

# CONNECTIONS

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Experiments in  
**DEMOCRATIC  
CITIZENSHIP**

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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# Countering Democracy's Challenges

By David Mathews



**A**s in the other articles I have written for *Connections*, I focus on where the Kettering Foundation is in its research, which is on what it takes to make democracy work as it should. I hope this research is useful to *Connections* readers.

Much of the research these days on democracy is troubling, even alarming. Four fundamental problems or challenges facing democracy today stand out. I'll describe them briefly now and elaborate later:

1. Citizens are roundly criticized, even by other citizens, for being inattentive, uninformed, and, even when attentive, easily manipulated. Many are believed to be incapable of making sound judgments, particularly in elections. Citizens, on the other hand, feel estranged from the government and pushed out of the political system, which they say includes the media. Americans often doubt they can make any real difference in the system beyond voting and writing their representatives.
2. Frustrated by the problems in the national political system, people are turning more to their communities to solve problems. Yet communities may be too divided in all sorts of ways for citizens to work together effectively. Furthermore, people may not recognize the resources they have or the opportunities in everyday community routines to use their assets to make the difference they would like to make.
3. Public confidence in major institutions, not just governmental but nongovernmental as well, continues to stay at a historic low—despite numerous initiatives in citizen participation, accountability, and community engagement. These measures

may even add to citizens' loss of confidence. Partisan gridlock and polarization in Washington probably further contribute to this declining confidence.

4. While there is evidence of vitality in civic life at the grassroots or local level, there is little connection between this, the politics people refuse to call politics, and the politics of elections and government. This disconnect was noted in reports that I will elaborate on later.

*Connections* readers might be in a good position to address these problems because many serve in nonprofits or nongovernmental organizations that are focused on the well-being of communities. People's frustration with the federal government is shifting their focus to communities, which means that communities have to work better to solve some of the problems that vex Americans.

Kettering research shows that there are everyday opportunities for citizens to have a meaningful impact. As I will explain, these opportunities are in ordinary routines like naming or identifying problems that affect the community. The foundation is eager to hear from readers interested in seeing more people involved in shared problem solving by experimenting with turning everyday

community routines into citizen-empowered practices.

## RESEARCH ON REPRESENTATIVE GOVERNMENT AND CIVIC DEMOCRACY

With these four general findings in mind, I would like to go into more detail on the research that we drew on in our analysis.

Since the 1980s, the foundation has been tracking the public's attitude about the political system through analysis of public deliberations in National Issues Forums (NIF), along with other sources. Whatever the issue being addressed in the forums, they have often involved questions about the role that the government should play. In 2012, John Creighton analyzed the results of a number of NIF deliberations, concluding, "It would be difficult to overstate the cynicism people feel toward elected officials." Other studies of citizens'



**Kettering research shows that there are everyday opportunities for citizens to have a meaningful impact.**

perceptions of government agencies, and the reactions of the agencies, show that the cynicism and distrust is often mutual. People may have little confidence in the government, and the government sometimes has little confidence in the people.

A key piece of research for Kettering came in 1991. In *Citizens and Politics: A View from Main Street America*, Rich Harwood found that, contrary to the then-conventional wisdom, the American people were not apathetic about the political system. Many were “mad as the devil.” Significantly, the Harwood study went beneath the usual popular dissatisfaction with government and politicians to discover an abiding

sense of civic duty, which is why people were so angry about being pushed out of what they considered their rightful place in a democracy.

Since that report, we have seen more evidence of this civic spirit, despite negative feelings about government. To be sure, people express doubts about their fellow citizens. Nonetheless, we continue to hear stories about citizens joining forces to solve problems and assist one another. This has been especially evident recently in communities that have been hit by natural disasters. And there have been studies showing that the politics of neighborliness and civic life are not dead but flourishing in some locales—so much so that it brings with it a sense of opportunity, even optimism.

Many studies show that public distrust of government is not confined to the United States. One of the more interesting studies, *The Democratic Disconnect*, was published by the Transatlantic Academy in May 2013. The report pointed to a “yawning” gap separating citizens from the institutions of government. Although recognizing that “internet-empowered social activism of a new generation has never been more vibrant,” the study found that “little of this participatory mobilization from civil society seems effectively to connect with formal structures [of government]



**We continue to hear stories about citizens joining forces to solve problems and assist one another. This has been especially evident recently in cities that have been hit by natural disasters.**



*Volunteer efforts in Texas following Hurricane Harvey.*

AP PHOTOS



and institutional processes.” Yet they also found that “strong potential exists for renewal.” They argued that “the key” to revitalizing democracy is “enhancing the participatory vibrancy that represents the cornerstone of high quality democracy.” The report concluded that, “visions of top-down problem solving are insufficient. Open-ended and vibrant democratic deliberation is needed.”

This suggests that if democracy is taken to mean only representative government, it is in very serious trouble. However, if democracy is also understood to include the work citizens do with citizens, the outlook is less grim. The difficulty, as this report argued, is that representative government and civic democracy, although often estranged, are nonetheless interdependent. What citizens do with citizens is the oldest form of democracy, even older than ancient Greek democracy. This civic or citizen democracy is like the wetlands

of the political ecology; it is where political life begins. If the legitimacy of institutional democracy is to be restored, efforts have to begin in these wetlands.

### **ORGANIZING THE RESEARCH AROUND THE ACTORS**

Because the research on democracy from all sources is voluminous and growing, we have found it useful to group the studies around the people and organizations that will need to respond to the challenges facing democracy: the citizenry, communities, and institutions, both





**The most important political decisions are often about what is *right* or *should be* done. These normative questions can't be answered with facts alone. They require the exercise of human judgment.**

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governmental and nongovernmental. The four fundamental problems facing democracy today, with which I began this piece, affect all the actors in various ways.

#### *Citizens*

As implied in the word *democracy*, the role of the *demos* (“the citizenry”) is central. “We the People” are sovereign in the US Constitution, yet, as noted, people have often been criticized for not exercising sound judgment. That criticism has been sharper recently because of the decisions people have made as voters. One conventional remedy is to provide citizens with more factually correct information. That’s fine; however, the

most important political decisions are often about what is *right* or *should be* done. These normative questions can’t be answered with facts alone. They require the exercise of human judgment. When this distinction isn’t recognized, the political debate is carried on with dueling facts that degenerate into polarizing wars over solutions rather than addressing what is behind the problems.

The highly adversarial tone of political discourse today can prevent common efforts needed to solve shared problems. Encouraging people to be more civil is fine; however, there is no substitute for doing the hard work of making shared judgments. Such “choice work” changes relationships, making them more pragmatic and less adversarial. Choice work is also called “deliberation.” Unfortunately, conventional definitions of deliberation may make no mention of deliberation as the exercise of human judgment.

Lack of civility is often a result of ideological polarization. This can be reduced by deliberations in which people weigh possible solutions against what is really valuable to them, what they hold most dear. Most of us want to be secure from danger, to be free to act as we think best, and to be treated fairly. The source of the conflict is not that we don’t share these concerns but



that people give different priorities to what they value because of differences in their circumstances. Recognizing this distinction can change the tone of the disputes. This helps combat polarization because even though people still differ on what should be done, it is easier for them to find ways to move ahead—despite lack of full agreement.

Research on deliberation and public judgment speaks directly to concerns about citizens and the soundness of their decision making. This research needs to extend to political discourse online. At Kettering, we hope to learn more about how online platforms can facilitate the exercise of good judgment. That question can't be answered, however, without more experimentation with making the technology friendly to democratic purposes.

Concerns about the ability of people to be responsible citizens also have obvious implications for civic education. People aren't born knowing how to be citizens; they have to learn to carry out the duties that come with citizenship. But *how* they are to be educated has been a subject of continuing controversy. One school of thought considers familiarity with historical documents like the Constitution to be essential. I'm a historian by training, so I would agree. Others would add familiarity

with the operations of government, such as how a bill is passed. Having served in government, I would also agree. However, I've been a teacher, and I know how hard it is to get young people to pay attention to things they consider unrelated to their day-to-day experiences. They may see the functions of government as irrelevant and the history lessons dry. As a student once wrote in his textbook, "If the world is filled with waters high, dear teacher, this book will still be dry."

Fortunately, there are now experiments that help animate civic education by giving students actual experience with doing the most basic



**There are now experiments that help animate civic education by giving students actual experience with doing the most basic work of citizens—making decisions with others.**

work of citizens—making decisions with others. These experiments are happening in colleges, secondary schools, and even elementary classrooms. Museums have also been trying this same approach to civic education in order to make their exhibits more meaningful. For example, trying to make the choices being debated in adopting the Constitution makes that document come alive for students. Given the problems our political system is having now, rethinking civic education couldn't be more urgent.

### *Citizens and Communities*

The places where people live, work, raise their families, and deal with everyday challenges are at the center of the political world. This is what

I mean by “community,” although I recognize there are other valid definitions.

As I said, communities are also susceptible to the divisions that can make it difficult for people to work together. But at the same time, the foundation is seeing many examples of the politics of neighborliness. For example, see Nancy Rosenblum's book *Good Neighbors* and James Fallows' article “How America Is Putting Itself Back Together” in the March 2016 *Atlantic*. Communities are more pressured than ever to come together and combat their problems, and many of these problems are the kind that only citizens can solve because the remedies are in the human interventions that only people



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*A community march against the heroin epidemic in Norwalk, Ohio, July 2017.*

can make. Community institutions, hospitals for instance, can care *for* you but only other people can care *about* you. And that care is powerful medicine.

Perhaps the spotlight has shifted more to our communities because people have lost confidence in national institutions. I'm not saying that people don't value what the federal government does or that it is as ill executed as it sometimes may appear. Nonetheless, the frustration with inaccessibility of many centralized institutions is real, and that frustration appears to be pushing people to look for local solutions. Research on how people in communities can come together, despite their differences, and do the work of producing things that make life a bit better for everyone is critical in today's circumstances.

I think that focusing research on citizens doing the *work* of citizens in their communities is particularly critical. I emphasize work because the work of democracy is real work—hard work that is often a struggle to do. I've already talked about the choice work involved in making shared decisions in spite of differences. However, there is more to this work than deliberation alone. In fact, decision making isn't an isolated act; it is one part of a body of interrelated work. There isn't anything mysterious about this work.



**The places where people live, work, raise their families, and deal with everyday challenges are at the center of the political world.**

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The problem to be solved has to be identified. Ways of combating it have to be considered and decisions made about who needs to act. The actors have to commit themselves and then garner the resources they need. The work also has to be organized to be as effective as possible. And, under the best circumstances, the people doing the work learn from what they have done so that when the next problem comes along, they will profit from their mistakes and be better able to respond.

The difficulty, from a democratic point of view, is that citizens may not recognize they are doing some of the work already or that there are overlooked opportunities. The critical question is, what will make these opportunities more apparent? Here is an example: People seldom, if ever, act without a reason, and that reason is reflected in how a problem

is identified or described. This naming usually happens so unconsciously that people may not recognize how important it is. Often communities move straight to action. But even then, the name of the problem is implied in the action. A democratic opportunity is lost when citizens don't add the distinctive names people give problems.

People describing problems in terms of what they hold dear is not the way professionals are trained to name problems, which, as it should be, is in expert terms. One example I have often used is that citizens want to feel that they are safe in their homes, and this feeling of security is less quantifiable yet more compelling than the statistics professionals use

to describe crime. Politicians name problems taken from a partisan agenda, which may not speak to people's experiences. Partisan names capture what a politician hopes will be a winning argument. The challenge is to recognize *all* the names, even those that aren't scientific or objective but rather experiential.

