Foundation.*

# The Citizens' Accord Forum: Building a Shared Society in a Sustainable Democracy

By Phillip D. Lurie and Udi Cohen

Conflict among social identity groups presents a fundamental threat to democratic self-governance. These identities reflect how people see themselves, and how others see them, and can vary in differing social contexts. Social identities include gender, race, sexual orientation, religion, economic class, and political ideology, among others.

The Kettering Foundation has been working with the Citizens' Accord Forum (CAF) to convene Israeli citizens, both Jews and Arabs, around issues of universal interest (e.g., education of youth, youth at risk, domestic violence, and abuse of religious beliefs). The idea is that the



SHELLEE FISHER PHOTOGRAPHY

sense people have of identities—of themselves and of others—will expand *as the recognition of the nature of the issues they share* expands. Recognition of the interconnections among different but related interests can drive the development of constructive exchange among people—even among groups with a history of conflict.

This point was illustrated in a powerful way one day in 2017, when Rabbi Shmuel began the closing discussion of a deliberative dialogue between Jewish rabbis and Muslim clerics by saying, “As you are aware, we, the rabbis in our group, prohibit Jews from visiting the Temple Mount until the Messiah arrives. However, it is still important for us to know that you, the Muslim clerics in the group, at least recognize that our Temple once stood in that spot—the location today of your mosque, Haram al-Sharif.”

The rabbi spoke hours before the meeting’s conclusion, when time was set aside for the participants to sign off on the final draft of a joint working paper. The paper was the result of several days of a deliberative dialogue on the shared problem of at-risk youth who are disconnected from their communities.

How did Rabbi Shmuel’s statement relate to the topic? It seems strange to have a question so difficult

and complex arise at that point in the process, especially one apart from the topic at hand.

Rabbis and clerics had worked together for several days. They had reached the point of publicly committing to joint action on an issue of shared concern, one that both groups had been grappling with within their own communities. They had much in common and had learned a great



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deal from each other through the deliberative process. It was clear that working together going forward would help each side.

Why was it so critical then, for Rabbi Shmuel and the group of rabbis, immediately before the truly groundbreaking move of ultra-Orthodox rabbis and Muslim clerics publishing their first joint working paper, to raise one of the root problems of the Jewish-Arab conflict? Despite knowing that he would not receive the answer he was looking for from his Muslim colleagues, Rabbi Shmuel was willing to risk the outcome of the hard work he had contributed to so significantly.

What about the Muslim clerics? They were immensely proud of the joint efforts and the progress they had achieved, yet they were unwilling to let go of their beliefs and perceptions even slightly. Why? What is the mechanism by which these contentious issues can be addressed?

As facilitators of dialogues, CAF understood that if the group did not ask itself these questions, it would not be able to end the week of discussions with the commitment of all participants to continue on a common path. Most likely, we would have concluded the meeting in the same manner as many other dialogue meetings—talk, energy, but no shared commitment.

Instead, we facilitated a difficult and tense discussion involving many concerns and fears on all sides. It was evident that we would not be able to reach a consensus. However, we did observe a fascinating phenomenon here: unlike other dialogues, this group concluded that we needed “to agree on how to disagree” during this intractable discussion. Ultimately, this agreement allowed the work to continue. The week ended with the creation of a joint document that codified their interest in joint work and joint ventures.

As this example shows, there are crucial design-related aspects to these initiatives, particularly the explicit focus on *issues*. When initiatives are focused on group *identities*, people can reduce themselves to a single identity, and in so doing, public issues inevitably become reduced to simple binary (zero-sum) negotiations. But seeing issues as simple binary problems ignores the complexities involved and ultimately leads to poor decision-making and unsustainable solutions. Moreover, this approach denies the reality that people often have many concerns related to a particular issue. These concerns are each equally valid and they overlap. Public concerns are dynamic, changing depending on local contexts, individual perceptions, group interactions, and other



factors. The key is to both raise and reconcile these interrelated concerns.

CAF's efforts are motivated by a desire to convene people who share an interest and have the capacities to deal constructively with issues of shared concern to those who live together in a region. People share the tensions inherent among the multitudes of interests they all represent. This explicit approach in design has been critical to CAF's work and a distinguishing feature.

### **FROM THE WAR OF IDENTITY POLITICS TO A DIALOGUE BETWEEN IDENTITIES**

Again, this is not to say that identity is unimportant, should be ignored, or is a nonstarter when addressing shared problems. Rather, as the

discussion stemming from Rabbi Shmuel's provocative question illustrates, CAF's approach recognizes the multitudes of identities we each bring into a space and the need to reconcile the tensions among the concerns that they represent.

In a world taken over by the polarizing discourse of "it's not what is said but who said it that matters, and whether we are for or against the speaker," we need to move from the war of identity politics to a dialogue between identities. It is important to develop tools for dialogue between identities so that these multitudes can be identified and their overlapping nature understood and reconciled. Conducting these dialogues of identities remains the central challenge in CAF's work.

CAF has learned that the ticket to meaningful dialogue is based on a balanced approach that recognizes the group has a “language” through which it can address the topic under discussion. Without such recognition, the dialogue is usually reduced to the classic question of, “What don’t we agree about?” rather than the more important question, “Why don’t we agree?” Unfortunately, most of the groups CAF is working with do not feel that they have such a language.

In the course of building this missing language, CAF has learned that the language sought by most of the groups is based on competing values, and so what is needed is a way to convert values that are held as absolute into competing values, allowing a balance between them to

be found. Dialogue must be aimed at finding the balance between these competing values by considering the trade-offs and examining the price that we, as a group and as a society, are willing to pay for the desired change.

To do this, CAF combines the dialogue that addresses the individual with a dialogue that also addresses the community structure, the social issues, and the resulting identities. This combination enables developing the consciousness of partnership—not just participation based mostly on shared interests. The consciousness of partnership is the starting point of the construction of a common civic ethos, and it guarantees the consciousness of sharing over time in a viable and stable process.





## A DIALOGUE THAT ALSO ADDRESSES THE COMMUNITY STRUCTURE

Dialogue between individuals with a distinguished identity (such as Jew, Arab, religious, secular) generally includes a review of each individual within themselves, including how they feel about the issue. In most cases the individual turns outward to the dialogue with the other group as part of a specific group. In many cases, dialogue groups based on the dialogue between individuals with a distinguished identity find it difficult to maintain that consciousness for long. For example, people who position themselves as a close-connected identity group are more apt to engage in a dialogue of identity, not a dialogue around shared issues and the trade-offs inherent in working through the problems at hand. The difficulty stems from, among other things, the lack of productivity that comes about when focusing on the root problems of the conflict. In many cases, when the groups are asked to develop a deep and long-lasting commitment, they will prefer to return to the “comfort zone” of identity politics and binary choices. Thus, for example, CAF learned that Jews and Arabs will return to the question of “who initiated the conflict in 1948,” which is a familiar topic in Israel: the language is familiar, and



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one can return to the argument in a friendly atmosphere without being too committed. Arabs, Jews, liberals, and conservatives in most cases come to the dialogue as one particularly defined group. In these cases, the dialogues result in the usual “politics of identity” discourse. To avoid this, CAF allows each group to first run

dialogues among themselves so that they can work through the different approaches (including the trade-off questions). Only after this can they begin to coordinate dialogues with other groups.

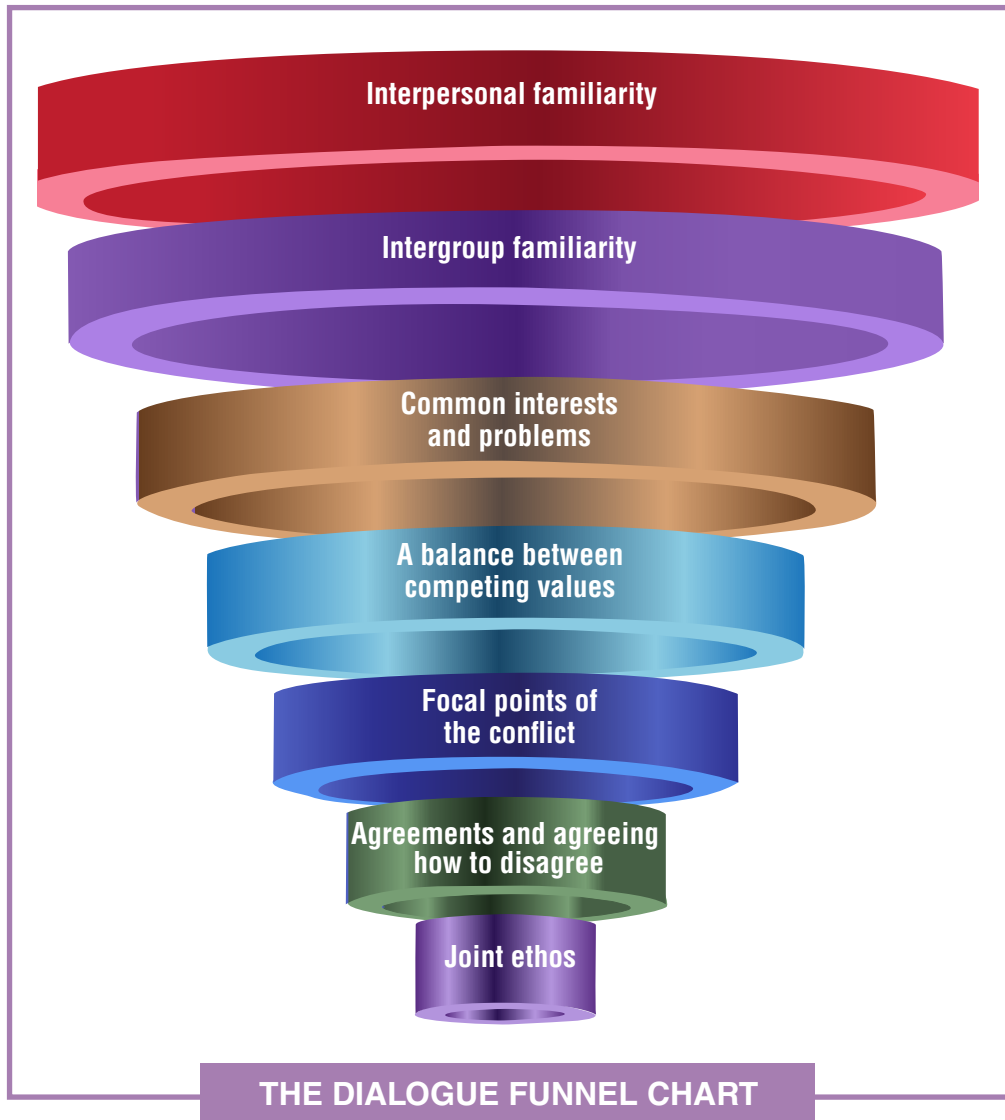
In addition, dialogue between identities—in which attention is turned to social and communal elements—simultaneously kicks off

an interesting process of dialogues within each reference group as well as between different groups in each population. For example, between liberals and conservatives, liberals will discuss an issue among themselves while simultaneously discussing it with conservatives. Here, the turning outward from an identity politics approach often appears coupled with the willingness to develop cooperation on the level of civic agendas. The minimum required here is on the level of “agreeing how to disagree.” From here onward, one can build a consciousness of viable partnerships and greatly contribute to the possibility of developing a shared civilian ethos.

#### THE TRADE-OFF QUESTIONS

Deliberative dialogue is based on trade-offs: questions that ask what price we are prepared to pay in order to balance competing values. CAF has learned that focusing on competing values enables participants in each group to develop their own unique language, a language through which people can begin to address shared public problems. Deliberative dialogue also enables the different groups to reduce the number of absolute values over which they are prepared to “go to war” in their work with each other. This reduction is enabled by the translation of these

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absolute values into competing values. The competing values create the ability for “agreeing how to disagree,” as did the rabbis and Muslim clerics. This is an essential element in building a common civic ethos in a polarized society.

The ability to agree to disagree is built upon tolerance. Group participants developed the approach, “I am willing to tolerate your choice when I understand that you are choosing one competing value over another,

but I understand that this is your way. You are mistaken, but let’s be tolerant and find the way to progress together. There is no other way. Let’s agree how to disagree.” Considering this, CAF drafted a dialogue funnel chart, creating a type of program model for group work. ■

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# On the Formation of Citizens

By Elizabeth Gish and Camryn Wilson



Citizens are made, not born. They are made by the communities where they live; the institutions that shape their lives; their education, careers, and family contexts; the practices into which they are drafted and decide to take on; the identities that are thrust upon them and those that they choose to embrace. This article will consider the ways that community engagement in a higher education context contribute to forming certain kinds of citizens.

## SERVICE AS A CITIZEN- FORMATION PROJECT

What we *do* shapes who we *are*. That is, our practices and habits not only

shape the world around us but also shape our identities, our understanding of our role in the world, and our ethical and moral commitments. Too often, colleges and universities overemphasize content acquisition, but information transfer is only a small part of education. It is important to pay just as much, if not more, attention to the practices and habits into which institutions of higher education socialize students.

At colleges and universities across the United States, service-learning is the leading model for community engagement. While experts may quibble over the details, in its ideal form service-learning is:

- reflective and engaging;
- undertaken with attention to students' broader educational and professional goals;
- sustainable and has a meaningful impact over the longer term;
- designed to encourage students to learn about and engage with issues of justice, fairness, and equity; and
- not intended to be a one-way provision of services such as cleaning a park or serving soup at a soup kitchen. Instead, students and community members should work together collaboratively to design the intended outcomes of the service program.

Service-learning emphasizes the root causes and broader societal structures that influence social challenges. As is the case with most practices, the ideal form is largely aspirational. As it is carried out, service-learning rarely reflects all of these characteristics.

Although service-learning is an improvement over more paternalistic versions of community service or volunteerism, it is a flawed model for citizenship formation. First, service-learning invites students into practices that highlight divisions between those who have and those who do not have, those who need and those who have something to give, those whose careers and educa-

tions are paramount and those whose lives and problems are the topic of a course or focus of a cocurricular activity. Even at its very best, service-learning privileges the education of the students doing the serving rather than the well-being of people and communities that are the objects of such service. While concerted efforts have been made to correct for the underlying xenophobia, sexism, classism, and racism that are often



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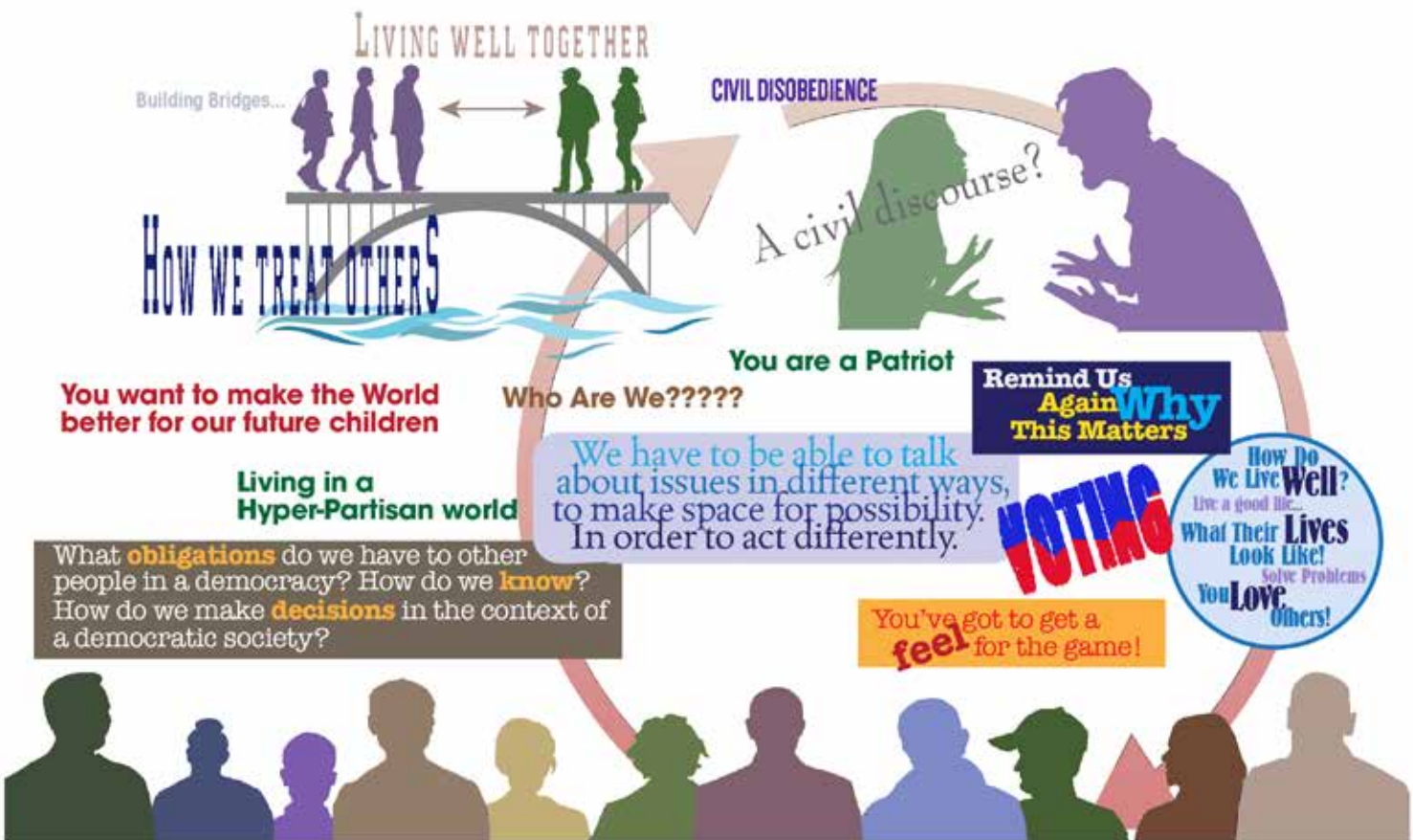
woven into traditional forms of service, service-learning cannot help but maintain a framework where more privileged people are doing things to help people who are less privileged and more marginalized, and where the lives and struggles of the less privileged are being used as a text and resource for others' education and growth.

Additionally, in the context of higher education, service-learning forms citizens who see social problems as learning opportunities *for them*. Accounts of the ways in which service-learning initiatives strengthened democratic capacity or contributed more just, equitable systems are

few and far between. The focus of service-learning research is on the benefits that it can provide to the students, the professors and administrators who lead the work, and the institutions of higher education that sponsor the service. The literature on how it impacts communities, including if and to what extent it brings about meaningful democratic change or increases community capacity, are, at best, an afterthought, but in most cases completely absent.

The efforts of—and positive outcomes resulting from—the many faculty, students, and community members who design and implement responsible, meaningful, and sustainable service-learning efforts should not be minimized. Service-learning has come a long way from the community service days where (usually) well-intentioned professionals and students entered communities without attention to the power dynamics and potential for harm that can come from service that is not mindful of issues of privilege, history, or culture. Countless studies highlight that there are both short and long-term benefits for students who take part in service-learning, and many communities that have been the targets of such service are, of course, appreciative and receive some measure of benefit, however fraught. Yet, keeping in mind one of

**“ Keeping in mind one of the central insights from Kettering Foundation research, we know that for people to build thriving, healthy communities, they must be able to learn together in a democratic context.**



the central insights from Kettering Foundation research, we know that for people to build thriving, healthy communities, they must be able to learn together in a democratic context. John McKnight, cofounder of the Asset-Based Community Development Institute and a Kettering Foundation senior associate, highlights this when he notes, “I have never seen service systems that brought people to well-being, delivered them to citizenship, or made them free.” What kind of engagement

practices might invite students into processes that move communities toward well-being and freedom?

The benefits of service-learning can be maintained without reliance on a service model. There are models of community engagement that allow for the creation of interactive spaces where people come together to address public problems, as best they can, through collaboration, creation, and shared purpose. Community engagement can be approached through an asset-based

lens and a lens of public work, where engagement is not something done *to* others. In some ways, service-learning theory has sought to rescue service from itself, attempting to create something grounded in equity, collaboration, sustainability, and democratic hope. But this is not what service is. Service requires doing something *to* or *for* someone. Kettering Foundation research done in collaboration with allies and community thought partners repeatedly highlights that democracy does not need more

**“An asset-based, public, and democratic approach to community engagement foregrounds collective strengths and possibilities and asks that associations, individuals, and institutions work with one another to recognize what a community already has instead of focusing on what someone else can give them.”**

people doing things to or for each other, but rather *with* each other.

An asset-based, public, and democratic approach to community engagement foregrounds collective strengths and possibilities and asks that associations, individuals, and institutions work with one another to recognize what a community already has instead of focusing on what someone else can give them. Such a model corrects the false narratives about marginalized people and communities as being “in need” and “at risk.” The time has come to end the practice of treating marginalized communities and people as a real-life textbook for college students’ education. In shifting away from service, we can move toward models that are promising in terms of forming citizens who see themselves as part of a community and as part of addressing societal challenges that are neither others’ issues nor the issues of “the other.” Rather, in non-service-based models, the issues of society can be seen and felt as part of the lifeworld of student-citizens living in an interconnected society.

#### **ALTERNATIVE APPROACHES TO CITIZEN-FORMATION**

The approach discussed here offers the potential for retaining the positive outcomes of service-based community engagement for faculty,





*A Western Kentucky University class called Citizen and Self that focused on citizenship and civic life was conducted over the course of seven years with more than one thousand students.*

students, universities, and communities while avoiding some of the challenges that come with service-oriented models. The following example is but one among many where communities, colleges and universities, faculty, and students are rethinking possibilities for community engagement. The example we discuss promotes strong democratic citizenship habits among students and in the communities where they live and emphasizes the formational aspect of the engagement. This approach was used at Western Kentucky University over the course of seven years with more than one thousand students in a class called

Citizen and Self, which focused on citizenship and civic life.

One of the central assignments of the course was a community deliberation project where students researched a local issue of their choosing and designed a National Issues Forums-style deliberation guide about the issue. Teams of students researched and wrote a 20-page background paper and developed a 3-5 page deliberation guide. They then hosted and facilitated a democratic public deliberation that was attended by members of the community, including students and faculty. The deliberation involved weighing different framings of a local

issue and discussing how the issue might be collectively addressed.

To carry out the assignment, students engaged in conversations with community members and spent time in the community to learn more about the issue. If they did a project on green space, they visited parks and spoke to the people there. If they studied homelessness, they spoke with a range of people in the community who were connected to this issue: nonprofit leaders, housed people, churches, unhoused people, teachers, and police. In class, the students reflected together about their own experiences with the issues they sought to understand: How did this issue impact them? People they know? The community where they were currently living? The place where they grew up?

The assignment emphasized the six democratic practices that have emerged from Kettering Foundation research over the previous decades. This includes collaboratively naming, framing, and deliberating about public issues. A central focus in this class was that naming, framing, and deliberating could be meaningful practices in and of themselves; there was no requirement to develop an initiative or project. A community nonprofit leader noted, “It was so helpful for us to work with others to understand how they understood

the issue of hunger in our community. We realized that we had been framing the issue in ways that didn’t really resonate with the community, or, I guess, resonated differently with different groups. Like we were just doing it from our perspective.” Of the naming, framing, and deliberation process a student noted, “I always thought of this issue as a black and white issue. Like there was right and wrong. I guess that is just how it seems like if you hear about [it] in the news and stuff. And like from my parents. But by talking to people who, you know, are actually, like living this situation, I see that it is a lot more complicated and the way we talked about it . . . it is kind of part of my own issue, too. I don’t really know what to do about it, but I can see that there are a lot of different ways to approach it and think about it. I never really dealt with that before in my other classes or in high school.”

While some initiatives and changes did emerge from the deliberations, a central outcome of the assignment was the invitation and initiation into practices of citizenship that were collaborative and deliberative. We learn how to be citizens by practicing how to be citizens. There was an emphasis both rhetorically and practically on the inclusion of a range of voices, perspectives, and experiences, and a strong emphasis

on understanding that issues are complex, multifaceted, and rarely black and white. Finally (and centrally), marginalized communities and people were not the central subjects of the students' research nor were they the target of services or projects. While everyday practical changes in communities that come from democratic processes are important, it is equally important to pay attention to the ways that practices shape the people who are taking part in them. Whose voices are heard and elevated? Are certain groups either explicitly or implicitly highlighted as a problem? Who are the "experts?" Whose learning is prioritized?