In each of the other aspects of civic work that I have listed, there are opportunities for citizens to make a difference—if they recognize the opportunities. Seeing them, however, is difficult because the way citizens do their work is different from the way professionals do theirs. For instance, the options for action taken by citizens are different from the options for professionals. For instance, if the problem is a rise in street crimes, which people see as a threat to the safety they value, one option for action might be citizens setting up neighborhood watches. When people name problems in terms of how the problems affect them and their families, it can prompt them to be civic actors.

The way citizens go about decision making in their communities is distinctive as well. Citizen decision making is seldom just a technical process of cost-benefit analysis. As noted earlier, public decision making at its best involves the exercise of public judgment. The resources



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people use to act are also different; so too is the way people organize themselves and evaluate results. At each point in community work, from the time a problem is named to the time the work is evaluated, there are opportunities for citizens to empower themselves. When people don't see these opportunities it contributes to a sense of powerlessness, which damages people's sense of responsibility. How can they be held accountable for what they cannot affect?

More research needs to be done on how people can recognize empowering opportunities. The same can be said about officials and administrators recognizing that citizens do their work in distinctive ways. The challenge isn't to get citizens to do what professionals do but for them to appreciate what they themselves can do.

### *Citizens and Institutions*

Among all of the problems in our political system, none is more glaring than the public's declining confidence in our major institutions, not only governmental but also nongovernmental. More effective measures to bridge the divide separating the public from government and other institutions are badly needed.

One reason is our large institutions can't be optimally effective without assistance from the produc-

tive work of citizens. Elinor Ostrom won the Nobel Prize in Economic Sciences in 2009 for demonstrating that. Unfortunately, there are obstacles standing in the way of what should be a win-win for both the public and institutions—governments, schools, hospitals, and so on. One is that people don't always see opportunities to make a difference. Another, just mentioned, is that the way institutions usually work may not align well with the way citizens usually work. The result of this misalignment is that the potential for collaboration between the citizenry in a community and the community's institutions often remains unrealized.

Our institutions are effective technically because they are staffed by competent professionals who contribute their considerable expertise. The downside is that these professionals may see citizens the way some physicians see citizens, which is as patients, rather than as workers or coproducers of the things hospitals, schools, and government agencies need.

A study by Monica Schoch-Spana et al. on the way professionals could better engage with citizens during disasters and epidemics is revealing. According to the authors, "The prevailing assumption is that a panic-stricken public, blinded by self-preservation, will constitute a





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*Citizens around the country are joining together to discuss the opioid epidemic.*

secondary disaster for authorities to manage. Some emergency authorities also have mistakenly interpreted citizen-led interventions in past and present disasters as evidence of failure on the part of responders.”

Or take the case of colleges and universities that have admirable community outreach programs, conduct publicly beneficial research, and give their students opportunities for public service. What do these commendable efforts imply about the role of citizens? It is easy to think of citizens simply as people who need information and services. This perception does not recognize that citizens also have resources and the capacity for action. The crucial question is, how can institutions of higher education relate to citizens as coproducers?

Government agencies and non-governmental organizations face the same challenge. Working with citizens doesn’t mean that professionals have to compromise their expertise or give up their power. It does mean, however, that professionals and their institutions have to open up space for citizens to act on their own—and be more than volunteers. Although professionals can’t do the work of citizens, they can encourage and precipitate it, *if* (and that’s a big *if*) they can be comfortable with sharing control.

Given the public criticisms of institutions and the danger of losing their legitimacy and authority, rethinking the role of professionals and exploring the possibilities for what has been called a more civic professionalism is necessary.

## RESPONSIBILITIES AND BENEFITS

No strategy for overcoming the problems of democracy, whether they have to do with citizens, communities, or institutions, is likely to be effective unless it serves the self-interests of those who have to carry out the strategy. And carrying out any strategy imposes responsibilities. Some of these self-interests are obvious. Citizens want to make a difference in shaping their future, but that requires doing work that can be taxing, like the choice work needed to confront and then work through the tensions associated with difficult decisions. Will people do this kind of work? Some already are. More should. In the United States, there are now a number of nonpartisan organizations sponsoring public forums on difficult issues that could promote not just informed dialogue but also deliberative choice work.

Communities benefit when their citizens join forces to combat common problems. However, that requires dealing with the myriad differences that put people and groups at odds with one another. Is there any perfectly harmonious community? Of course not. Still, there are some communities that benefit from greater levels of collaboration. That is often evident after natural disasters, but cooperation isn't limited to

tragedies. It could happen more often in more places. And that isn't just wishful thinking.

Despite doubts about what citizens can and will do, there are signs of renewed civic vitality in our communities. This issue of *Connections* highlights such stories. The key is recognizing that people don't have to be alike one another or even to like one another to work together. They just have to recognize the obvious—they need one another.

Who might benefit from bridging the divide separating the public from the government and other public-serving institutions? In the case of governments, it might help to give officeholders ways to connect to a public that is more than



**Despite doubts about what citizens can and will do, there are signs of renewed civic vitality in our communities. This issue of *Connections* highlights such stories.**



interest groups, constituencies with demands, or the statistical public in polling data. What about connecting to a deliberative public? A citizenry that deliberates has something in common with officeholders who have to exercise their best judgment on issues that can't be decided by data alone. As I mentioned earlier, these are matters where the issue is what is the *right* thing to do; these are normative *should* questions, and they are difficult decisions for officials to make. Officials have reason to want to understand how citizens go about making up their minds on such difficult issues.

Another obvious benefit: as I mentioned, governments have already made a number of efforts to combat declining confidence through public participation initiatives, civic engagement projects, and demonstrations of accountability. Yet confidence has continued to fall, which suggests a need to go beyond current engagement practices to strategies where institutions work more *with* the public than just *for* the public. Kettering has found that when people are involved in collaborative work with institutions—when they are agents, not just subjects—they are more likely to have confidence in the institutions. A February 2017 white paper published by the World Economic

Forum suggests a similar strategy:

The 21st century needs a new model of government, a government *with* the people. Olli-Pekka Heinonen, Director General of the Finnish National Board of Education, writes that this revolutionary shift happens if we, instead of providing public services to citizens, learn to achieve results with citizens. This means a fundamental change in how the identity of citizens is seen; a shift from consumer-citizens to value creator-citizens.

We live in a time when democracy faces challenges on a number of fronts, and no one knows all that needs to be known about how to meet them. We need more experiments by governments, schools, colleges and universities, communities, neighborhoods, civic organizations, and citizen associations to combat these challenges. We can shake our fist at our problems, but there has seldom been a time when these problems were more obvious to more people who realize that something has to be done. This opens the door to invention. And that's the good news. ■

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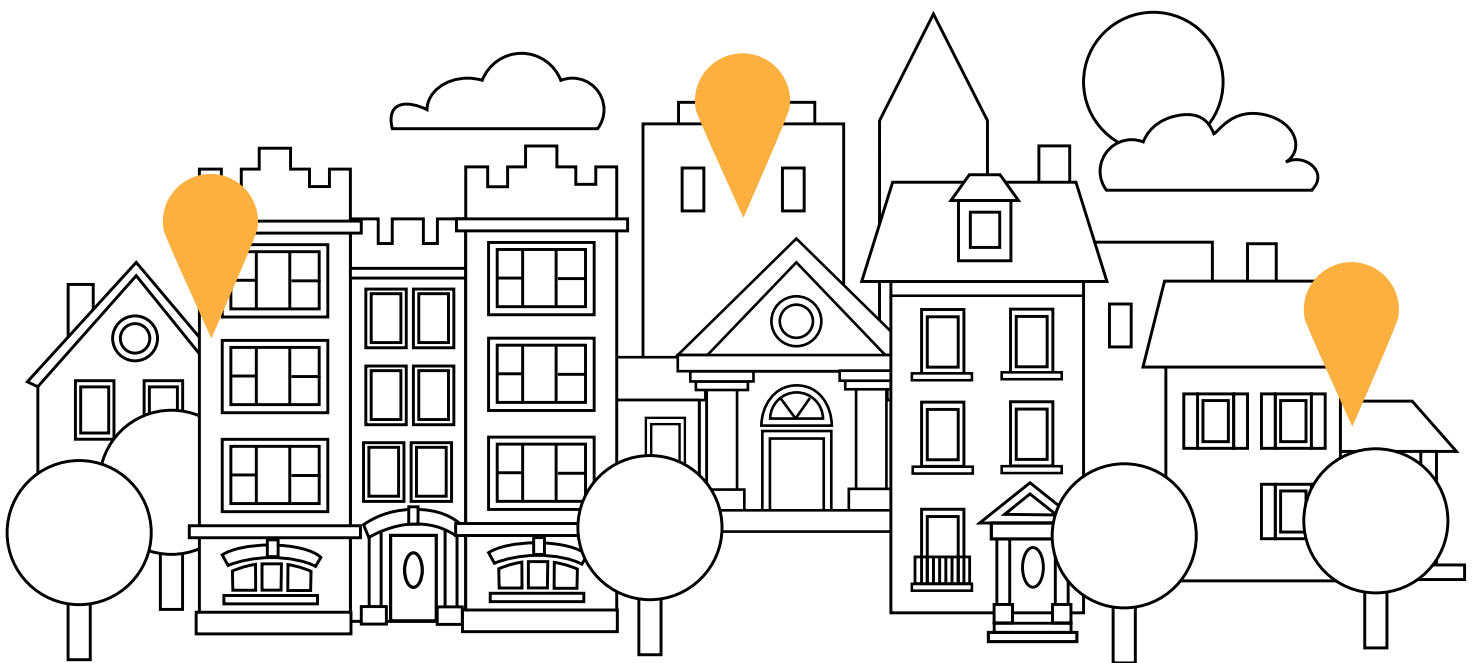
# The Educating Neighborhood: How Villages Raise Their Children

By John McKnight

**T**hroughout North America, one of the most popular mottos is the African saying, “It takes a village to raise a child.” Hardly anyone disagrees with its

premise. However, there are very few “villages” that actually engage in this practice. Child raising is thought to be largely the domain of families and schools. However, a village is much more than family or school, and holds more educational resources than either.

The educational assets of the village include the knowledge of neighborhood residents; the clubs, groups, and associations that are citizen-based learning environments; and the local institutions (businesses, not-for-profits, and government bodies). They each provide distinct and irreplaceable learning opportunities. It is these neighborhood educational assets that are activated in a village that raises its children. However, in most communities, these invaluable resources are unused and





**The first universally available educational asset is the knowledge local residents hold that they are willing to teach young people.**

disconnected from the lives of young people.

There is a forgotten history of village child raising. In the Asset-Based Community Development Institute's neighborhood research, we have discovered this history by asking people over 50 years of age to describe their experiences in their neighborhoods when they were children. Most of these people respond in a similar fashion. They say that things have changed a great deal. They remember how various people on the block taught them all kinds of things from singing to stamp collecting to bicycle repair to history. They also remember how the people on the block expected them to behave and would tell their parents immediately if they stepped over the neighborhood boundaries.

Finally, they speak of their sense that they were the children of all the people on the block or neighborhood.

When we ask people under the age of 40 to tell us about their childhood neighborhood experiences, we rarely hear the story told by their seniors. Instead their story is about school, youth groups (from Boy Scouts to gangs), and programs. Neighbors have vanished from the story.