Service-learning is popular for institutions of higher education, and giving it up will be a challenge. In one discussion at a Kettering Foundation research exchange, a faculty member noted, "There is no reason to even suggest an engagement project that doesn't have service-learning in the title. This is what the administration knows, it is what they want. Even if that is not the bulk of what we are doing, we need to find a way to call it service-learning." Advocates who have invested substantial resources into reforming service as a pedagogy grounded in principles of justice and equality will find it hard to give it up. But it is time for a new model. When



**When service is eliminated from community engagement, we create space for new and creative ways to conceptualize approaches to citizen-formation with an eye toward a democracy that is more deliberative, pluralistic, just, multiracial, and equitable.**

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service is eliminated from community engagement, we create space for new and creative ways to conceptualize approaches to citizen formation with an eye toward a democracy that is more deliberative, pluralistic, just, multiracial, and equitable. Such an approach is long overdue. ■

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# Learning Exchange: A Democratic Way of Working

By Sarah L. Murphy and Brad Rourke



**D**emocracy offers the ways and means through which people can collectively control their own future. People decide what problems they face together and what to do about them. They may act in greater or lesser concert with one another. And they learn about what works in the face of their problems and opportunities.

Collective learning is key, as it generates a loop of insight and action that can lead to greater democratic capacity. In this way, Kettering's theory of democracy is learning-based. People learn their way into new ways of acting together. The essence of democracy is collective learning.

In its research, Kettering has developed a way of working with others that is intended to model, foster, and spread such democratic learning. To many, it may appear that these are just a lot of meetings. But they are more than that: they are learning exchanges. Each builds an intentional relationship among participants, where the key distinguishing feature is that it is a dialogue with a shared understanding that joint learning is the intended outcome.

For many years, Kettering's way of trying to learn and spread new insights about democracy through such relationships included meetings, held in person at our campus in Dayton, Ohio, where people could be



fully immersed in democratic learning. Part of that immersion included Kettering program staff and exchange participants who agreed to a set of research questions that helped to guide the series of meetings. This resulted in a shared commitment to learning.

All this was tested by the COVID-19 pandemic. In-person meetings, something that the foundation had relied upon for its research and democratic learning, came to a sudden halt. Virtual meetings on Zoom became the new normal for businesses and nonprofits alike. While Kettering was adapting to virtual and hybrid (a combination of online and in-person) learning exchange meetings along with the rest of the

country, it became clear that this was an opportunity to study and learn more about our own practices.

A hybrid meetings task force began as a small team charged with interrogating how to convene such meetings. We wanted to explore how to do meetings well in a virtual environment and initially focused on the technology required, the length, and frequency of hybrid meetings. Memos researched and written by Michele Archie, a Kettering associate, became the foundation for a conversation about the craft of designing and executing hybrid meetings. Program officers and associates joined the task force in exploring how technology can further the aims of Kettering's research and



**“ We wanted to know what works and does not, what we can do better, and how we can take the best of in-person and virtual meeting formats to create an experience for participants that furthers the research.**

allow for democratic learning. Here are a few key takeaways from these conversations:

- Start with the end goal in mind: What learning do we want to achieve and how much time do we need? What will the work be? How will we communicate with each other? By starting here, both participants and convenors can engage in shared learning no matter how they are present in the meeting.
- Intentionally create something special, provide equal footing for all participants, and recognize that how people are invited matters.
- A hybrid exchange can go beyond the set meeting time (synchronous and asynchronous) and involve diverse ways of learning, various platforms of collaboration, and flexibility.
- No matter how a meeting is executed, a learning exchange is about a relationship. This requires quality interactive conversations where we learn together and an immersive environment that promotes participation by everyone.

It soon became clear that even with the best technical equipment in place, it does not matter if the meeting is not designed and executed well. Archie described that

conceptual shift this way: “How do we encourage meaningful interaction and collaboration between remote and on-site participants in a single, shared meeting?” We focused specifically on the craft of designing learning exchanges to facilitate meetings that move our research forward and provide opportunities for collective learning. We wanted to know what works and does not, what we can do better, and how we can take the best of in-person and virtual meeting formats to create an experience for participants that furthers the research.

Our first insight was that we did not know enough about how participants experienced exchanges or what they were expecting from an exchange. Was collective learning happening? Did the Kettering way of working indeed model, spread, and foster democratic learning? To find out, Archie interviewed a number of people involved in designing and executing six different learning exchanges conducted between 2016 and 2021. This included Kettering staff and participants from outside Kettering, both first-time participants as well as people who have been a part of the Kettering network for several years. Of the six exchanges, all had different purposes and designs. Two were conducted in person, three were virtual, and one started in person and transitioned

## LEARNINGS FROM EXPERIMENTS WITH HYBRID MEETINGS

- Be clear about the purpose of the meeting
- Have ground rules for expectations and participation
- Intentionally design and consider designing with participants
- Plan shorter and more frequent virtual meetings
- Create a sense of belonging and a shared culture
- Provide flexibility for virtual attendees
- Have a moderator for both in-person and virtual participants who work together to engage both types of participants
- Plan asynchronous work for in-between meetings and as pre-work
- Use digital collaboration tools: Slack, Google Docs, MURAL, Zoom
- Quality audio is more important than quality video

to virtual when the pandemic hit in early 2020. All the exchanges were built around practical engagement or experimentation that participants undertook between meetings.

This work revealed two key ways in which working through learning exchange creates value for participants: (1) exchanges generate insights that shape personal and professional understandings of civic life and

influence their professional and civic practices, and (2) they create new ideas for professional practice, based on their own experimentation and on hearing from other participants. These two elements are key to the collective learning loop described above. In addition, both exchange participants and Kettering program officers value the relationships developed.

The value of relationships is directly related to what interviewees identified as the top contributing feature of exchange design: the cohort. Most people prized the experience of participating with a mix of people from other places. The support, discussion, and collaboration that

occurs in these exchanges all helped participants in shifting their mindset and seeing that they were not alone in the work. In some exchanges, these cohorts became their own separate learning communities (which is another way to say that collective learning was occurring).

Asked for suggestions in each interview, exchange participants shared that they prefer smaller cohorts with more specific agendas that allow for deeper discussions. While they understand what they each learned from their experience in the exchange, it was not always clear to them what was learned or generated collectively. Closing the loop can help the group reflect on its collective





learning. Both exchange participants and program officers thought that combining in-person exchanges with virtual meetings was the best way to design learning exchanges in the future. In-person meetings provide a greater opportunity to develop relationships and create a cohort, while virtual meetings could be more frequent and focused on progress reports and specific questions from individuals or teams.

Michele Archie's report became an opportunity for Kettering program staff and network members to discuss and reflect on the interviews with exchange participants. That conversation surfaced several keys for Kettering to keep in mind as it looks ahead to future work:

- Be clear that we use the word *exchange* in two ways: (1) a relationship that develops over time with learning at the center, or (2) one episode, a meeting.
- Make clear to participants that what they are doing and learning matters to Kettering's research.
- Recognize that this way of working has a learning curve.
- Appreciate that collective learning takes time and can cause a sense of uncertainty. While both can be a challenge when there is urgency to the problems, it is important to recognize that learning and relationship building takes time.



**Since its founding in 1927, the work of Kettering has evolved and continues to do so. Through it all, the foundation maintains its commitment to experimentation and learning.**

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Since its founding in 1927, the work of Kettering has evolved and continues to do so. Through it all, the foundation maintains its commitment to experimentation and learning. The past two and a half years forced us to experiment and learn our way through new ways of designing and executing learning exchanges. Reflecting on the resulting successes and failures positions us to better understand how collective learning can be improved—regardless of format. ■

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# The Battle to Preserve Our Democracy: An Interview with Sharon L. Davies

By Scott London



*Sharon L. Davies stepped into the role of president and CEO of the Kettering Foundation in April 2022. Journalist and longtime Kettering collaborator Scott London sat down with her to talk about the threats facing democracy today, some early takeaways from her first months on the job, and where she hopes to lead the foundation in the years ahead.*

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**Scott London:** Many worry that we are in a period of democratic decline in America. New restrictions on voting rights, a loss of trust in government, racial and economic inequalities, and intensifying polarization are now posing serious threats to our democracy. What do you see?

**Sharon L. Davies:** I would describe it as a battle for the preservation of our democracy. We are a deeply fragmented society today and

unfortunately some of the fragmentation is being deliberately and intentionally organized by those who are not committed to democratic principles and values. There are some among us who seem complacent about the enduring nature of our democracy and might even prefer an authoritarian leader or an autocratic system of governance if it means they can control the reins of power.

I think we have good evidence for this in events like those of January 6, 2021. A past sitting president refused to commit himself to the peaceful transition of power, which is one of the fundamental requirements of a democratic system of government.

We also know there are many in our country who fear our increasing diversity today. It is serious because it is a clear sign that instead of embracing our growing diversity as a strength, some are looking in the opposite direction and seeing it as a weakness and wishing for an earlier time in our history when our society was less diverse.

**London:** In their book *Four Threats: The Recurring Crises of American Democracy*, Suzanne Mettler and Robert Lieberman describe conflicts around diversity—debates about who has a rightful place in our political community—as one of several enduring challenges facing our democracy.

**Davies:** One of the striking things about that book is the authors' observation that American democracy has gone through crises throughout its history. If we think back to the Civil War, for example, we were as close to falling apart as a democratic nation as we have ever been. A big part of it had to do with the deeply polarized views of our citizenry on the institution of slavery.

During the civil rights era of the 20th century, we were similarly polarized about the treatment of Black citizens. We had a system of legalized discrimination against Black Americans and had to work through very extreme differences of opinion about how to address that. We survived that, too.

One of the oddly comforting things about *Four Threats* is the case it makes that we have come through crises of democracy before. But I say that without meaning to suggest that we should take the dangers today lightly. We can't afford to do that. Democracies can be lost. And so, we must be willing to pay attention to the signs that these threats are present again today.

**London:** Given all the threats facing American democracy today, where do you see potential leverage points for turning things around?

**Davies:** I think we have always found strength when citizens have



**I believe Americans will come together to defend our democracy. I wouldn't call myself an optimist. But I do have an unwavering faith in the ability of our country to prevail in the end and to protect our democracy.**

come together. Democracy is an inherently fragile idea, and one of the obligations of citizenship is that we must always be prepared as citizens to come to its defense when there are signs that it's in danger.

Although it is under threat, I believe Americans will come together to defend our democracy. I wouldn't call myself an optimist. But I do have an unwavering faith in the ability of our country to prevail in the end and to protect our democracy.

**London:** John Lewis, the late congressman from Georgia, spoke of democracy as a verb, as something that was best realized *in the doing*.



Reverend Joseph Lowery, President of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, his wife Evelyn, and John Lewis (L-R) led several thousand civil rights marchers across the Edmund Pettus Bridge on February 14, 1982. John Lewis was one of the original Selma to Montgomery marchers who was severely beaten on the bridge in 1965.



As he saw it, every generation has to take it upon itself to protect and defend the values of democracy.

**Davies:** That's right. Over the past several decades, the Kettering Foundation has been helping us understand the ways citizens can come together across chasms of difference to find some common ground and, once they have found that, to contemplate common actions that can be taken. The foundation has developed ways of framing issues of common concern so that communities can work their way toward some kind of public choice.

Town halls or issues forums are one way that citizens can be engaged in governance, but there are other ways. John Lewis was an important leader during the civil rights era and demonstrated that acts of non-violent civic disturbance or activity could move us closer to our aspirational goals as a society. We had citizens engaged in nonviolent civil disobedience who were prepared to

be arrested because they were technically breaking laws they believed needed to be broken in order to shine a spotlight on the wrongfulness of those laws.

We also saw this in 2020 when, in the middle of a pandemic, American citizens were so horrified by the murder of George Floyd that they disregarded the threats to their own health and poured into the streets of cities around the country to protest what they were seeing and to say, "this is not a reflection of what I believe this country stands for."



*Youth Poet Laureate Amanda Gorman speaks during the inauguration of US President-elect Joe Biden on January 20, 2021, in Washington, DC.*

Citizen engagement is an important part of the evolution of our democracy. There are many different ways that citizens can give voice to what they expect from their representatives in Washington, DC, or their own localities. One question we need to give more attention to is whether the voices of citizens are actually being heard by representatives and whether there are ways of holding representatives accountable if they are not acting on behalf of their constituents.