It appears that in one to two generations, villages have lost their power to raise children. Their functions have largely been transferred to schools. This transfer is reflected by the fact that in the last generation, schools have been asked to take responsibility for the health, safety, food, recreation, behavior, moral values, and entrepreneurial development of young people. Viewed from the school perspective, these transfers have created teachers who often feel overwhelmed by all of these responsibilities. The transfer of neighborhood functions to the classroom has so distorted the teacher's role that she or he is diminished in capacity to teach those things for which they were prepared—the basic educational curriculum.

The transfer of neighborhood functions to schools has been a lose-lose history. The neighborhood

has become impotent and often angry at the behavior of young people with whom they have lost touch. The school has become overburdened as it attempts to be an all-purpose child raiser that fails at this impossible task. As a result, school-neighborhood tensions are increased as schools try to respond by getting parents to support the school rather than seeking neighborhood initiatives that would result in the village restoring those functions.

The resolution of this school-neighborhood dilemma depends upon identifying and mobilizing the educational capacities of the residents, associations, and institutions in the neighborhood. Surprisingly, every neighborhood is rich with these educational resources. However, very few communities are organized to identify and connect these resources to young people. A village with the capacity to raise children must first be able to identify the three most important teaching resources in the neighborhood.

### **THE KNOWLEDGE OF LOCAL RESIDENTS**

The first universally available educational asset is the knowledge local residents hold that they are willing to teach young people.

We have been engaged in research assisting people in local neighbor-

hoods to identify the local teaching knowledge. One example of this knowledge was documented in a low-income African American neighborhood in Chicago. The local neighborhood organization initially met with 17 residents residing on 3 local blocks. They asked the residents what they knew well enough to teach local young people and whether they would be willing to do that teaching without pay. The accompanying table demonstrates the teaching knowledge that these residents were willing to freely share with their village young people.

It is notable that the neighbors can teach some traditional school topics, but of even more significance, they can teach subjects that would not usually be taught in the school, such as vocational skills, moral values, constructive relationships, financial economic skills, self-esteem, recreation, and so on. In “teaching” these kinds of subjects, the neighborhood is recovering its function as child raiser. The school is relieved of functions and can even receive assistance from neighbors in supplementing typical school topics.

While there is great value in all the possible adult connections to their young neighbors, connecting youth to the village’s skills and vocational learning opportunities is an important resource for changing

## Teaching Knowledge of 17 Residents of 3 Blocks in Chicago's Woodlawn Neighborhood



Banking skills  
Basic accounting  
Economics  
Entrepreneurship



Physical fitness  
First aid  
Skating  
Real estate skills



Job creation  
Job training  
Marketing  
Raising a credit score  
Computer technology



Reviewing a credit report  
Being a good neighbor  
Basic etiquette  
Hygiene



Beginning journalism  
Homeschooling  
Reading comprehension  
Mathematics



Breastfeeding techniques  
for new moms  
Cooking  
Nutrition  
Self-esteem



Grammar  
English  
Handcrafting  
Knitting  
Sewing



Public speaking  
Presentational etiquette  
Event planning  
Strategic planning  
Youth life skills

life futures by connecting what young people want to learn with what neighbors want to teach.

### NEIGHBORHOOD ASSOCIATIONS

The second educational asset in neighborhoods is the clubs, groups, organizations, and associations to

which the local residents belong. These are usually smaller face-to-face groups where the members do the work and they are not paid.

We have done research with local neighborhood groups helping them identify their local associations. There are always many more than local people realize. One example is

the town of Spring Green, Wisconsin, with a population of 1,600. A team of residents was able to identify 82 associations and to interview the leaders of 60 associations.

The associations involve a diversity of neighborhood, civic, vocational, environmental, and social interests. The study found that the leaders identified “learning” as the most common reason that people join these associations. They are not only topical learning opportunities, but also provide invaluable social relationships that build trust—both qualities that every youth would learn to their advantage if they were connected to one or more associations.

The 60 associational leaders were given a list of various kinds of neighborhood improvement functions that are often fulfilled by local associations. Of particular significance is the fact that 34 groups say they are now involved with youth while 12 indicate that they would probably become involved if asked. When asked whether they are involved with “youth at risk,” 12 groups report that they are while 14 more say they are probably willing if asked. Many associations are in some way involved with young people and many more could be engaged if they were asked. This makes clear the largely unrecognized contributions and possibilities of local associations as teaching/learning venues.

Special note should be made of the research that emphasizes the importance of young people being connected with adults in order to develop their vocational, civic, and moral values. Local associations are the most readily available opportunities for young people to establish adult relationships in a productive setting that can develop their gifts and capacities as citizens.

### LOCAL INSTITUTIONS

The third neighborhood educational resource is the local institutions—businesses, not-for-profits, and government institutions that include libraries, parks, schools, and museums. These local institutions have



**Local associations are the most readily available opportunities for young people to establish adult relationships in a productive setting that can develop their gifts and capacities as citizens.**

been widely recognized as learning resources by universities and high schools with community service programs. These programs place students with the institutions in order to broaden their knowledge beyond traditional school topics. These kinds of student-institution relationships have many benefits, including specific vocational knowledge, relationships with productive adults, networking opportunities, understanding norms of a workplace, creative and entrepreneurial experiences, and activities that build self-esteem.

In addition to these institutional relationships, students can also be connected to other adults who are performing productive institutional activities. An example would be students who are paired with the mayor and elected council people, directors of government departments, hospital administrators, foundation staff, police officials, and entrepreneurs of all kinds. These experiences, in addition to providing wonderful learning opportunities, also increase the commitment of young people to their neighborhood and its civic life.

## **ACTIVATING AN EDUCATING NEIGHBORHOOD**

In many places, a common description of a local community is that it is a “welcoming neighborhood.” A

related definition would be an “educating neighborhood”—a place where all of the learning assets of individuals, associations, and institutions are identified and mobilized to create a village that raises its children. There are at least three steps that lead to an educating neighborhood:

### *1. Partners in Education*

The organization for carrying forward the vision of an educating neighborhood includes as many educating partners as possible. These partners can include neighborhood associations, other interested associations, the library, the local newspaper, the community foundation, the local government, the chamber of commerce, and the school.

This Neighborhood Education Partnership is best achieved if its members are not only visionaries but also representative of the three kinds of educational resources that must become activated if the educating neighborhood is to be mobilized.

### *2. Identifying a Neighborhood's Educational Resources*

In many neighborhoods, the “village” is not raising the children because the local educational assets are not visible. An initial goal of the Neighborhood Education Partnership is to make visible the invisible resources and to identify their willingness to take on a neighborhood education role.



## Three Steps That Lead to an Educating Neighborhood



**1 Establish a Neighborhood Education Partnership**—associations and institutions mobilized to create a village that raises its children.



**2 Identify the neighborhood's educational resources**—teaching knowledge and willingness to become an educational resource.



**3 Connect the educational resources**—develop methods that connect them to young people.

This “visibility” could include identifying 1) the teaching knowledge of residents in the neighborhood; 2) the associations in the neighborhood and their willingness to become an educational resource; and 3) the array of institutions and their willingness to join in the educating process. This undertaking can be done by the partners, sometimes in cooperation with local colleges and agencies.

While thus far we have focused on the role of adults teaching young people, it is equally important that this visibility initiative also seek to understand the skills, abilities, and interests that young people are prepared to contribute to neighborhood life. In this sense, people of all ages

become educating assets—everyone a teacher and everyone a learner.

When this “map” of the abundant educational resources is made public, it usually leads to a new vision of the neighborhood, its strengths, and its educating possibilities.

### *3. Connecting the Educational Resources*

Once the Neighborhood Education Partnership has identified the vast array of educational resources, the next step is to develop methods that connect them to young people. This function could be performed by a staff of the partnership. It might also be a significant function of the partners themselves. The local newspaper and college could also be an implementing resource. The task is to

weave young people into the fabric of the adult community so that they can learn and also become contributors to the neighborhood's life.

### LEARNING TO SUPPORT FUNCTIONING NEIGHBORHOODS

In recent years, several leaders of institutions and professionals have realized that they will not be able to fulfill their goals if the neighborhood is not organized to fulfill its unique functions.

Professionals in the health field have been active for years in energizing local neighborhoods to undertake health-giving activities because they know that medical care is a very limited tool for improving health.

In many communities, police leadership have become clear about their limits in dealing with crime. They

have developed community policing as a method to support neighborhood organizations that will take on functions providing security that police cannot begin to provide.

Many elected officials and department heads understand that unless local neighborhoods are organized to take on productive functions, the city or town will decline. They know that local government has clear limits of its capacity to create safe, healthy, economically sound neighborhoods. Without organized productive citizen action, the government will fail.

It is much less clear that school professionals understand what health, police, and municipal officials see so clearly. Often, they are still trapped in a paradigm in which the school dominates the field of education. However, this is a new educational era. Villages must recover their capacities to raise children if schools are to become all that they can be. An effective school of the future will be a partner in that neighborhood recovery. When that recovery is achieved, the village will be able to say, "These are our children. We care for and educate them. Our school is our best ally as we pioneer the new work of becoming a village raising our children." ■



**This is a new educational era. Villages must recover their capacities to raise children if schools are to become all that they can be.**

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# Recasting the Narratives That Shape Our Public Life

By Paula Ellis

**T**he power of story to shape thought and influence action has never been more widely understood. Story wars abound.

We've all heard someone say, "We need to control the narrative." This sets off a heated war over words and their meaning. Is it pro-life or pro-choice? Is it undocumented immigrants or illegal aliens?

Stories are the way we transmit our culture and values. It's no wonder, then, that the fights to control the narrative are more well-financed and the storytelling genres more diverse. Narrative techniques have exploded with the plethora of mediums. And the industries devoted to persuasion grow more sophisticated each day.

Story wars are high-stakes business.

If you want to win a public policy point, garner support for your cause, develop loyal followers, succeed in commerce, or advance your personal brand, you must construct a compelling narrative that others will adopt.

Why?

Stories convey information that trigger the emotions that fuel action. They help us make sense of things. They help us know who "us" is and is not. They can change behavior. There are stories of grievance. Stories of hope. Stories of helplessness. Stories of strength. And many more.

These story wars abound at the metalevel when, for example, a country fights to evolve a shared cultural myth against which it can measure the gap between today's reality and its ideals. They abound at the mezzalevel when political candidates shape their now-obligatory autobiography years before announcing a run for office. They abound at the microlevel when a documentary, TED talk, religious parable, or neighborly chat is told and retold, moving easily through the relationship networks in which we live.

Today, social media platforms enable all stories, no matter their origin, to spread more quickly to more people. We are all storytellers. We all have a voice.

Fighting for its place in this increasingly complex ecosystem of persuasion and narrative is journalism, a discipline once readily trusted as an essential source of information from which citizens could exchange views and form their individual or shared beliefs.

While journalism rests on a set of fact-checking and verification processes, modern-day journalists have long recognized that their work no

longer is a matter of “just the facts, ma’am” stenography. Context matters more. Conflict occurs at the intersection of competing values. And as society’s norms have become more contested, the work of journalism began to resemble cultural anthropology. News organizations, always recognized as agents of learning, now also were viewed as agents of enculturation and socialization.

As this shift accelerated, cable news arrived, brilliantly positioned with niche audiences to capitalize on culture wars and tribal instincts. Next came the Internet to enable all forms of distribution—broadcast, narrowcast, and one-to-one—but these privilege the individual.