**London:** We often speak of democracy as something we estab-

lished a long time ago that we may now be in danger of losing. But it might be more accurate to think of it in aspirational terms. I'm reminded of the words of Amanda Gorman, the young poet who spoke at President Biden's inauguration ceremony. She spoke of democracy as "the hill we climb"—as the destination we have not yet reached, or the promise we have not yet fulfilled.

**Davies:** I think that's absolutely right. Our founders very intentionally turned their backs on the idea of rule by a monarch or by despots and instead placed the power of our

self-governance in the hands of “we the people.” But at the time those beautiful words were written, this was more of a promise than a reality. If we look at it with clear eyes, we have to acknowledge that when the founding documents were written only a very small part of our population was actually given the power or authority to participate in their own governance.

Throughout our history, every time we have moved a little closer to those ideals, we have done it by expanding the pool of citizens with the authority to participate in self-governance. Every time we have moved a little closer to our aspirational ideals, we have done it by being more inclusive. That is our North Star. We should really understand and celebrate that. Our strength actually lies in the diversity of our citizenry.

**London:** I realize these are still early days and you are still settling into your new role, but what can you say about what you hope to accomplish as president and CEO of the Kettering Foundation? If we look ahead to the 100th anniversary of the foundation, which is five years away, what one or two things would you hope to accomplish by then?

**Davies:** I would say that I think it's essential that the Kettering Foundation be engaged in the battle to



**It's essential that the Kettering Foundation be engaged in the battle to protect and preserve our democracy. Looking back five or ten years from now, I would like to be able to say that we were clearly involved in that fight along with our fellow citizens and allied organizations, and that we took it seriously and didn't neglect the dangers that existed.**

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protect and preserve our democracy. Looking back five or ten years from now, I would like to be able to say that we were clearly involved in that fight along with our fellow citizens and allied organizations, and that we took it seriously and didn't neglect the dangers that existed.

It's going to require a lot of us. We are thinking about what that work might look like. And we are asking ourselves, what are the most acute needs of democracy right now? And, how might we organize our work in order to help meet those needs? I'm happy to say that our staff is very engaged in that process. We are actually utilizing our strength in issue framing and deliberation to go through that exercise.

It's a very inclusive project. It will include the thoughts and wisdom of our network of associates and allied organizations. I'm having high-level conversations with leaders of respected peer organizations that are also focused on democracy and democratic health. And we are learning a lot, as we always like to do here at the Kettering Foundation. At the end of the learning process, we will set some strategic goals for ourselves and hold ourselves accountable.

**London:** What are some of the ways the Kettering Foundation can make its research more visible and accessible to the public in coming years?

**Davies:** I think it calls for me, as the president and CEO, to be visible and to talk about what we are doing, what we are learning, and what we believe democracy demands of us right now. So, I expect to elevate my own public role, as well as that of

our program officers who make up an incredible team of researchers deeply committed to this project of citizen-led democracy. I'm hopeful that the country will see a lot more of them in the days to come as we focus on these acute challenges.

**London:** How would you describe your own style of leadership?

**Davies:** I think of myself as a deeply collaborative leader, one who believes firmly in the power of team. I've always thought that a leader is only as strong as the team they have the privilege of leading. So, I focus very much on the needs of the team and how we can act successfully together.

I will say that I'm very comfortable being in front of rooms, on panels, giving keynotes and other addresses. I've had decades of experience talking about important issues facing the country, and I expect that will be an important part of what I do. But I hope that I'm also communicating that I understand the strength of the Kettering Foundation never comes down to a single individual. It's always going to be thought of broadly as our wonderful staff and this incredible network that we have built over time and will continue to expand. ■

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# Deliberative Pedagogy in Elementary Schools

By Mindy LaBreck and Stacie Molnar-Main

*Kettering recognizes that schools can provide a space for adults and young people to learn about their roles as citizens in a democracy and the practice of deliberative politics. For many years, Kettering's civic education research has focused on*

*classroom teachers as one of the keys to educating young people about their roles in a democracy and the practice of deliberative politics. Recent efforts have focused specifically on how deliberation and other democratic practices can be reinforced in elementary schools.*

Several years ago, the Kettering Foundation published a book, *Deliberation in the Classroom: Fostering Critical Thinking, Community, and Citizenship in Schools*, describing learning from a series of research meetings with secondary school teachers. After publishing the book, the civic education group at Kettering convened a similar series of meetings with elementary teachers with an interest





**After about a year of experimenting with learning and teaching in a deliberative way, teachers were able to observe and identify a consistent set of skills and dispositions that enabled students to deliberate.**

in answering three questions:

1. Can elementary students learn to deliberate?
2. Are there common skills that can be reinforced, or learning experiences that can be provided, to prepare students to engage in deliberative decision-making?
3. Can these skills lead to a broader understanding of democratic politics?

The group met together several times to learn about deliberation and to discuss how they prepare their students for democracy, with the aim of reporting on their experiments using deliberative pedagogy in the

classroom. This type of pedagogy merges dialogic, engaged pedagogies with democratic classroom practices aimed at building communication skills, participatory skills, and critical thinking skills that can support deliberative democracy, according to editors Timothy Shaffer, Nicholas Longo, Idit Manosevitch, and Maxine Thomas in *Deliberative Pedagogy: Teaching and Learning for Democratic Engagement*.

### **ELEMENTARY STUDENTS CAN LEARN TO DELIBERATE**

Through these exchanges with elementary teachers, we learned that kids ranging from 5-to-11-years-old can learn to deliberate, but it's not something that comes naturally. It is highly dependent upon the students' level of maturity and communication skills. These characteristics, along with their lived experiences, impact their language development, interpersonal habits, and ability to engage in the types of abstract reasoning that deliberation demands.

The fact that students were not prepared to deliberate when they entered the teachers' classrooms did not dissuade teachers. Teachers embraced the challenge and used complimentary programs, like Cosmo-Kidz and National Issues Forums in the Classroom, to support and inform their deliberative pedagogy.

## COMMON SKILLS AND EXPERIENCES THAT SUPPORT DELIBERATION

After about a year of experimenting with learning and teaching in a deliberative way, teachers were able to observe and identify a consistent set of skills and dispositions that enabled students to deliberate. These skills and dispositions were named the Building Blocks of K-5 Deliberative Learning. Here is brief description of each and how they were reinforced in elementary classrooms.

*Communication skills* are the ways in which students express and comprehend ideas to meet their own needs and collaborate. In the earliest grades, teachers supported the development of communication skills by teaching basic verbal and nonverbal skills and by using cues to encourage students to apply those skills in class. Some teachers emphasized the senses used in communication by using cues to help students to attend to the ways that they can, for example, “listen with their eyes, ears, head, heart.” Beginning in about third grade, teachers introduced the skills of active listening and paraphrasing. In the upper elementary grades, sentence stems (a sentence with missing parts that students can fill in with their own ideas) were used to model ways that students can draw connections between others’ ideas, express

disagreement during class discussions or deliberations, and introduce new ideas.

*Empathic perspective-taking* is an awareness of feelings in oneself, the ability to recognize and imagine others’ feelings and experiences, and the skills involved in responding compassionately to others. In the early elementary grades, the teachers encouraged empathy by introducing “feelings vocabulary words” to students and by encouraging them to use words and drawings to represent their own feelings. Eventually, they would ask students to predict how they might feel if faced with common experiences—like losing a toy, waiting for an upcoming birthday, or receiving a compliment. Over time,



students became skilled at predicting how other people might feel in similar situations.

Interactive read-aloud strategies (where the teacher reads a story aloud and pauses to ask questions about the text) were used to engage students in imagining how book characters might feel. In the upper elementary grades, teachers extended lessons on “point of view” to reinforce how perspective can be influenced by peoples’ life experiences. Students read primary source accounts, conducted interviews, and analyzed how characters’ experiences influenced their values, feelings, and decisions. Teachers introduced the concept of “voices not in the room” to reinforce the importance of seeking the perspectives of people who may not be present in the classroom.

*Sense of belonging to a democratic community* refers to students’ belief that they are contributing members of a classroom centered on democratic values. Educators noted the importance of establishing a classroom community where all students are valued, including those who are perceived as “different” in some way, those who offer dissenting perspectives, and those who do not always adhere to classroom norms. An Arizona elementary teacher explained, “As a teacher, you are an incredibly important model for

your students because you create the conditions” where students learn that including every voice in the classroom matters.

The teacher went on to describe how difficult it can be to respond with inclusivity and care when a student does not conform to classroom norms. Yet, all the teachers agreed that when they demonstrate interest in and care for nonconforming students, they model for other students that each voice in a democracy should be valued, including the voice of those who may be challenging accepted norms or authority.

The teachers also designed classroom activities that helped students build constructive relationships with one another and involved students in creating and reflecting on classroom rules and routines. They used games and other fun activities to promote participation and social connections, and regular classrooms meetings were used as forums for engaging students in reflection, planning, and problem-solving about classroom issues. While these types of activities are common in elementary classrooms, the teachers noted the significance of consistently approaching community building and group problem-solving with the goal of teaching democracy in mind.

*Sense of agency* is the internalized belief that one can control one’s

## BUILDING BLOCKS OF K-5 DELIBERATIVE LEARNING

### Communication skills



- Wait time/emotional regulation
- Active listening and paraphrasing skills
- Skills for speaking in a group
- Multiple ways of expressing agreement and disagreement
- Writing to support deliberation
- Deliberative questioning

### Empathetic perspective-taking



- Awareness of self, surroundings, and others
- Open-mindedness
- Ability to “listen with the heart”
- Respect for others, including privacy and boundaries
- Sense of awareness and interconnectedness among community members
- Perspective-taking skills
- “Voices not in the room”

### Sense of belonging to a democratic classroom community



- Willingness to participate
- Sense of belonging or of having a personal stake in the class community
- Ability to work with classmates on issues, even when there is significant disagreement
- Understanding the goals of democratic decision-making
- Awareness of the role of power, communities, and relationship structure in creating and recreating the social world

### Sense of agency



- Awareness that our stories are incomplete and “we are writing our future”
- Perseverance
- Self-confidence
- Growth mindset
- Belief that “I can be an agent of change”
- Awareness of our role in creating and recreating the social world

### Skills of deliberative decision-making



- Storytelling and story-hearing
- Ability to generate several solutions to a problem
- Ability to identify pros, cons, and trade-offs
- Naming and framing skills
- Critical thinking skills
- Comfort with ambiguity and conflict
- Ability to present the best case argument for perspectives with which you may disagree

actions and influence the world around them. Sense of agency is reflected in students' willingness to try new tasks or take risks in learning, in students' persistence in their work, and in their willingness to speak up when they have a concern or when something doesn't seem right.

Elementary teachers reinforced students' sense of agency by providing them meaningful classroom jobs and regular opportunities to have a voice in classroom decisions. Aware of how adults' comments can shape a student's sense of agency, teachers favored feedback focused on skill development, effort, or progress over feedback focused on whether students achieved the "correct" answer. The teachers attempted to encourage students to take risks in learning by reminding them that "mistakes are opportunities to learn," by celebrating creative ideas or unique ways of approaching problems, and by probing students' thinking during class discussions.

*Deliberative decision-making skills* are the specific cognitive and interpersonal skills that are used during deliberation. At any grade level, teaching deliberation requires that students engage with real-life issues and explore solutions to problems together. In early elementary

classrooms, simplified deliberations occurred that focused on issues that impacted the class, school, or playground. Teachers set the stage for deliberation by regularly asking open-ended questions about the school issues and inviting students to share their ideas. Teachers asked questions such as:

- What type of classroom do we want to have?
- What should we do when a new student joins the class?
- What choices do we have when you see that someone is being left out of a game?

While the youngest elementary students were not capable of engaging in the types of analyses that older students could, they were able to name problems in ways that reflected different ways of experiencing, seeing, or feeling a problem; they could brainstorm different ways to help or fix problems; and they could talk about the pluses (pros) and minuses (cons) of different actions. When teachers required students to identify more than two ways of naming problems and celebrated students' creative ideas, they were reinforcing students' deliberative capacities and conveying their confidence that each student could contribute to group problem-solving.