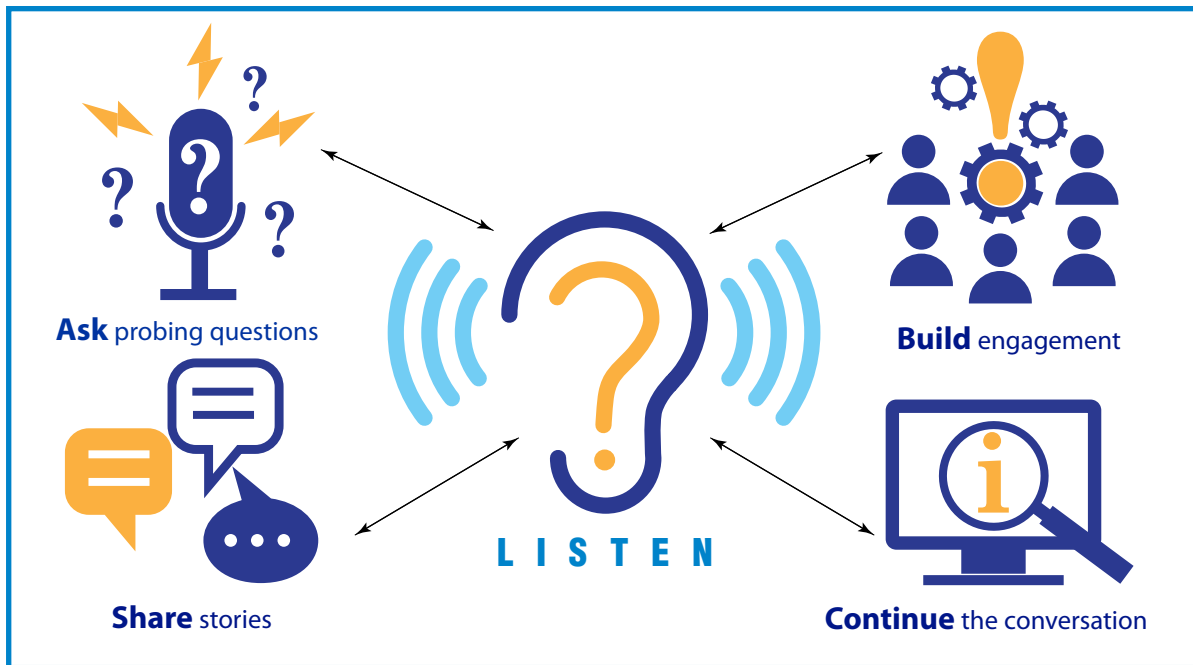
What does all of this have to do with democracy?

Rarely do these warring stories seek to find common ground for action.

“We need to address the ways in which we construct a common narrative from facts,” said Alexios Mantzarlis, head of the International Fact-Checking Network at the Poynter Institute. Combatting “fake news” and verification matter. But, Mantzarlis asked, “Is it still possible in a polarized society to agree on our fact-gathering process? And is it still possible to go from that fact-gathering process to a narrative about what actions should follow?”



**Fighting for its place in this increasingly complex ecosystem of persuasion and narrative is journalism, a discipline once readily trusted as an essential source of information from which citizens could exchange views and form their individual or shared beliefs.**



These are central questions for the future of journalism and its role in democracy.

Today’s coarse discourse and paralyzing political polarization are in part shaped by journalism’s approaches to story. But journalism also is shaped by the polarized environment in which it functions. They are codependent.

While this dysfunctional feedback loop clearly serves the interests of some, it does not serve the interests of the many—everyday citizens seeking to identify shared problems and solve them together.

Is there a better way? Can this pernicious system be disrupted?

The disruptors are among us. They are focused on what some refer to

as “people-powered” journalism. Its guiding impulse is to work *with* the people first if the intention truly is to work *for* the people.

Their organizations have names you’ve likely never heard, such as [Hearken](#), [Spaceship Media](#), the [Coral Project](#), [GroundSource](#), and [Screen-door](#). Others are entrepreneurial units within better-known media companies like the [Public Insight Network \(PIN\)](#), [Alabama Media Group](#), [ProPublica](#), and Audio Acad-emy at [KALW](#) in the San Francisco Bay area.

They share the belief that journalism exists to serve the interests of citizens in a democracy and that an antidote to today’s poisonous public discourse must be found.

They are working behind the scenes, as inventors often do, to experiment with new ways that journalists can support the essential work of citizens in a democracy. Their faith rests with the people.

They believe that journalists and news organizations must relate to and engage with members of the public differently. After all, media distribution has moved from a one-way broadcast model to a one-to-one model predicated on two-way communication.

Andrew Haeg, a PIN veteran and movement pioneer, makes the point clearly on the website of GroundSource, which he founded. “Your

community is talking. . . . GroundSource makes direct, two-way engagement simple and scalable. Transform one-way communications into rich conversations, building a loyal and trusting community in the process.” GroundSource has helped a growing number of community media organizations develop “Listening Posts” that employ simple technologies to create public conversations about local issues.

So that we don’t miss the point, these disruptors make their stance clear in their brand-positioning statements:

“Because journalism needs everyone.”

“Your public’s interest.”

“Directly engaging your community.”

“Using media to bridge divides.”

They also spell it out in mission statements such as this one:

“Create joyful, informative media that engages people across the divides in our community—economic, social, and cultural.”

Their philosophy is to start first with the people and the needs of the people as expressed by the people.

These are not one-off projects. They represent a shift in mind-set and tactics, meant to bring about a

**“ They are working behind the scenes, as inventors often do, to experiment with new ways that journalists can support the essential work of citizens in a democracy. Their faith rests with the people.**





*Innovations in Journalism research exchange participants.*

transformational change that could make the practices of journalism more democratic. Like all inventors, they have more questions than answers. And the questions drive to the heart of traditional tenets of journalism.

Kettering is wrestling with the resulting tensions and learning with these and other innovators through a series of learning exchanges that began earlier this year. Among the earliest questions are:

- Could journalism help citizens discover one another's narratives and construct shared ones that don't fall into the polarizing story traps that have been laid by others?
- What could journalism look like if it put citizens at the center and reimagined its role as supporting the work of citizens?
- What role might journalism play in fostering deliberation on the difficult issues communities face?
- Could journalists elevate the value, skills, and techniques for listening to the public? Instead of eliminating online comment sections, can journalists dig deeper into them for understanding? How can technology help?
- Could journalism and news organizations facing an existential crisis find a sustainable path to the future if they more closely





## Amid today's chaos and despair about the future of journalism, these innovators see opportunity.

aligned their interests with those of citizens?

- If one were building a news organization from the ground up to better support democracy and the role of citizens in it, what might it do and how?

These are among the overarching questions that propel these passionate innovators.

Each day, however, they must tackle the nitty-gritty details of upending longstanding journalistic practices and mind-sets.

At Hearken, cofounder Jennifer Brandel and team help news organizations engage with the public at the beginning of and throughout the reporting cycle. “We democratize the editorial process,” said Brandel, who emphasizes that journalists must become better listeners. Hearken means “listen.” In describing its

new engaged journalism model, Hearken proclaims on its website: “An informed citizenry is the bedrock of democracy, and the purpose of journalism. So why not let the citizenry weigh in directly on what information they need?”

Public Insight Network (PIN), incubated at American Public Media and used in 59 newsrooms across the country, is the earliest of these efforts. Developed to encourage news audiences to share knowledge and insights with journalists, it also aims to transform the culture of newsrooms so that journalists can engage more authentically with members of the public. Linda Miller, director of PIN, believes journalists should not sit atop the perch of expertise and use a belief in objectivity to distance themselves from communities. “We should be advocating for thriving communities. There is a tension between the professional ethics of journalism and the desire to be in community.”

More recently, Spaceship Media landed on the scene to reimagine journalism as a way to generate dialogue and engagement on divisive issues. Founders Jeremy Hay and Eve Pearlman are designing and refining a journalistic process that begins with lightly facilitating online dialogue. Shortly after the heated 2016 presidential race, Spaceship Media, work-

ing with the Alabama Media Group, hosted an online dialogue for residents of Alabama and California to explore tension-filled issues that they identified. Abortion, guns, and health care came up. Participants quickly learned that their perspectives, knowledge, and experiences differed greatly. As they worked through the differences, they realized they didn't have all the information they needed to understand the issues and to form judgments. Journalists were asked to fill in the gaps. According to Hay and Pearlman, participants placed more trust in information when they requested it. Chief among the things Spaceship Media has learned is that "connection has to come before the facts," Pearlman said.

Subramaniam Vincent, a digital technology expert at the news Trust Project at Santa Clara University's Markkula Center for Applied Ethics, has used the tool Screendoor to provide news organizations with a "low-cost, low-touch crowd-sourcing/collective wisdom surfacing" approach. A serial entrepreneur, Vincent said, "The more alienated we feel, the more we crave connections."

Alabama Media Group news vice president Michelle Holmes has led several experiments to listen and learn with the public. A seasoned news leader and innovator, Holmes

well understands the nuanced differences between thinking of people as a public rather than as an audience. [Whitman, Alabama](#), a stunningly beautiful and moving video series in which Alabamians read verses of Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself" makes this point. "To me it is the same problem—alienation and lack of connection. Connecting people through the words of this deeply democratic poem. It is a commitment to connecting human beings. That is the essential problem of both journalism and democracy, it is feeling part of the whole."

We connect with each other through the stories we tell. His story. Her story. Our story.

Journalism is said to be the first rough draft of history. The stories it tells and the actions they foster become history.

Amid today's chaos and despair about the future of journalism, these innovators see opportunity.

By working *with* the public, our bet is that journalists can find a way forward. ■

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# Park Life: Experimenting with Democracy and Civic Engagement in Cincinnati's Oldest Public Park

By David Siders

**P**iatt Park, established in 1817, is the oldest public park in Downtown Cincinnati, being witness to nearly 200 years of civic life. Imagine the scenes of daily life over the decades as times changed amidst this beautiful urban oasis, two city blocks long, featuring rows of benches for public seating and densely populated with trees and flowers. What could be a more lasting tribute to democracy alive and well in a community than a public park that welcomes all people, no matter background or socioeconomic status? Today, Piatt Park serves as a perfect

ecosystem to study and explore the ecology of democracy: a myriad of stakeholders and institutions surround the park—including businesses large and small, a large number of residents, and one of the busiest public libraries in the nation. All are neighbors of the park; all are part of the larger ecosystem.

Naturally, toxic problems exist that will most likely never go away. In recent years, stakeholders attending community meetings have essentially decried, not in my backyard! They say things like:

- We don't want homeless people in our park.
- Teenagers loiter and make me uncomfortable.
- Too many panhandlers in the park!
- Where are the police?
- Why is there so much litter on Tuesdays in the park?

But others who regularly use the park ask other questions:

- Why can't you leave me alone and just let me enjoy the park? Isn't everyone allowed to be in the park?
- Where else would I go if I can't stay here? I have a right to be here!

Next, add to all of this a strong dose of cultural, environmental, and socioeconomic change: a powerful



*A bronze statue of William Henry Harrison points to a historic Presbyterian church and another residential building along Piatt Park.*



*Piatt Park is Cincinnati's oldest public park, established in 1817. This photo includes two of several large residential buildings along the park.*

community development group funded by major corporations of the city of Cincinnati is surveying property and real estate in the blocks surrounding Piatt Park, with the intent to develop new retail spaces, restaurants and bars, and high-end condominiums. In the same area, a former-hotel-turned-apartment building (15-stories tall located at the east end of the park) recently suffered a financial crisis while being renovated and construction stopped immediately. Broken windows theory could swiftly apply to this hindered project. Vast and dramatic change will certainly alter this ecosystem.

Beginning in 2016, the Public Library of Cincinnati & Hamilton County joined in a research exchange with other libraries throughout the country and the Kettering Foundation. Kim Fender, executive director of the library, and I were excited to initiate a new experiment in democracy and civic engagement. Initially, our library planned an experiment that was designed to tackle the broad, toxic problem of homelessness.



**We prepared to hold deliberative forums, with the easy-to-understand name “Community Conversations in Piatt Park,” in order to meet people where they are.**

During research exchange sessions at the Kettering Foundation, we decided to refocus our project to consider how all citizens might use and enjoy Piatt Park. We developed a planning and advisory team comprised of stakeholders that represent our community: employees of Cincinnati Parks, the CEO of Downtown Cincinnati, Inc. (a nonprofit business organization with a mission to build a dynamic metropolitan center valued as the heart of the region), and the director of Strategies to End Homelessness (a local umbrella of direct service providers and advocacy for unhoused people).

Our planning and advisory team was essential in our capacity to develop community forums that will

facilitate communication, deliberation, and collective learning pertinent to the concerns and facts surrounding individuals and groups of people who utilize the public space of Piatt Park. Thanks to the wisdom of our group, we now have a template for a communication model that can serve to unite people on issues of public space and to allow a collective, community-defined understanding of a citizen’s responsibilities to enjoy public spaces. Our public library’s experience with delivery and outreach of services to all citizens in a free and public manner, our experience in planning and organizing, and our provision of meeting spaces for public use positions us with a potentially effective strategy to unite people based on collective learning of shared issues of concern.

We prepared to hold deliberative forums, with the easy-to-understand name “Community Conversations in Piatt Park,” in order to meet people where they are. We wrote a script to guide how our forums will work within, ideally, an hour timeframe. The framework includes open-ended questions such as:

- What do you want your neighborhood park to look like?
- What bothers you?
- How does this problem affect you and your colleagues?





*Piatt Park is an urban oasis for all residents, downtown workers, visitors, and the homeless community.*

- What should we do, and what would be the consequences?
- What are we learning?

We realized the importance of “probing questions” like: How would the solutions proposed today impact you or other people in the community? How would you go about implementing that course of action? The script for forums can also serve as a training or preparation guide for potential forum moderators and as a model for possible community conversations in the future—no matter the subject matter at hand.



**Along the way, our planning and advisory team discussed current, ongoing, rapid, and potentially dramatic changes in the community directly surrounding Piatt Park.**

We prepared promotional fliers for the public forums, and thanks to the wisdom and community connections of our planning and advisory team, we created a concrete way to invite the diversity of stakeholders of the park to help ensure the opportunity to participate.

Along the way, our planning and advisory team discussed current, ongoing, rapid, and potentially dramatic changes in the community directly surrounding Piatt Park: a local community development corporation has taken ownership of two public parks within blocks of Piatt Park. Will park rules change if the corporation takes ownership of Piatt Park? We have also wondered how new businesses and resident popu-

lations could impact the use of Piatt Park. Our implementation of deliberative forums about Piatt Park is more important than ever as rapidly changing communities influence the story of our project.

As we have reflected on the planning process, our planning and advisory team further concurred that change in communities has significant ramifications on our ecology: new emphasis on police patrols in the park has possibly changed usage of the park. Street outreach workers from the Veterans Administration and a local social services organization for teenagers are actively working with their clients in the vicinity in an ongoing manner. A church group feeds the public in the park on



*Piatt Park is heavily populated every day.*



Tuesdays and has been a source of litter in the park. The colleagues in our team are realizing new ways that rapid and significant change in our community dramatically affects its citizens. As we know, democracy requires a community, or a society of citizens, to work together to address common problems. We believe that our community conversations, with the intent to allow citizens to make connections, discover problems behind the problems, make decisions, and learn how to act on decisions, will support the ideal of people experiencing happy and fulfilling lives. Our team is excited and enthusiastic in regard to learning more about how democracy requires institutions with public legitimacy to contribute to strengthening society—especially in the midst of change.

Our careful planning turned into community action! On September 12, 2017, we held our first community conversation about Piatt Park in the Tower Room of the Main Library of the Public Library of Cincinnati & Hamilton County—a community meeting space that perfectly overlooks Piatt Park. We decided to hold this first forum with our Downtown Residents Council—a significant group of stakeholders because Piatt Park serves as their front and back yards. The park serves as residents’ prime green space and community



**We now have a new level of citizen input and collective learning—and a potential course of community action—upon which to reflect.**

space in the neighborhood. We had a robust session. Some of the things we heard during the forum include: “Democracy can be messy, but everyone should have a right to enjoy the park,” and “What about the Downtown Residents Council adopting the park to schedule events and work with police to make the park safer?” We now have a new level of citizen input and collective learning—and a potential course of community action—upon which to reflect. As we plan our next deliberative forum, in which we will invite the broader community of stakeholders of Piatt Park, our experiment with democracy and civic engagement continues amidst swift, influential change in the neighborhood. ■

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*David Siders is the popular library manager at the Public Library of Cincinnati & Hamilton County. He can be reached at [david.siders@cincinnati-library.org](mailto:david.siders@cincinnati-library.org).*

# Being a Civically Engaged College That Contributes to Democratic Ways of Living: Reflections of a College President

By Adam Weinberg

**F**our years into my tenure as a college president, I have been reflecting on the role of colleges in the work of democracy, and more specifically on the role of college presidents in leading our institutions in ways that open up space for our students, faculty, and staff to be part of creating healthy democratic ecosystems. This article is intended to generate a conver-

sation and vision for a civically engaged college that contributes to democratic ways of life.

## A VISION FOR UNIVERSITIES TO ENHANCE PUBLIC WORK AND CIVIC AGENCY

In the 1830s, Alexis de Tocqueville argued in *Democracy in America* that the future of democracy would depend on the “habits of the heart” developed by citizens as they came together in families, neighborhoods, classrooms, congregations, workplaces, and other public spaces to deliberate “in the company of strangers” on matters of common concern. For Tocqueville, democracy was an ongoing process of people coming together to create and re-create the



communities in which they want to live.

This conception of democracy moves beyond the laudable actions of voting and community service to the nuanced and difficult process of people acting together to solve problems. It is a citizen-centered view of democratic living. Higher education plays a central role in this process. As John Dewey wrote in *The School and Society*, “Democracy has to be born anew every generation, and education is its midwife.”

The work of colleges in this process is to prepare students to be engaged citizens in a democratic society. At college, students develop the interest and capacity to engage in public work. Faculty, staff, and others build democratic spaces within communities where they can come together to be cocreators of their communities. They produce intellectual work that contributes to democratic movements and ways of life, and to human freedom more generally.

What does this mean and how does it happen?

The foundational condition is the work we do with students through the liberal arts. The clearest expressions of the civic mission of higher education find their roots in Greek democracy. William Cronon articulated this vision in his classic piece

“[Only Connect...’ The Goals of a Liberal Education](#),” in which he writes that the liberal arts enhance the capacity of people to listen and hear, read and understand, and talk with anyone. Liberal arts learners also can write persuasively, solve a wide variety of puzzles and problems, and respect rigor as a way of seeking truth. In doing so, they practice respect and humility, understand how to get things done,



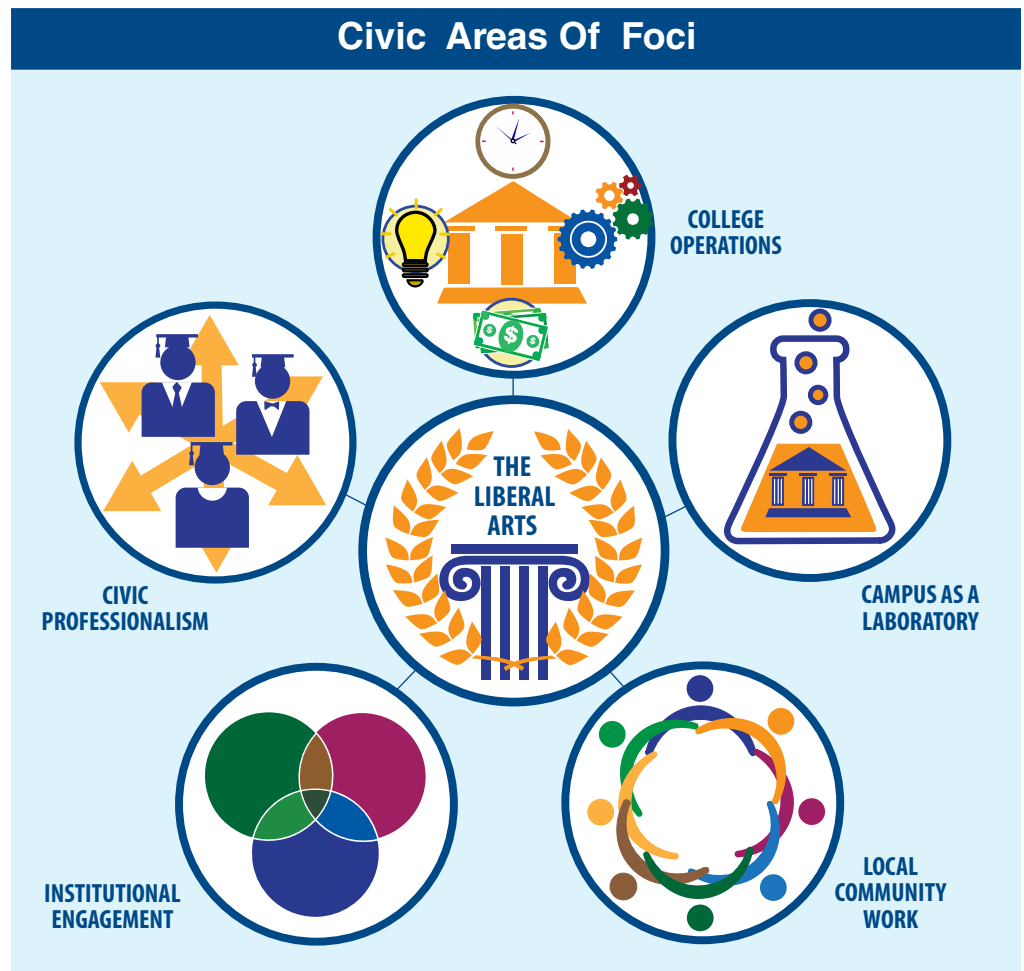
**Four years into my tenure as a college president, I have been reflecting on the role of colleges in the work of democracy, and more specifically on the role of college presidents in leading our institutions in ways that open up space for our students, faculty, and staff to be part of creating healthy democratic ecosystems.**

and nurture and empower people around them—seeing the connections that help one make sense of the world and act in creative ways to build the future.

While not every undergraduate will be a liberal arts student, every student needs exposure to the liberal arts if we want to be a civically oriented college. The attributes that Cronon outlines are foundational civic skills, values, and habits.

This work then expands across five dimensions of the college.