In the upper elementary grades,

teachers were able to introduce foundational concepts of deliberative democracy. Students could understand the concept of trade-offs as early as third grade, and they began to understand the concept of common ground by the end of elementary school. Citizen questions and public work were introduced in the upper elementary grades to help students differentiate between problems that are personal in nature and question or issues that require community or public action. “Citizen questions tend to be authentic and posed by students, problem-based or need-based, linked to community, and action-focused,” explained a fifth-grade teacher from State College, Pennsylvania. This concept can be used to help students bridge classroom learning with issues of concerns that exist in their lives or the community.

### **DELIBERATIVE POLITICS IN ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS**

Teaching the Building Blocks of K-5 Deliberative Learning can prepare young children to use the skills of deliberation to solve age-appropriate problems. One teacher shared how her students’ sense of agency and the skills of deliberative problem-solving prepared them to work together to solve a recess problem creatively. Talking together, listening to one



another, and weighing trade-offs gave them a way to come up with a unique solution (implementing “old school games” at recess) to an age-old problem (students were bored and not getting along at recess). Another teacher described how her class exercised their communication skills and applied the concept of common ground when trying to select a class science fair project that everyone could support. While these are not ground-breaking examples of democracy transformed, they demonstrate the relevance of deliberative politics to young people and offer evidence that young people can benefit from deliberative pedagogy.



**Creating a more democratic learning community in schools can contribute to the development of lifelong democratic capacities and citizens with a sense of agency.**

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#### LOOKING FORWARD

Deliberative democracy affirms the importance of citizens and their representatives justifying their decisions to each other in a public process as “free and equal persons seeking fair terms of cooperation,” rather than as simply subjects to be controlled, according to Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson in their book *Why Deliberative Democracy?* Critics have noted that deliberation’s reliance on rationality, quality facilitation, and certain types of communicative processes can reinforce power imbalances, obscure contested meanings, exaggerate consensus, or disadvantage populations who may favor other forms of engagement. These concerns are relevant to civic education and should inform educators’ work.

Despite those critiques, creating a more democratic learning community in schools can contribute to the development of lifelong democratic capacities and citizens with a sense of agency. The skills and capacities teachers identified as building blocks of citizenship and democratic life are not only relevant to young children, but to people of all ages. The ability to listen to one another, to consider perspectives and values different from our own, instilling a sense of belonging in community with other citizens, and having a sense of responsibility to solve problems together for the public good—these are all things to aspire to at any age. Deliberative pedagogy and the use of democratic practices like deliberation can open paths for kids and adults alike to see they are a part of a larger citizenry, a way to see themselves as public actors who can make a difference in their own communities. And, we know that schools are key to achieving this. ■

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# Humanities Councils: Working For and With the Public

By Joni Doherty and Melinda Gilmore

**A** Kettering Foundation research exchange with six state humanities councils started with a wall of whiteboards and a bunch of multicolored dry-erase markers. We talked—and argued, and laughed, and talked some more—as we filled the whiteboards, searching for a question that would guide our work together over the next three years.

State humanities councils are well-positioned to bring people together around ideas and questions. They evolved from the National Foundation on the Arts and Humanities Act, a law passed as part of President Lyndon Johnson's Great Society. The act defines the humanities as a set of disciplines that include archaeology, language, linguistics, history,

philosophy, ethics, comparative religion, jurisprudence, literature, arts theory, and criticism, and it prioritized academic research and writing. With 56 councils in all US states and jurisdictions, these councils work to bring the humanities to people in a variety of ways, including where they live and work. In that early meeting, our discussion focused on what we could learn together as we codeveloped the following core questions:

- What can we—our communities, our states, our nation—do to decrease the likelihood that real and significant differences and divides damage our capacity to live and work well together?
  - How can humanities councils work with citizens, communities, and each other to invite and explore different perspectives on shared challenges?
  - How can we work together across differences to make thoughtful decisions about how to address these problems?

At first we considered applying the questions to a shared program, but because of the many differences among the states in terms of population, diversity, density, geography, and culture, each state decided to apply the questions to different programs, with each program designed for their particular states.



**What can we—our communities, our states, our nation—do to decrease the likelihood that real and significant differences and divides damage our capacity to live and work well together?**

### **TWO COUNCILS, DIFFERENT APPROACHES**

Two of the programs are representative of the richness of the work of all six councils. A reading and discussion program organized by the Maine Humanities Council involved professionals working in a hospital. Participants engaged in a monthly scholar-facilitated discussion to explore works of fiction, poetry, drama, and nonfiction that illuminated issues central to their professional contexts. The Maine Humanities Council described these discussions as “taking humanities into the heart of the workplace, making a direct impact on the way work is performed and how colleagues interact.” Planning for the program

included individuals who know “where the shoe pinches.” To ensure an “inclusive and humanizing” health-care community, participants included everyone who supports the work of a hospital. This includes not only doctors and nurses, but also lab technicians, hospital administrators, billing specialists, and orderlies. All have important roles in patient care and had an equal voice in the group. The themes explored in the readings selected for the program included “access to care; different understandings of what ‘wellness’ means; the distinction between the diagnosis of disease and the patient’s experience of illness; [and] how different people experience the dying process.”

Many of the Maine programs cultivate individual knowledge and skills in small group settings. The impact of these small group discussions extends to the public sphere as participants explore the ethical and democratic implications of their professions. The Maine Humanities Council’s experience with this kind of public work has taught them that “people use ideas to understand the world. These ways of thinking are both informed by others and by their own experiences.” Text-based discussions lead to “reworking how [people] understand the world and their own role in the world around them.” The Maine programs are designed for

particular places or situations where participants are invited “to read things carefully, to think about them, to discuss them with people they don’t yet know very well, and with people they do.” From the Maine Humanities Council’s perspective, “the larger gain is that often people get *practice* exploring different perspectives on the shared challenge of understanding a text, something clearly low-stakes and without urgency—building their ability, just a little, to explore perspectives when a higher stakes, more urgent shared challenge presents itself.”

The Mississippi Humanities Council decided to create a program

“to address, very frankly, our state’s (and our nation’s) most vexing and ongoing dilemma: our racial divide.” They learned that when conditions are right, “Mississippians are very willing to talk through their differences and listen to one another’s personal perspectives.” In contrast to Maine, this problem-based approach focused on communities rather than on individuals. It was also a new approach for Mississippi, since in the past the council worked primarily as a grantmaker. As planning progressed, the original plan of convening state-wide dialogues on race was discarded. Instead, the council focused on identifying community



partners willing to work on a local problem related to race. The council assisted by providing sensitive and skilled facilitation. As the council noted, “our facilitators had to be people the participants trusted, who had a deep understanding of the issue and who were sensitive to the underlying pain participants felt because of the racial disparities they live with. . . . In both of the series we coordinated, participants could tend to dwell on the pain and anger they felt. Our facilitators had to use great skill to acknowledge the pain and allow expression, but to also urge participants forward and to find a shared vision for resolution.”



**During this three-year period of innovation and reflection, some councils began thinking differently about how they conducted programs that were already in place, and some experimented with new approaches.**

While the dialogues invited the sharing and reflecting of individual experiences, they were also informed by historically accurate facts, literature, and philosophy. This offered participants insight into the role of race with respect to the problem. In Tupelo, for example, local partners identified an enrollment disparity in Advanced Placement (AP) courses. According to Tupelo Public School District data, in 2019 only 14 percent of Black students at the high school were enrolled in AP courses, yet they made up 51.46 percent of students. Parents, educators, and community leaders met regularly to consider the role race plays in perceptions and barriers about AP coursework. In another project with Delta State University, administrators initially wanted to focus on improving donor relations with their Black alumni. As the planning evolved, the focus shifted to engaging with current students and community members. The new goals included building an appreciation for diversity, bringing together diverse Delta communities through sharing ideas and building cooperation, and reducing racial disparities in those communities. Another outcome was that college administrators became more aware of current challenges faced by Black students and committed to addressing them.

## HUMANITIES COUNCILS: ORIGIN AND EVOLVING MISSION

The Voting Rights Act and the Medicare and Medicaid Act, each passed by Congress in 1965, are widely recognized as significant for democracy. The National Foundation on the Arts and the Humanities Act is less well known. It led to the establishment of the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), which has funded grants for scholarly and educational projects, including the papers of both Booker T. Washington and George Washington, a multivolume biography of Thomas Jefferson, and archaeological expeditions.

During hearings for the act's reauthorization in 1970, Rhode Island Senator Claiborne Pell, the "legislative father of NEH," reaffirmed his desire for the establishment of state councils. While the NEH effectively supported scholarship at the national level, Pell believed creating organizations that operated at the grassroots level would more effectively connect the humanities with people. Pell's vision for a public humanities seems to match Johnson's. In a speech at Brown University in 1964, a year before the NEH was established, Johnson noted, "There just simply must be no neglect of humanities. The values of our free and compassionate society are as vital to our



*On September 29, 1965, President Lyndon Johnson signed legislation creating the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) and the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) as separate and independent federal agencies to promote and support the arts and the humanities to all Americans.*

national success as the skills of our technical and scientific age.”

This view envisions a public humanities that cultivates the kinds of values essential for democracy. During the NEH's 50th anniversary, Darren Walker, president of the Ford Foundation, reflected, “I think that President Johnson believed that the human experience needed to be nourished by face-to-face engagement and by bringing together people of different backgrounds and different races.” The councils that have participated in this exchange would agree.

In 1971, the NEH created six state-based programs to explore how to do grassroots humanities, which led to the formation of the 56 humanities councils that exist today. The ways the councils do their work has evolved over the decades. Alongside traditional humanities, in which experts share their scholarship with the public, is an emerging sense of the value of partnering with individuals and organizations to cooperatively develop programs that address local concerns and challenges. Another characteristic of this new approach is that these kinds of programs foster the disposition and skills individuals need in a democracy.

### **THE HUMANITIES EXCHANGE: INNOVATION, COLLABORATION**

What are some of the takeaways from bringing together these six councils? The executive directors and program officers who participated think of themselves as innovators. They are committed to developing or cocreating programs where diverse individuals and groups might apply humanities perspectives and skills to contemporary challenges. Pennsylvania Humanities put it this way: “It feels like the divides among Americans are greater than ever. I don’t need national surveys to prove

it—or expert pundits to opine about it. . . . We see how the resulting hostility and distrust undermines our happiness and emotional well-being, the quality of our relationships, our sense that we can act and make meaningful contributions, and even the integrity of our institutions.”

During this three-year period of innovation and reflection, some councils began thinking differently about how they conducted programs that were already in place, and some experimented with new approaches. Each time we met, the councils discussed the many challenges associated with developing close working relationships with individuals, communities, and other organizations in their states. But they also affirmed the value of doing so. For example, instead of doing outreach to get people to come to “their” event, they reached out to the residents of their states to imagine, develop, and implement programs. In other words, programs intended to address the challenges of democracy were developed in ways that affirmed democracy. This led to programs that were more relevant for communities, fostered the development of democratic disposition and skills, and in some cases, led to immediate concrete actions.

Every council agreed that they learned things they would not

have learned without a sustained engagement with each other and with Kettering. Oregon Humanities described the experience in this way: “Talking regularly with colleagues from these other states has helped us understand their decisions and their reasons for their decisions, which has helped us with our own choices and with understanding the larger context of this work. . . . The focused and sustained time with other state council program staff and executive directors has been very valuable. It’s a space that’s hard to create or justify, but its value is clear, both for how it impacts the work and for how it impacts the people doing the work and their relationships.” And Indiana Humanities expressed a similar viewpoint: “Because our staffs are small and we’re very busy, it is hard to get away for this kind of deep-dive learning, especially for the full programs team, at the same time.”

Future research may lead to more insight into the ways in which the disposition, knowledge, and skills associated with the humanities enhance democracy during these tenuous times. The councils that participated in this series of exchanges might form the kernel of a network that includes other councils, writers, artists, and public humanities scholars. For example, how can the humanities be both action-oriented



**Future research may lead to more insight into the ways in which the disposition, knowledge, and skills associated with the humanities enhance democracy during these tenuous times.**

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and reflective? What additional discoveries might be made about what the humanities can do to address the real and significant differences and divides that damage our capacity to live and work well together? To make our country more fair? More compassionate? Less violent? Shifting the focus from the original mission of the humanities councils—how the humanities can be shared with the public—to how the humanities can advance democracy is a question that deserves consideration. ■

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# Deliberation Tackles Tough Issues on Campus

By Alex Lovit

In 1982, the National Issues Forums Institute (NIFI) published its first three issues guides, intended to promote deliberative conversations about public problems. In the four decades since, NIFI and its partners have published hundreds of issues guides on a wide variety of topics and convened thousands of forums for citizens to discuss public concerns.

Throughout this history, NIFI's deliberative issue guides have found a receptive audience in higher education. Deliberation in college classrooms has developed into a



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full-fledged field of scholars studying the theory, practice, and effects of deliberative pedagogy. But until recently, deliberation on college campuses has mostly been practiced in academic contexts, focusing on topics of broad national concern rather than on any issues specific to the university environment.

What would happen if universities convened deliberative forums not as an academic exercise in building deliberative skills or in exploring government policy, but as a community conversation about issues affecting campus life? During the last three years, the Kettering Foundation and NASPA, a national member organization of Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education, have been working together to answer this question.

### **FRAMING AND TESTING CAMPUS ISSUE GUIDES**

NASPA is the largest association of student affairs professionals in the United States, with more than 15,000 members at more than 2,100 campuses. When most people think about universities, it is their academic departments—which concern core research and teaching functions—that come to mind. But higher education institutions could not function without the diverse field of student affairs, which embraces everything



**What would happen if universities convened deliberative forums not as an academic exercise in building deliberative skills or in exploring government policy, but as a community conversation about issues affecting campus life?**

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from housing and dining to student programs and offices of diversity, equity, and inclusion. If academic faculty's research and teaching are higher education's *raison d'être*, student affairs professionals are the ones responsible for developing and maintaining a functional, cohesive campus community.

For student affairs staff to hold deliberative forums about campus issues, the first step was to develop issue guides on these topics. The process of selecting issues and framing them for an issue guide was itself deliberative, with teams of NASPA staff and associates

convening concern-collecting and test sessions involving hundreds of student affairs professionals and students across multiple campuses. In the 2020 issue of *Higher Education Exchange*, NASPA's associate director of policy research and advocacy, Diana Ali, described the challenge of developing a framing that reflected the diversity of thought and experience among these contributors: "We worked collaboratively in tying together similarities and differences experienced in the threads of participants' stories. . . . We pulled from our disparate skill sets to identify the sticking points and created deliberation options representative of our findings."



**The 10 campuses that piloted the NASPA issue guides found that students were interested in engaging, and that deliberative conversations prompted by the guides were civil, diverse, and deeply reflective.**

NASPA's framing team has now developed three guides on campus issues relating to free speech, fraternity and sorority life, and systemic racism. Each of these guides focuses on a topic that has provoked controversy on college campuses, and each of them presents participants with a range of options for how universities might respond that prioritizes different values.

For members of a campus community, these issues are not abstract academic exercises, nor are they broad concerns with marginal relevance to campus life. Questions about how to balance freedom of discourse against the risks of offensive speech, or how Greek-letter organizations can provide camaraderie and fun while remaining safe and equitable, are immediate concerns for higher education institutions. They are also wicked problems, in the sense that they can never fully be solved and contain inherent value tensions that must be continually renegotiated. This is all the more true for campus communities with ongoing turnover of students matriculating and graduating each year. As the university representatives most directly responsible for fostering campus community, student affairs professionals are well-suited to convene deliberative conversations on these topics.

## NASPA ISSUE GUIDES FOR DELIBERATIVE FORUMS

*In partnership with the Kettering Foundation, NASPA developed three issue guides for use by higher education institutions. Following the model established by the National Issues Forums Institute, NASPA issue guides are designed for use by groups with differing and diverse perspectives around a central question that does not necessarily have a predetermined “right” answer. Deliberative forums introduce participants to multiple options for addressing a central issue or question and allow time for each option, and its trade-offs or drawbacks, to be discussed by participants.*

*All three NASPA issue guides are available online at <https://naspa.org/project/issue-guides-for-deliberative-dialogue>.*

### ***Free Speech and the Inclusive Campus***

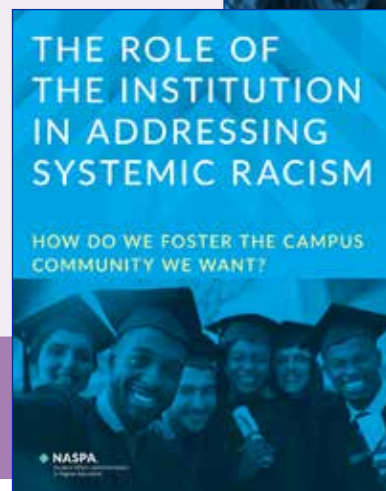
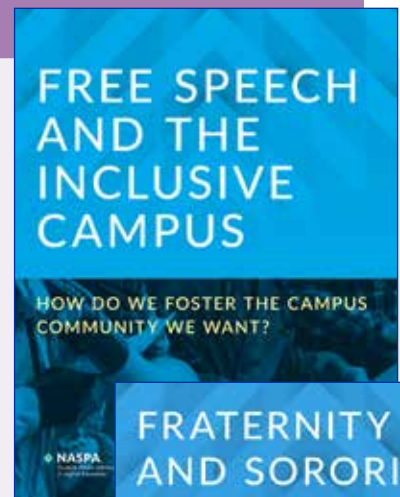
- OPTION 1** ▶ Prioritize student safety and well-being
- OPTION 2** ▶ Affirm the educational value of intellectual curiosity and engaging with ideas across difference
- OPTION 3** ▶ Uphold the ideals of free speech

### ***Fraternity and Sorority Life and the Inclusive Campus***

- OPTION 1** ▶ Prioritize safety and well-being
- OPTION 2** ▶ Focus on community engagement and leadership
- OPTION 3** ▶ Ensure equity and access

### ***The Role of the Institution in Addressing Systemic Racism***

- OPTION 1** ▶ Address systemic racism through academic inquiry and shared learning
- OPTION 2** ▶ Address systemic racism through cocurricular programming and workforce development
- OPTION 3** ▶ Address systemic racism through a sense of belonging and thriving





to these formal partnerships. In July 2022, at the most recent Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement conference, 118 participants attended a moderator training workshop, preparing to convene deliberative forums on their home campuses. And since *Free Speech* was published in 2020, it has been one of the top five most-downloaded issue guides from NIFI's website (not including downloads from NASPA's website, where it is also separately available).

As it turned out, 2020 was a difficult time to launch a new deliberative initiative in colleges and universities. The COVID-19 pandemic closed down many campuses, causing students to attend classes and extracurricular activities virtually. Unsurprisingly, participation in "campus" programs tended to decline

### COVID-19 PUSHES FORUMS ONLINE

Student affairs professionals on 10 campuses participated in a partnership with Kettering and NASPA to pilot student forums using these issue guides. But interest in these guides has been by no means limited

during this time, with wide-reaching implications for student experience. For example, the National Survey of Student Engagement found that both first-year students and seniors reported significantly fewer discussions with diverse others in 2021, as compared to prepandemic years.

The pandemic also affected NASPA's process of issue guide development. To solicit diverse perspectives and test drafts of the issue guide on free speech, NASPA had convened members at conference sessions. But for the second and third issue guides, much of this had to be done virtually. Facilitators reported that discussions at the virtual sessions were somewhat less robust, but the online meeting format also enabled a more diverse range of individuals and institutions to participate. In particular, developing these issue guides through virtual meetings may have been more equitable as it allowed representatives from less-resourced institutions to participate without paying for conference fees or travel. The pandemic also affected deliberations in another unexpected way: the issue guides had been designed to prompt reflection and conversation about common issues typical of college experiences, but the pandemic had caused unforeseen disruptions to typical experiences. Several moderators who convened deliberations about free

speech during the 2021-22 academic year noted that, unusually, many students had never experienced protests over a controversial speaker's presence on campus.

Convening deliberative forums on college campuses continued to be difficult during the 2021-22 academic year. The pandemic had disrupted traditions of campus gatherings, and ongoing safety restrictions meant that, in many cases, convenors could not rely on that traditional motivator to bring college students to events—free food. The student affairs offices convening these forums often had to go the extra mile to attract participants, partnering with student organizations or with academic partners who offered extra credit or other incentives for attendance.

Despite these challenges, the 10 campuses that piloted the NASPA issue guides found that students were interested in engaging, and that deliberative conversations prompted by the guides were civil, diverse, and deeply reflective. For example, Amy Koeckes, associate director for student engagement at the University of Nevada, Reno, noted that it was common for students to complain about the 90-to-120-minute schedule for deliberative forums, “but by the end, attendees were staying longer, wanting to continue to talk about the topic even after the forum was over.”

In many cases, the issue guides developed by NASPA elicited deeply reflective conversations informed by students' values and experiences. In forums at The University of Alabama, students with diverse political beliefs shared experiences applying for campus speaker permits—and found common ground about the importance of considering a wide range of perspectives. At Oklahoma City University, Talia Carroll, vice president for diversity, equity, and inclusion, and Lilly Bermúdez, associate dean of students, reported that forums helped to defuse conflict by giving students opportunities to both understand and influence campus policies. Intriguingly, Oklahoma City University students tended to express more heterodox opinions later in forum conversations, suggesting that “perhaps, as a result of the guide and our facilitation, students believed and trusted that their voices mattered and that we did want to hear from them.” (Alongside the NASPA-developed guides specific to campus issues, some universities also made use of another issue guide, NIFI’s *COVID-19 and Vaccines: How Should We Keep Our Communities Safe?*, which prompted emotional conversations directly relevant to students’ recent experiences.)

The impacts of deliberation on individual psychology, group

identity, and political behavior are notoriously difficult to measure, and Kettering’s partnership with NASPA did not include a full-scale academic study. But this experiment with issue guides on college campuses did nevertheless produce many examples of students incorporating deliberative democratic principles into their speech and behavior. In forums on both free speech and fraternity and sorority life, participants recognized and wrestled with tensions. Students recognized that protecting peers from feeling dehumanized or unsafe also meant limiting the free exchange of ideas, and that the feelings of community belonging and social exclusion prompted by Greek-letter organizations are two sides of the same coin. This is core to deliberation’s democratic power. When citizens recognize shared values and the trade-offs necessary to balance them, people with different perspectives are drawn into shared conversation, rather than seeing one another as illegitimate or alien. Even criticisms of the issue guides—some participants argued that Greek-letter organizations are too diverse to be governed by a single model, or that the ideal of a neutral moderator could not apply to the topic of systemic racism—demonstrated the power of deliberation. Forums provided the opportunity for individuals to

civily express these carefully considered opinions among groups of diverse peers.

Deliberative experiences can influence how students make decisions democratically in a variety of contexts. Rae Joyce Baguilat, director of student leadership and civic engagement at the University of Illinois Chicago, described how student government leadership at an institution where she'd previously worked had internalized deliberative practices, using traditional forum questions like, "Who's not in the room?," "What's the third option here?," and "What's the trade-off?" to expand their considerations when discussing student issues and funding.

Perhaps the most important outcome of NASPA's and Kettering's initial experiments with campus deliberation was simply their contribution to building campus communities—a particularly important goal in the aftermath of pandemic-related disruptions. Feeling included and respected in conversation with a group is a powerful way to feel like a full member of that group. As Kathryn Cilano, director of the center for leadership and civic engagement at the Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT) put it, "When we set out to pilot a deliberative dialogue program on RIT's campus, I anticipated



**Perhaps the most important outcome of NASPA's and Kettering's initial experiments with campus deliberation was simply their contribution to building campus communities—a particularly important goal in the aftermath of pandemic-related disruptions.**

that students would leave with an increased likelihood to have difficult conversations with their peers and staff at our university. What I did not expect was the unintended outcome of increasing students' sense of belonging within our campus community. In very similar ways, this research exchange has provided me with a deeper sense of belonging within the field of higher education and specifically within the community of educators who focus on meaningful civic engagement initiatives." ■

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# Breaking the Mold: Journalism Reimagined

By Paloma Dallas and Paula Ellis



**T**he Kettering Foundation knows that if democracy is to work as it should, journalism must work as it should, too, in a healthy media environment that supports robust debate, responsive government, and a place for citizens to do the work that only they can do. That's why for many years the foundation has partnered with journalists to explore how journalism can better meet the needs of citizens and incorporate their perspectives and actions in news coverage.