**The campus is a laboratory** that fosters students' commitment to and capacity for living democratically in a community of difference. A key part of this is what [Harry Boyte](#) and others call public work. This is the hard and sustained work of citizens to create things of lasting public value by working across differences to be cocreators of their communities. Living on a college campus should help students develop the skills, values, and habits of engaging in public work as part of their everyday lives.



For example, when a student moves into a first-year residence hall, it is likely to be the first time they have lived in a diverse community. As such, first-year residence halls are places where students can learn the skills, values, and habits of public work as they engage each other across difference to cocreate the community in which they live.

Student organizations, which are sites for fostering civic agency, are another example. As students learn to lead and manage organizations, they learn the arts of organizing, goal setting, asset mapping, creative problem solving, and other crucial skills of public work. Doing this work requires colleges to engage emerging campus leaders in leadership training and mentorship, as well as the reflection that allows learning to emerge from the work of student organizations. It also requires setting a tone and establishing public spaces where they can work together to create and sustain the communities in which they want to live.

In this moment, a lot of this work needs to center on what it means to live and work with, as well as learn from, people who often see the world in very different ways from ourselves. Students must learn to see difference as a source of strength, where the best decisions are made by diverse teams of people. We live in a moment



**The campus is a laboratory that fosters students' commitment to and capacity for living democratically in a community of difference.**

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of tremendous polarization that is eroding our ability to live democratically. People don't state ideas for fear of saying something wrong. Opposing views on vexing and complex social issues prevent us from moving forward on solutions.

Colleges have both an opportunity and an obligation to be the major social institution that helps students develop the capacity to get beyond this state of affairs and to be a generation that has the skills, values, and habits of working across difference to engage in public work locally, regionally, nationally, and globally. For this to happen, the curriculum and cocurriculum have to connect in ways that help students develop this capacity. In other words, this work needs to start in the classrooms with



a strong grounding in the liberal arts and then be reenforced throughout campus life.

**Local community work** moves beyond thin models of community service, in which we view ourselves as outside entities that serve others. Instead, colleges need to adopt a model of cocreation, in which we view ourselves as members of the community who work with others to address problems, take advantage of opportunities, and cocreate the

future. In part, this is a difference in tone and perception of how we talk about and think about our relationship to others. But doing it well also requires a shift in substance, focusing on projects in which the college can play a sustained role, working with others over long periods of time to create things of lasting social value.

In one expression of this view, **Nancy Cantor** has called for colleges to be anchoring institutions that engage in barn-raising activities. She builds off Caryn McTighe Musil's 2013 article "**Connective Corridors and Generative Partnerships**," in which she calls for colleges to create "generative partnerships done with, rather than done to, communities." In *The Looking Glass University*, Cantor writes, "Partnerships have



PHOTOS BY JONATHAN VEGA

to be sustained and sustainable well beyond the calendar of any given grant or service-learning course, and that will ultimately impact our practices in fundamental ways.” She calls for colleges to “tread carefully, keep humble, and yet keep going.”

This can play itself out in a number of ways. At Denison, for example, we are focused on the downtown square of Newark, Ohio, the target of civic and economic revitalization efforts. Initially, we joined with civic organizations, businesses, neighborhood associations, the mayor, and others to help frame a narrative on the importance of the project. We encouraged and supported faculty and staff who got involved in various efforts or identified themselves as already being involved. The college made resources available, including financial support, student interns, space for events, and public support. When an alumnus purchased a building, we rented a store front to be an early tenant. We converted the store front to [The Denison Art Space in Newark](#) with democratic purposes in mind. The space serves as a public space that brings people together across difference to explore art in ways that generate conversation about the kind of community we want to cocreate. As core projects emerged around the square, we stepped into the space, asking how



**As anchoring institutions, colleges should operate in ways that strengthen the local civic fabric. In other words, how we operate has a huge impact on local democratic capacity, as our policies and ways of being impact our staff and local businesses, as well as local political processes and issues.**

we could be a partner working with others to engage public work.

**College operations** can do some of the most important, though often hidden and forgotten, work relating to colleges and local democratic ways of life. As anchoring institutions, colleges should operate in ways that strengthen the local civic fabric. In other words, how we operate has a huge impact on local democratic capacity, as our policies and ways of being impact our staff and local businesses, as well as local political processes and issues. Colleges need



to assess how they can operate in ways that best increase civic agency within the community, as well as support emerging local capacity for public work. At Denison, we have been attempting to do this in two ways.

Internally, we are examining our work environments and management practices to understand how they enhance or decrease the civic agency of our staff. For example, employees who have long-term, stable, and skills-enhancing employment tend to be more involved in local communities. We are examining how we structure work to ensure that we are providing these kinds of jobs. This means doing a different kind of training for our managers and

reexamining HR policies. When a staff member wanted to run for political office, we tried to make his work schedule more flexible to make this possible. We are keenly aware of our need to support the rights of all of our students, faculty, and staff when they wade into political issues. Our goal is to support their right to be locally involved and to voice views, even if those views are unpopular and differ from the interests of the college.

Externally, we are cognizant of how we operate in the local community. One focus is to purchase goods and services in ways that support local businesses and individuals who are engaged in local public work. For example, we have shifted our food purchases to support local farmers and businesses. Another focus is how we interact with local political processes. When we developed plans for a new building, we included the neighbors in multiple design meetings, communicating in ways that are consistent with public work models. We are aware that when the college takes a heavy-handed approach, it decreases local civic agency. When it engages in public work, it increases the civic agency of the college.

All of this work is subtle but important. The college employs almost 800 people and spends \$100+ million annually. How we structure



**As a college, we are doing more to signal that we value faculty who merge their intellectual and civic selves, and that we support and celebrate faculty who do this work.**

work and purchase services has large implications for how people perceive themselves and their relationships to others and the community. As such, it impacts the civic agency of individuals and the capacity for public work across the community.

**Civic professionalism** is becoming an orienting concept for how we think about work. Building off the work of [William Doherty](#) and others, we are infusing notions of **civic professionalism** in how we imagine the work of our faculty and the work of preparing students for their professions. As Doherty notes, the work of the professions should contribute to civic life. He calls for us to explore the ways that professionals can use their skills and knowledge to contribute to public conversations and actions.

This work starts with our faculty. As a college, we are doing more to signal that we value faculty who merge their intellectual and civic selves, and that we support and celebrate faculty who do this work. Some of this is about making resources available to faculty. For example, we provided a summer intern to a faculty member doing a community-based research project. We also supported a group of faculty who started a project called [Between Coasts](#), which is a platform for people from the Midwest to tell their

public and political narrative post-election. We drafted a new [policy on academic freedom](#) that affirms the right of our faculty and others to wade into public issues. As part of this work, we held a symposium on faculty as public intellectuals, at which I started the event expressing the college's support for faculty to blend their professional and civic selves.

We are doing the same with students. As part of a new strategic plan, we have launched the [Austin E. Knowlton Center for Career Exploration](#). We purposefully call it “career exploration” as a way to signal that the center's work stretches beyond “getting a job.” The Knowlton Center pushes students to ask questions about the kinds of lives they want to lead and to think about how careers and professions fit into those lives.

Part of this work exposes students to alumni who have woven together their professional and civic selves. We are connecting our students with alumni who can share their stories and reflections on how careers allowed them to blend civic engagement and community contributions. We are setting up internships and externships in which students can work alongside alumni in their communities. These are purposeful and designed to open up space for students to see how others have blended their

personal, professional, and civic interests to be the architects of their own lives.

**Institutional engagement** is key, given that colleges are part of many communities, including local, higher education, professional, and global circles. Our civic work needs to take place across all of these groups. At Denison we are working through our professional associations to push for a larger conversation about the civic value of higher education in our institutions. We are collaborating on a multiyear conversation at the Kettering Foundation, joining [The Talloires Network](#), and encouraging more faculty and staff to participate in AAC&U meetings on democracy. We also have played a large and proactive role in the formation of two associations for presidents from around the world—[The Global Liberal Arts Alliance](#) and the Higher Education G20. Both of these efforts are bringing together liberal arts colleges from around the world to build relationships and share resources.

### **THE ROLE OF A COLLEGE PRESIDENT**

Colleges should be anchoring institutions that strengthen our graduates' capacity for democratic ways of life. Doing this requires a broad approach to our civic work. We can't reduce

these efforts to a single program, initiative, or center. The college needs to infuse a civic mind-set as a core principle of our structure and operations, from the work we do in classrooms and residential halls, to our HR policies and local community involvement. This involves rethinking how relationships work between students, faculty, staff, the college, the community, and others. And it requires developing a vocabulary that frames and guides this work across campus, imprinting civic thought through every facet of the college in ways that enhance the capacity and opportunities of our students, faculty, and staff to identify their civic agency, engage in public work, and persist as civic professionals. In doing so, our community strengthens democratic ecosystems.

The role of the president is important. We set a tone by the things we say or don't say and the actions we take or don't take. When this is done well, colleges can be proactive agents that protect and deepen democratic ways of life as we prepare students to be effective and engaged citizens; support our faculty and staff to live in democratic ways; and widen the space and local civic capacity for the emergence and persistence of democratic ways of life. ■

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# Parents for Public Schools: Encouraging Educational Citizenship

By Joann Mickens

**P**arents for Public Schools (PPS), a national nonprofit based in Jackson, Mississippi, began working with the Kettering Foundation in 2013, first on a yearlong project that included experiments concerning how local PPS chapters could develop an issue guide that would reframe school issues as community-based issues. A second project, begun in 2015, built on the first one, and examined the use of that issue guide in the communities where PPS has local chapters. The third project, begun in 2017, is a culmination of the first two and explores how the organization can become a learning center that brings select chapters together to encourage democratic practices to help the

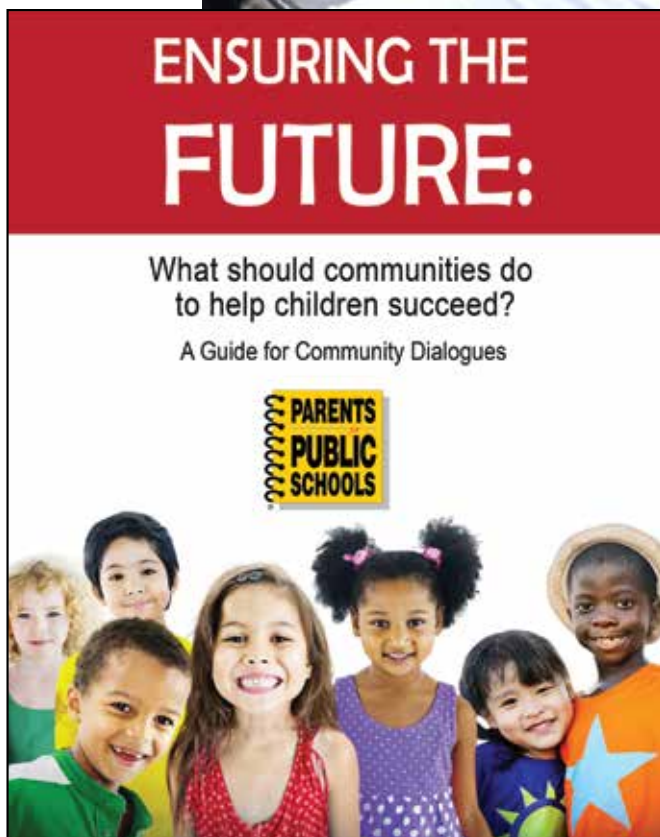


chapters set direction for—and act to take ownership of—accountability for the education of the children in their communities.