That task is more critical than ever today.

It may be no coincidence that in the last 20 years, as democracy has eroded along with trust in institutions, journalism has been threatened by the internet revolution that has upended media norms. Journalists were traditionally taught that their central mission is to provide verified, factual information. That meant one thing when information was scarce, but today we are awash in it. Social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Telegram, TikTok, and others have become primary sources of news as legacy print and broadcast media struggle to maintain an audi-



ence and replace advertising lost in the digital era. Journalists also have been taught that they must hold the powerful to account, and yet this isn't enough to shore up our democracy today.

In communities across the country, some journalists have been questioning their effectiveness and challenging assumptions and practices that were developed decades earlier in a dramatically different political context. Journalism professors also have been taking stock of the significant changes under way and wondering how they could better prepare students to thrive in a field that is no longer shaped by a reliably steady industry that predictably provided jobs.

Kettering designed its research to explore each of these developments as separate parallel strands, recognizing that they are interrelated and would at some point become intertwined.

The foundation's research approach to learn from the doers afforded these journalism innovators in the field and in the classroom a unique opportunity to take time away from their fast-paced work lives to reflect, share, and create a community of changemakers. We encouraged them to experiment and learn together.

This yearslong work has culmi-

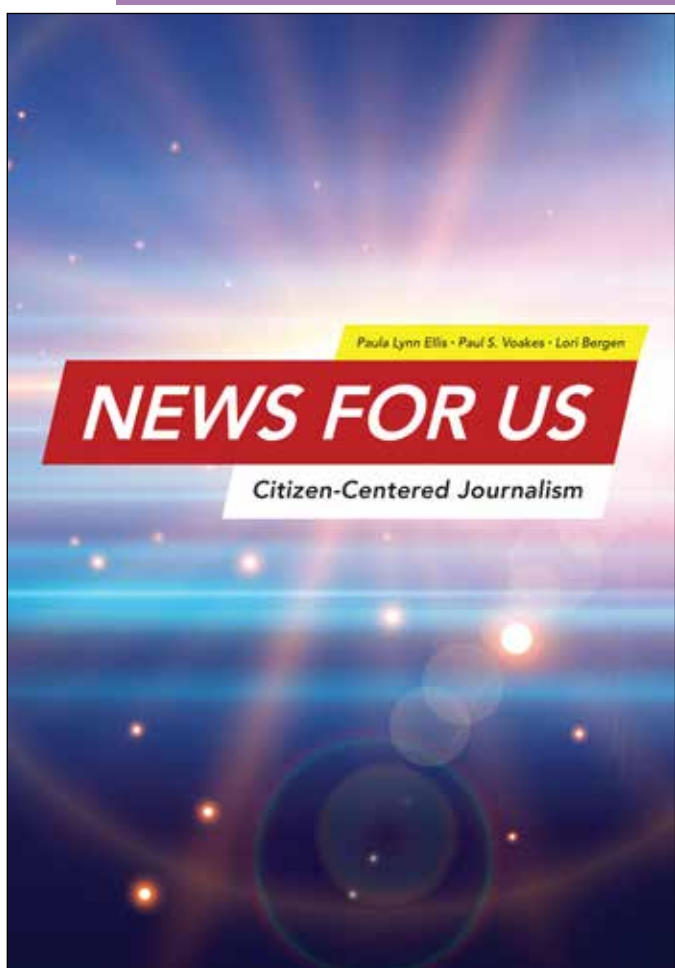
nated with the publication of two books—a journalism textbook published in 2022 and a new Kettering Foundation Press book, available in the coming months, that brings together personal essays from 10 journalists who are bold thought leaders and innovators in their profession. Both books point toward new paradigms for journalism. The textbook suggests different



**This yearslong work has culminated with the publication of two books—a journalism textbook published in 2022 and a new Kettering Foundation Press book, available in the coming months, that brings together personal essays from 10 journalists who are bold thought leaders and innovators in their profession.**

***News for US: Citizen-Centered Journalism* by Paula Lynn Ellis, Paul S. Voakes, and Lori Bergen (Cognella, 2022).**

In the midst of the disruptions and distrust that have plagued traditional media in recent years, and a degree of polarization rarely seen in American history, a new style of journalism is emerging. Dozens of news organizations, from corporate powerhouses to home-office startups, are reviving a classic role of American journalism: inspiring and enabling Americans to do the difficult, authentic, and ultimately rewarding work of citizenship in a democratic society.



*News for US: Citizen-Centered Journalism* is the first-ever guide to this new approach—one that enriches the skill set of the 21st-century journalist with the mindset of civic engagement. Authors Paula Lynn Ellis, Paul S. Voakes, and Lori Bergen illuminate the principles of citizen-centered journalism and demonstrate how today’s journalists can apply them within the context of modern-day news and feature reporting. The text features engaging perspectives from leading innovators and experimenters in the field who describe their challenges and offer guidance to readers.

Offering readers a blend of academic scholarship and case studies that highlight practical innovations, *News for US* provides readers with a comprehensive look at the emergence of citizen-centered journalism and the new journalistic mindset.

To learn more and purchase the book, visit: <https://titles.cognella.com/news-for-us-9781516548514>.

practices to emphasize for journalists in training. The book of essays discusses the results of experiments in covering the news not merely for, but *with* the citizens and communities in which they live.

The two books are very different, and yet they are linked by the belief that journalists who work with and for citizens can make both journalism and democracy stronger. The books complement one another because they feature some of the same innovators who, while holding fast to essential journalistic principles, are questioning long-standing practices that may no longer serve the needs of the public.

The textbook, *News for US: Citizen-Centered Journalism*, combines theory with practice to explore the emergence of what the authors call “relational” journalism, an approach that emphasizes building an ongoing relationship with members of the community it serves not only to restore their trust in news media but also to increase their power in the democratic process. To bring alive the mindset and skill-set shifts that the authors argue are necessary for journalists to play this facilitative role, the textbook features mini case studies of news outlets that are experimenting with relational journalism. The examples drawn from across the country are used to

illustrate five principles of relational journalism:

- Journalism is in itself an essential democratic practice.
- Journalists and citizens are collaborators.
- Journalists facilitate the work of citizens.
- Relational journalism updates time-honored traditions.
- Journalism must follow new paths to financial sustainability.

While the textbook was envisioned for use in advanced reporting classes, it has found a home in entry-level courses and in professional circles where people are rethinking the relationship between journalism and democracy. In his foreword, Neil Brown, president of the Poynter Institute for Media Studies, said, “Three of America’s leading journalist-scholars have offered a powerful and optimistic playbook for journalists to embrace new and adaptive thinking about how journalism can be an effective tool of democracy, rather than settle for the trope that it simply is.”

Paula Ellis is lead author of the textbook, written with Paul Voakes and Lori Bergen. It is a product of the authors’ decades-long experience, and it was further inspired by the ongoing conversations between educators assembled by Kettering in

learning exchanges at the foundation and the annual AEJMC (Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication) convention. The journalism professors, many of whom were leaders in the field of “engaged journalism,” repeatedly lamented that existing textbooks just couldn’t keep up with the rapid changes under way.

And here is where the two strands of Kettering’s journalism work came together. Just as these educators were meeting in learning exchanges at the foundation, leading innovators from news organizations across the country were also gathering at the foundation to trade ideas and experiences with each other. The textbook was able to bring their work and innovations to the educators and into classrooms, but the ideas that they were experimenting with were so rich that we wanted to share more.

The second book, *Reinventing Journalism to Strengthen Democracy*, is a volume of essays that we edited to bring together insights from 10 of the innovators who participated in learning exchanges at the foundation, many of whom are also featured in the textbook.

The central proposition of the textbook comes as no surprise to the authors of the essays, who believe that journalists and citizens together can cover the news and shape a narrative that makes the media more trusted, more robust, and strengthens democracy.

In the exchanges with these innovators, we kept the focus on the simple question that Kettering has persistently asked for decades: What does it take to make democracy work as it should? Then we asked about the implications of the answer for journalism. What more, or what else, is required of *journalism as an institution* for democracy to work as it should?

Over the course of a few years, we met regularly and learned together. The journalists reported on their efforts. Sometimes they succeeded; sometimes they fell short. Regardless of the outcome, we asked them to tell us, and each other, what they had learned. Foundation folks, drawing from decades of scholarly and practical research, added to the mix.

**“What more, or what else, is required of journalism as an institution for democracy to work as it should?”**

***Reinventing Journalism to Strengthen Democracy: Insights from Innovators***  
edited by Paloma Dallas and Paula Ellis (Kettering Foundation Press,  
forthcoming).

The book includes the following essays:

**“Reorienting Journalism to Favor Democratic Agency”**

by Subramaniam (Subbu) Vincent, director of Journalism and Media Ethics for the Markkula Center for Applied Ethics at Santa Clara University

**“Journalism: Evolving with the People”**

by Doug Oplinger, who led the statewide media collaborative, Your Voice Ohio, and is former managing editor of the *Akron Beacon Journal*

**“Fostering Human Connection Is the Heart of Media Reform”**

by Michelle Holmes, founder of Heart’s Ease Love and Freedom Center and former vice president of content, Alabama Media Group

**“Dismantling Systemic Racism in News”**

by Martin Reynolds, co-executive director, Robert C. Maynard Institute for Journalism Education and former editor in chief, *Oakland Tribune*

**“Public-Powered Journalism”**

by Jennifer Brandel, cofounder and CEO, Hearken

**“Working with the Community”**

by Ben Trefny, interim executive director, KALW Public Media

**“Dialogue Journalism: Adapting to Today’s Civic Landscape”**

by Eve Pearlman, cofounder and CEO, Spaceship Media

**“A Framework for Building Trust with Communities”**

by David Plazas, opinion and engagement director, USA TODAY Network Tennessee

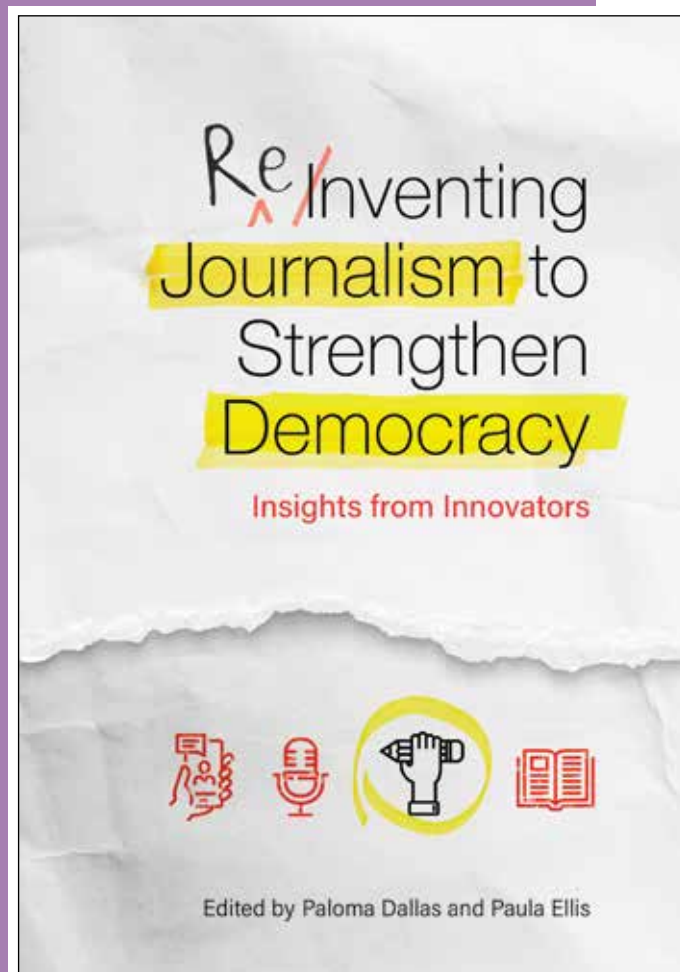
**“For Democracy to Work, Journalism Needs an Ethic of Care”**

by Linda Miller, who leads the Multicultural Media and Correspondents Association’s Equitable Media and Economies Initiative and was the former director of network journalism and inclusion for American Public Media

**“Journalism’s Civic Media Moment Could Be a Movement”**

by Darryl Holliday, cofounder and co-executive director, national impact for City Bureau

The book will be available for purchase soon at [www.kettering.org](http://www.kettering.org), Amazon, and Barnes & Noble.