From its start with a small group of parents in Jackson and then the opening of its national office in 1991, PPS has focused on how public education supports and contributes to a successful, working democracy. PPS today keeps this focus, but every generation of parents and members must internalize this aspect of the organization to their own work. This sometimes becomes challenging when our members and chapters are so concerned with the immediate needs and issues of public schools as their children are being impacted—issues such as standardized testing, Common Core state standards, teacher evaluation, vouchers, and charter schools. Sometimes they



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democracy that works for citizens and to finding solutions for the problems that exist. This project helped PPS refocus its energies and conversations to familiarize new generations of PPS parents with these concepts. The team that originally worked with Kettering included some of our very newest members, and this was a great benefit for them.

The issue guide that was created gave PPS a concrete tool to encourage the active discussion and participation of citizens in the education of the youth in their communities. Because so many of our chapters hold forums and conversations with the public and with school district and community leaders, the deliberative approach to such discussions was an invaluable addition to our repertoire.

can become lost in these issues and can forget how the ability to resolve issues affects the larger picture, i.e., our society and whether it will be the educated society needed for a strong and vibrant democracy.

The opportunity to collaborate with the Kettering Foundation has given PPS the privilege of seeing Kettering's own commitment to a

To sum up the first project, participating not only contributed to the personal growth of our PPS team



members, but also reinvigorated PPS as an organization and planted the seeds for continued growth and progress in the future.

Beginning in May 2015, and continuing through March 2016, PPS hosted a series of community forums to gain the public's view of who bears responsibility for preparing children for future success. The goal was to move the discussion from what schools or families should do to the idea that the education of our children is a community endeavor that requires the resources, support, and commitment of all. It begged the question, what does the future hold for the community if the emerging generations are not prepared to lead successful lives? This question of success went far beyond academic performance and got to the very continuance of our way of life.

Using the issue guide developed in collaboration with the Kettering Foundation, *Ensuring the Future: What Should Communities Do to Help Children Succeed?*, PPS gathered 24 different groups of citizens in 11 different locations across the country with the objective of engaging them in conversations to get their perspectives on this issue. These conversations were held in the Northwest, the Northeast, the Midwest, and the South. Participants were residents of communities as small in size as

Philadelphia, Mississippi (population of less than 8,000), to large cities like Seattle, Washington (population of 608,000).

In addition, the conversations included a diversity of racial and ethnic groups. In every instance, forum attendees were representative of the diversity within the general population in those communities. In total, 43 percent of the participants were African American, 38 percent were Caucasian, 4 percent were Asian, and 13 percent were Hispanic.



**The experience using the issue guide was one of building relationships, uncovering community concerns, and recognizing that even though it was a big job, community members were willing to explore and take responsibility for preparing children for future success.**

## **KETTERING FOUNDATION RESEARCH,**

including the current exchange with Parents for Public Schools, has identified characteristics of citizenship in community politics that can foster a sense of shared control over the future. We are studying the development of democratic forms of the practices through which people make collective choices—about the education of youth and about opportunities for new kinds of productive interactions.

Perhaps the most interesting finding from our past work with PPS, which started in 1999, is that an organization like Parents for Public Schools, and all that its name implies, has recognized that framing educational issues as a community challenge is not antithetical to their mission of supporting public schools, but rather a necessary condition to it. The reason is rooted in the belief that healthy schools depend on healthy communities, with the latter being a function of the shared sense that communities of people have the responsibility and power to shape their future.

The current research project with PPS, regarding what it means to operate as a learning center, offers the Kettering Foundation an opportunity to engage questions connected throughout its entire program chart. This includes a focus on:

- **Citizens:** What encourages citizen-to-citizen interactions, including questions around the naming and framing of issues?

The forums tended to include more females (65 percent) than males (35 percent), and most of the participants (52 percent) were between the ages of 30 and 49; however, the next largest group was comprised of those from 50 to 74 years old, many of whom no longer had children of school age. In fact, almost half of those participating (47 percent) did not have children in public school, an indication that there was interest in this topic throughout the community. It was also gratifying to note that only 35 percent of those participating were PPS members, so we were reaching community members who did not necessarily hold the same perspective of public schools as PPS did. Nevertheless, in all instances, moderators found forum participants to be interested and engaged in the process.

The experience using the issue guide was one of building relationships, uncovering community concerns, and recognizing that even though it was a big job, community members were willing to explore and take responsibility for preparing children for future success. It also helped identify areas of need that could benefit from the work of PPS. In particular, there was the recognition by community members that parents, in order to be effective advocates for their children, need to



be provided with the education and tools to do so. Of course, providing information and providing tools for parents is a huge focus of PPS work.

The forums also reiterated that we cannot forget the importance of connecting with underrepresented parents. Their voices must also be heard. PPS's sponsorship of these forums is perfectly in line with its mission of educating parents/community members and advocating for public schools and ALL children. The forums reminded us of the power of dialogue and deliberation and how it might lead to action and consequently, change. One moderator said, "I realized if you first of all bring people together intentionally, have prepared material prior to the meeting, and have an effective process to hear all voices, you can leave with next steps to produce outcomes."

Since PPS first began working with Kettering, the organization's mission statement has been revised to reflect the changes the organization has gone through. The previous mission statement, "PPS promotes and strengthens public schools by engaging, educating and mobilizing parents" was changed in March 2016 to "Parents for Public Schools advances the role of families and communities in securing a high quality public education for every child." The

- **Community:** How can a communitywide coalition encourage and support local efforts in learning about innovations in democratic practices from one another?
- **Institutions:** How do institutional actors in these places align their routines with the practices of democratic citizenship in a way that encourages the kind of community and citizen-to-citizen interaction noted in this article?
- **Chapter-Based Organizations:** How can a national, chapter-based institution bring these ideas into its work, through learning exchanges with its own chapters, which will be completely different from the way it normally works? How can a learning center facilitate such an endeavor in a learning mode? How can insights about that way of working be shared with other centers that aspire to be similarly constructive of regional democratic capacity?

While all of the foundation's research touches on the first three questions, the last one is specific to this project, and may be where we have the most opportunity to learn. It could lead to critical, practical insights that we can share with other chapter-based organizations, with which we may work in the future.

*For more information on this research, please contact Kettering Foundation program officer Phillip D. Lurie at [plurie@kettering.org](mailto:plurie@kettering.org).*

new mission statement is more inclusive and was arrived at using feedback and input from PPS chapters in order to reflect the work that they see themselves doing in their communities.

Currently, PPS is exploring what it means for the national chapter to become a “learning center” that brings select chapters together to encourage democratic practices designed to help the chapters in their communities set direction for, and act to take owner-

ship of, accountability for the education of children.

For PPS, a “learning center” is a self-conscious hub of learning exchange about practical insights regarding democratic citizenship (or governance). A “center” acts as a resource for people who want to explore ways to develop the democratic work of citizenship in their communities. That is, how can citizens work together around shared problems related to education, particularly when tensions arise about what should be done? The center will work to develop the capacity of others to do such work in their communities. Centers are generally coalitions (networks), but rather than be organizers of action, they are organizers of exchanges focused on learning.

What the implications of this mode of operating will be for PPS and its local chapters remains an ongoing area of exploration for the organization. Though changing the organizational focus remains a scary proposition, PPS highly anticipates what we will learn about our national staff, our local chapters, and the communities in which they operate as we set out on this next phase of our work with the foundation. ■

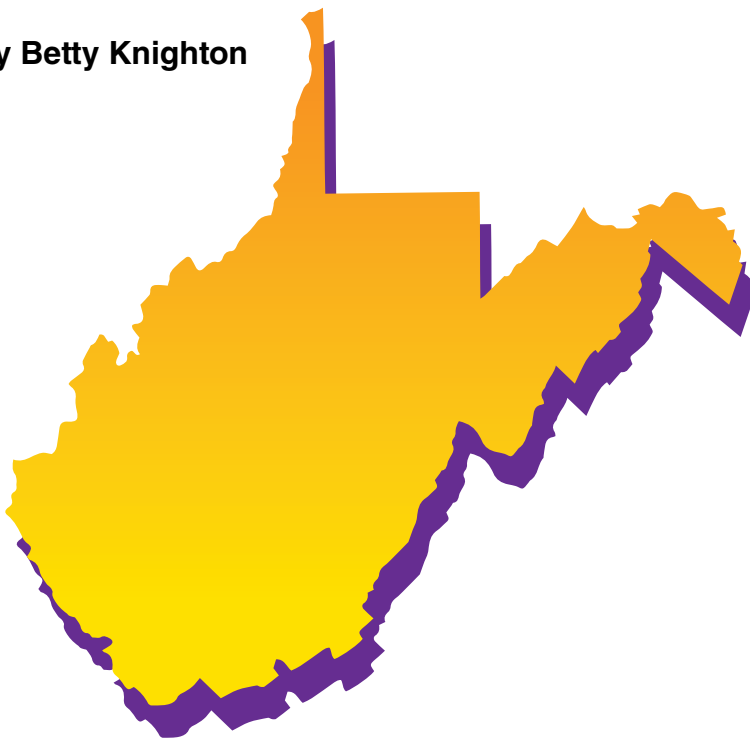
**“ PPS is exploring what it means for the national chapter to become a “learning center” that brings select chapters together to encourage democratic practices designed to help the chapters in their communities set direction for, and act to take ownership of, accountability for the education of children.**

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# Becoming a Catalyst for Civic Learning

By Betty Knighton



**F**or more than 20 years—even before its development as a statewide nonprofit organization—the West Virginia Center for Civic Life has engaged in learning exchanges with the Kettering Foundation and the worldwide network of democratic entrepreneurs it helps to connect. The opportunities to glean insights from the multinational research of Kettering and to share

insights from the work of West Virginia residents have been key to our development as an organization that puts ongoing civic learning at the heart of its mission.

## TRUE NORTH

As we have charted our course over the years, “true north” has always been the desire to work with West Virginians who want to develop ways to have constructive conversations about shared concerns—conversations that will take them to deeper levels of understanding, sound choices, and more effective public action. We have found many state residents are drawn to the practices of public deliberation because the processes they were using weren’t working—or weren’t working well enough.

In our work, public deliberation refers to ways that people think together to accomplish critical goals: identifying ways an issue affects their lives, talking through the inevitable tensions among ways to move forward, and identifying civic resources that can be put to work in complementary ways. Another term for this work is “democratic citizenship.”

Our role is to be a catalyst for constructive development in these processes of citizenship, without having a partisan stake in any topic or issue. As a catalyst, we work with

*“What’s Next is about creating the conversations—and the relationships—that allow communities to decide where they want to go.”*

—Kent Spellman  
West Virginia Community Development Hub

*“Through What’s Next, we talk and work with others who want to make progress that improves lives.”*

—Jeff Allen  
West Virginia Council of Churches

*“The conversations people have away from the politicized environment are very different. It’s not about coal vs. the economy. It’s about their personal struggles.”*

—Scott Finn  
West Virginia Public Broadcasting

*“No community was ever developed based on what it did not have. Through What’s Next, people come together to consider what they can create with the assets they have.”*

—Becky Ceperley  
Greater Kanawha Valley Foundation

those who want to create environments and opportunities for public dialogue to work more effectively. One aspect of the work is to convene seminars and workshops, such as the annual Civic Life Institute, at which participants can explore the democratic roles of community convenor, dialogue facilitator, and civic engagement networker.