**In the end, we hope both books will help small-d democrats everywhere to view journalists as potential allies in fashioning both new narratives about our collective identity and a more constructive public square.**

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As editors of the book, we asked the innovators to tell their learning journeys in their own words. We asked them to mine their experiences for insights and inflection points, focused always on the question of how journalism could better support a strong, thriving democracy.

The journalists in the volume of essays take aim at different challenges, but each takes stock of how we have landed at this point of deep distrust—of each other, of the media, and of institutions of all kinds—and each also offers ideas about ways forward.

The essays take on the myth of

journalistic “objectivity,” the overreliance of the media on experts and institutions, and the tendency toward an extractive relationship with the public. Many also focus on “belonging,” and the role journalism has historically played in creating a collective sense of the public, of an “us.” The loss of newspapers and fracturing of the information ecosystem has weakened the sense of a shared identity, but the journalists in this volume recognize that many have long felt excluded, misrepresented, and unable to see themselves and their experiences reflected as part of the democratic experiment. And this problem extends beyond the community to the newsroom as well. As one of the authors writes, “At the very least, mainstream news organizations have been sustainers and facilitators of systemic racism and White supremacy culture.”

The authors see an opportunity to help create a narrative that is more inclusive and better captures the rich diversity of our nation and its complicated history. Rather than aspire to neutrality, one innovator suggests deep authenticity. “In an era of mistrust and skepticism, with people on heightened alert for being manipulated and played, the way out for journalists is to be as forthright and transparent as possible.” Another author writes that all journalists

should be prepared to answer this question: “Why should I trust you?” Confronted with this question at a public event, he was forced to grapple with the impression that he and other “media elites” look down on their rural neighbors.

The essays suggest new imperatives for journalism: To care, not just about issues and accuracy, but about communities and the people in them. To work with the community, not just on their behalf. To more intentionally focus on advancing public understanding and “help the public discuss complex cultural and political concerns, including power itself, across racial and ethnic identities.” To be “integral, vital, living threads in the fabric of democracy, stretching and flexing so that people see us as partners, as vital to improving their lives.” To help people see themselves as part of a larger collective: “I see you and you see me and *we are all in this together.*” And to shift the journalistic gaze “away from Whiteness, to the kaleidoscope of gazes that reflect our society and the world.”

These journalists see a role for themselves in building trust not only toward the news media but also among people in the community. Some have experimented with a facilitative role for journalists. Others support a more participatory model of journalism that sees people in

communities as active problem solvers and producers of the kind of journalism they need to address the problems they face. They have coined their own terms: *dialogue journalism* and *public-powered journalism*. They have trained residents in cities around the country as “documenters” to record what happens in public meetings so that others might get involved and make a difference. This type of participatory media is seen as an essential part of a new civic movement.

All the authors see opportunity in this moment of turmoil. With older models of journalism under threat, they see a growing appetite for experimentation and the emergence of something new to meet the needs of today. Their thoughtful essays contribute toward a richer understanding of journalism today and its dual opportunity and responsibility of strengthening democracy.

In the end, we hope both books will help small-*d* democrats everywhere to view journalists as potential allies in fashioning both new narratives about our collective identity and a more constructive public square. ■

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# Reimagining Public Service, Professionalism, and Public Institutions: Fostering Democratic Practices

By Valerie Lemmie and Kara Lindaman

**F**or more than 40 years, the Kettering Foundation has been studying the problems of democracy, including how citizens and public officials learn to work collaboratively to address shared community problems neither can fix alone. Much of this research has been inspired by the work of Elinor Ostrom, Nobel Prize-winning political scientist, and Daniel Yankelovich, a public opinion expert and social

scientist, as well as what we learned from the hundreds of public officials who have convened at the foundation over time and have shared their struggles, experiments, innovations, and the outcome of work with citizens and other aligned institutions to address the intractable, challenging problems their communities faced.

Over the years, a language was developed. And while initially used by adherents to our research findings, as this network of academics and public officials has grown, our language is increasingly reflected in professional nomenclature, especially in the field of public administration. This is important because language has an impact on how mayors, police chiefs, city managers, and the like do their jobs. It has helped public professionals understand democracy as a set of practices, including naming, framing, deliberating, identifying community resources, acting collaboratively with the public, and learning together as a community. An example is the use of the terms *complementary* or *coproduction* when referring to public work between government and citizens that reflects how they leverage the assets of institutions and communities to address shared problems. While citizens may never use a word like *coproduction*, use of the term implies that they and government are working together on



issues, rather than one side holding power over the other. Another example of this shared approach is the movement away from public hearings to deliberative community conversations. Public deliberation is proving to be a powerful tool as it moves beyond public opinion and first impressions to a deeper understanding of complex problems where people can work through their disagreements and tensions, identify the interests and values they share, and build common ground upon which to act.

As an operating foundation with an action research orientation, Kettering's insights are informed by how public officials and citizens work together to address shared community problems. Enduring learning outcomes of the work of the foundation are best found when our research terminology gives voice to the work done in communities. Newer terms, such as *cocreation*, reflect the increasing role citizens are playing in the development of public policies, priority-setting, and problem-solving. This learning loop keeps our research fresh and relevant as well as recognizes the evolving relationship between citizens and public officials in addressing community concerns.

The public officials who join us are often frustrated with business

as usual and have an interest in exploring ways to align their professional routines with the way people in communities work. At times, this frustration comes from public demands or from political expectations. Those who participate in Kettering learning exchanges represent the innovators, thought leaders, and influencers searching for better solutions to problems in their relationship with the public. Other participants teach the next generation of public officials and seek to equip them with the skills they will need to manage public institutions, such as city and county government, in an environment of political polarization, threats to our representative democracy, and demands



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understanding of public service—especially the ways theory and practice are aligned to engage with citizens in democratic and complementary ways to address public problems. Kettering’s research represents a fundamental and significant shift from traditional professional norms and institutional constraints as it advances “democratic practices” over “best practices.”

While we see an increase in community collaborations that are more democratic and complementary, there are threats to democracy that can make these collaborations more challenging for public officials and citizens. In our most recent research with city managers, they report increased political polarization on local councils and in communities, which makes finding common ground and identifying the values that people share more difficult. Over time, public meetings have become more contentious and unruly, and people have become less willing to compromise. Our academics and researchers advise us that young people are demanding an accountability of public institutions for past and present harms and are questioning whether these institutions can be trusted to reform themselves. They are reframing the question of how to make democracy work as it should to how to make public

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for institutional accountability. The researchers and scholars seek a better understanding of how public policy, service, and administration can be understood, implemented, and practiced in more innovative, equitable, and relevant ways. For example, one city manager noted that national politics are slowly moving into localities, with social media comments becoming increasingly more partisan and polarized.

In July 2022, we convened several groups that had launched their learning journeys one to two years earlier. Collectively, they sought to create a holistic and comprehensive



institutions more inclusive, just, and equitable. Public professionals are responding by creating more opportunities to work with the public to help strengthen our democracy.

The narrative from these learning exchanges illustrates the intersectionality of the pressing concerns facing public institutions, professionals, and the wealth of shared experiences. But even more important is the acknowledgment of the integral role the public must play if our democratic institutions are to thrive. We highlight two of the learning exchanges convened in July 2022.

### **LEADERSHIP INSTITUTE: CITY MANAGERS ENGAGING CITIZENS TO SOLVE COMMUNITY PROBLEMS**

We are working with the International City/County Management Association (ICMA) and the National Civic League on a Leadership Institute to help managers build and strengthen their ability to engage with a public that often feels sidelined, reluctant to get involved, and hesitant to recognize and address issues of race, equity, and inclusion. A dozen local government officials and fellows met at the Kettering Foundation for one day in May and one day in

July to work on these issues and to develop their capstone research projects for the annual ICMA meetings in October.

Key to the work of the Leadership Institute is shared learning and the development of innovative professional practices. Representing communities across the country—including California, Colorado, Maine, Minnesota, North Carolina, Tennessee, and Washington—this diverse group of public officials developed a cultural competency while exploring ways to create greater access and responsiveness to marginalized communities and more equitable processes to engage citizens in democratic and complementary work.

The role of government, power, and equal access was a common theme of the week, especially with Institute fellows. They struggled with moving to or achieving judgment

when there are multiple stories, perspectives, and truths, and how government and public policy, despite its best intentions, has unintended consequences. Rather than focusing on the costs of public participation and the time democratic engagement takes, they considered the costs of *not* addressing inequities. They used a mountain metaphor to illustrate what they were doing and what they were learning.

The mountain metaphor encouraged reflection by public officials when collaborating with citizens to foster a more diverse, equitable, and inclusive community. All agreed this is sometimes frustrating and often-times messy. The progress made “up the mountain” may often be “stomping back the switchbacks” to make the path more accessible for subsequent travelers and change agents. Progress becomes hopeful and shared with a collective stake in the climb, rather than the individualistic and personal, as problem solvers and fixers, in the archaic and academic public service model of specialization and technical expertise.

## **PUBLIC SERVICE WITH DEMOCRATIC PRACTICES**

The theme of the mountain metaphor transcended the research of multiple learning exchanges on public institu-





tions and citizens acting in complementary ways. Faculty, teachers, and scholars in programs and schools of public policy and public administration struggled with the pedagogical approach to engage citizens differently and more inclusively. In other words, how may academics in higher education harness resources and creativity to move away from a single narrative about what is happening in the community to reflect how to collaborate with community differently?

In the fields of public policy and public administration, being neutral, professional, and impartial is paramount. However, the enrollment cliff facing higher education has increased pressure to increase recruitment and retention and to reduce barriers to student success while there is growing distrust in the democratic institutions of colleges and universities. The lack of urgency and responsiveness in teaching and

learning about “best practices” and “professional public service” as non-political or apolitical seem unaware and irrelevant when the threats to democracy are very real.

In other words, how is theory best put into actions and practice? What should be the purpose-driven definition of professionalism, which upholds shared community values on significant issues and local decisions? There was consensus to move away from the teaching and learning of “best practices” to the “sense of belonging” and “what works.” Once



students as citizens discover what works, they can adapt it to their own communities and own it as their practice. Whether this becomes an advocacy or deliberative process underscores the tensions and the interests involved: where community and citizen priorities are reconciled and aligned with the real and relevant work of the public administrator.

### **SHARED PURPOSE AND VALUE IN PUBLIC SERVICE**

Many of the exchanges held in July strengthened the networks and connections between and with public

servants and underscored the value of these ordinary citizens doing extraordinary work to build the democratic capacity and civic muscle of their communities. For example, the research exchange, “Public Safety Officials Engaging with Citizens in Democratic and Complementary Ways to Create Safe Communities,” expanded the table to thoughtfully include police chiefs and officers, community organizers, prosecutors, and professional associations. From their experiences on the streets and in their communities, we learned how to recruit and retain public

servants (police officers) as citizens who create trust and improve quality of life equitably. Participants agreed there is a desperate and shared need for the cultivation and socialization of “people with a heart for service,” which they saw as a prerequisite for the recruitment of police officers and the reform of public safety.

The experiences and perspectives of public safety officials are not too different from those of city managers and county executives and mirror many in public service and public institutions, whether on the front lines or in front of a classroom of students. The heart of democracy resides in the everyday work and daily lives of citizens in our communities.

The enduring lessons of this work are expressed in real action by public servants. If democracy is to represent and to respond to the urgent concerns of the day, the interaction and relationships between public organizations, agencies, and institutions need to be restored to healthy levels of deliberation and resilience. These fellows, who come to the foundation, demonstrate their commitment.

The relationships and connections nurtured throughout these research exchanges exemplify the good work of our research. They remain critical to the health and well-being of our democracy. And while the tensions in the trek up the mountain and



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“stomping back the switchbacks” are real and ever-present, so, too, is the democratic promise. ■

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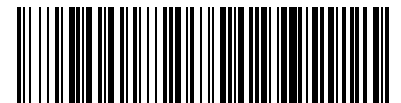
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