Equally important are the deeper interactions with people and organizations that want to develop dialogue initiatives on particular public issues. In our early exchanges with Kettering, we experienced the potential and the possibility of working with others through learning exchanges. In our work in West Virginia, we continue to learn how to provide practical resources and also to elicit networks of people who are learning from and with each other. We have found that the mutual benefits gained from learning together are what creates and strengthens networks that continue to grow over time.

## SHAREABLE INTERESTS

Our most fruitful partnerships involve intersections of the diverse but interrelated interests of citizens, their civic associations, and formal organizations in communities. These partnerships often occur in the context of a specific project, where community-based or state-level

organizations bring their experience in working to address an issue, and we bring experience with the practices people use to make dialogue constructive.

Over the past 20 years, as we have partnered with organizations that have organized community initiatives throughout the state, our distinct focus has been on developing sustainable democratic practices. Our assumption has been that we need to intentionally and strategically work in ways that support growing networks of learning partnerships with people and organizations in communities. We have seen that democratic practices continue over time as new issues emerge when networks of learning are in place.

What are we learning about how to work in this way? As I reflect, I find myself returning to a concept that had a powerful impact on me many years ago: “shareable interests.” I was introduced to the concept by David Mathews in his “All of Politics” essay:

Common ground often has to be created. . . . There has to be a more creative integration of people’s motivations to create new interests that did not exist before. The ability to integrate a variety of different interests, to transform them into shareable interests, is the ability to have a stronger and

more inclusive sense of what is common than any conceivable aggregating of particular interests.

Our initial understanding of shareable interests related to the ways community members set directions through deliberative discussions of political issues. The concept recognizes that encouraging complementary acting on such issues is not a matter



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of finding a consensus regarding some particular action or policy. The *political* challenge of democratic public acting is in recognizing that there are myriad interrelations among different actions by different people and organizations.

Over the years, however, the notion of shareable interests has taken on an even more powerful and practical meaning for our center. It has become a foundational insight for considering how to build working relationships with others as they recognize their own interests in promoting constructive nonpartisan public dialogue.

The range of organizations that we have worked with is wide, but very

few have organizational missions that mirror our particular focus on democratic citizenship. We have learned that the key is to work with others in ways that reveal our different but shareable interests in making democracy work. Much of the challenge—and the satisfaction—in our work is in discovering with others how the development of democratic citizenship can enhance the missions of their organizations.

We have learned how the emergence of the idea of shareable interests can occur. And we have seen how the insight can allow advocacy organizations to promote neutral facilitation, can allow overburdened social service organizations to devote precious time to open dialogue practices, and can allow government agencies to try new, less certain practices under the public spotlight.

## DEMOCRATIC ECONOMIC CHANGE

In 2014, we entered into a learning exchange with Kettering regarding ways to develop active citizenship in the governance of economic change. Given the fundamental changes facing West Virginians, it was an opportune time to explore insights from Kettering's research in this area. A key focus of the exchange has become a statewide initiative called *What's Next, West Virginia?* The



**Much of the challenge—and the satisfaction—in our work is in discovering with others how the development of democratic citizenship can enhance the missions of their organizations.**

initiative is designed to encourage community-based practices through which citizens set directions and act toward positive economic futures for their communities—and for the state.

The initiative provides fertile ground to examine Kettering's research into what it takes for democracy to work as it should: citizens who make sound decisions about their future, communities that work together to address common concerns, and institutions that work with others in communities to strengthen society.

### **WHY WHAT'S NEXT?**

We could see that throughout the state many people were working to build strong communities with local economies that meet the needs of their residents. They were identifying local assets as they dealt with difficult challenges: changing job markets, shifts in demographics, and competition with a global economy.

But while much work was underway in West Virginia, it was also apparent that there were few opportunities for constructive discussions that examine different points of view across sectors and geographical boundaries. Believing that the time was right and the need was great, we and many partnering organizations formed a planning coalition to consider ways to foster opportunities



for our residents to think deeply and to set directions for addressing public issues important to their own community's well-being. This broad—and growing—coalition includes nonprofit, philanthropic, economic, governmental, educational, and faith-based organizations.

The goal behind these community discussions is not merely to



draw a crowd and fill a room with opinionated people. The purpose is much bigger and more powerful. When people talk together about common concerns, they begin to see themselves as public actors. They talk about what *they* can do, not just what *others* ought to do. *What's Next, West Virginia?* is based on the belief that communities in a democracy are healthier when citizens are doing the work of citizens.

#### WHAT'S IN A NAME?

In the early stage of the initiative, the planning team talked to hundreds of West Virginians to understand how they saw the economic chal-

lenges and opportunities facing their communities. We quickly discovered just how significantly the naming of economic issues affects how and whether people see themselves as public actors.

In initiatives on other issues, we had conducted similar group interviews and informal individual conversations with residents to gather concerns and understand diverse points of view. The practice served us well. It has led to the development of issue frameworks effective in helping communities talk and work together on a wide range of issues, such as substance abuse, domestic violence, the needs of young children, dropout prevention, and childhood obesity. In each of those initiatives, residents gave full-throated responses to these basic questions and connected the issue quite automatically to their own experiences.

Such full-throated, personal responses were much less common during our first round of interviews to gather West Virginian's insights about the economic future of the state. Often, when we asked "What concerns you about West Virginia's economy?" or "What could be done to improve your community's economy?" we were met with perplexed looks, sometimes with silence, and sometimes with the explanation: "I



# WHAT'S NEXT, *West Virginia?*

don't really know much about the economy.”

Clearly our questions were not allowing many West Virginians to connect the reality of their own experiences, hopes, and concerns with “the economy” of the state—certainly not in a way that revealed a role for themselves in shaping it. We reconsidered the kind of questions that would allow such associations to be made and headed back into West Virginia communities with a new list: What would it take for you and your family to thrive in West Virginia? What could allow your community to prosper? What concerns you about your family's future? What would make you feel more secure?

The new questions allowed the floodgates to open—as West Virginians articulated concerns and hopes about improved health and education, cultural attitudes and mind-sets, the quality of leadership and community relations, and yes, job opportunities and workforce development. Many people saw these issues as inextricably linked, such as the small business owners who worried about their ability to hire workers who were healthy enough to provide the labor they needed to remain a viable part of their local economy.

As the discussions unfolded across the state, it became clear that “our



**A strong future will require economic entrepreneurs, but it will also require civic entrepreneurs. It will require an ever-evolving and growing body of insights about constructive public practices and how they can be implemented to strengthen democracy and improve lives.**

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economic future” is not *an* issue, but rather a wide range of interconnected issues impossible for any sector to address alone. This broad constellation of concerns has remained at the forefront of subsequent *What's Next* community-based initiatives as each community determines which issues to prioritize based on their own local needs and opportunities. We have seen communities talking and acting together on issues they choose to name as key to their economic well-being: mentoring of young entrepreneurs in one commu-

nity, enhancing systems to help the homeless in another, and addressing substance abuse in yet another.

### **POLYCENTRIC ISSUES**

What are we learning about how West Virginians can interact as citizens in their economy? One of the most powerful insights we have gleaned is that what our residents call “the economy” is fundamentally about people—people who teach the community’s children, mine the region’s coal, run a small business, operate a large hospital, pastor a local church, or serve on the county commission or in the state legislature. Everyone is a player in the economy, with the right and responsibility to help shape it. It follows, then, that improving the economy requires strengthening connections, relationships, and decision-making practices to get things done.

Or, as a community member in Fayetteville recently put it: “If everyone is having a separate conversation, we all just get tired and worn out, and we feel like we’re spinning our wheels or beating our heads against the wall. The *What’s Next* discussion is so important because it’s in this relationship building that we can begin to help each other find answers.”

With relationship building in mind, we are focusing on how people in their own communities can build coalitions of organizations

and citizens that create an environment in which people can practice active citizenship. Communities, in turn, are creating “civic space” in which multiple opportunities for interactions among people with diverse perspectives can set directions together as a decision-making public.

### **MOVING FORWARD**

A strong future for West Virginia will include new economic opportunities. Identifying them will require new relationships, new connections, and new ways of talking and working together. A strong future will require economic entrepreneurs, but it will also require civic entrepreneurs. It will require an ever-evolving and growing body of insights about constructive public practices and how they can be implemented to strengthen democracy and improve lives.

Our evolution as a center for civic life that learns and grows will also depend on that spirit of entrepreneurship. Along with our ongoing exchanges with the Kettering Foundation’s growing networks of innovators, our center will continue to learn with the many West Virginians dedicated to creating the kind of democratic interactions they want and need. ■

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# Public Deliberation, Historic Decisions, and Civic Education: A Journey with a Presidential Library

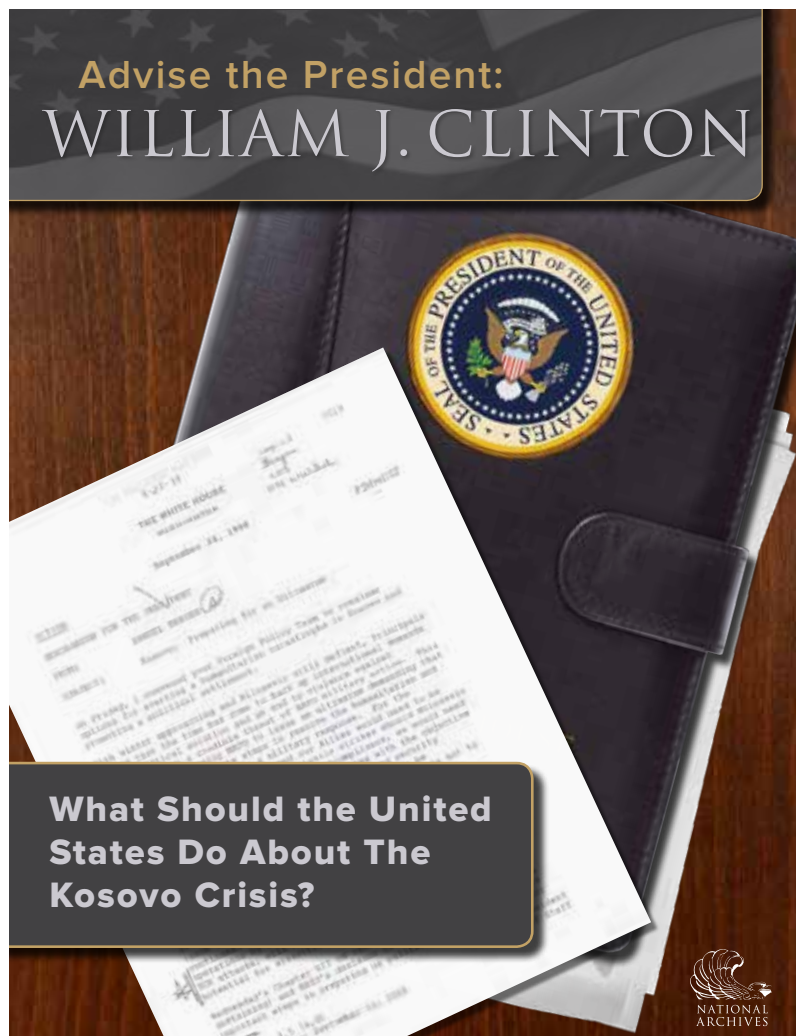
By Kathleen Pate

**O**n May 17, 2017, more than 100 high school students participated in deliberative forums on historic decisions at the Clinton Presidential Library in Little Rock, Arkansas. They used issue guides developed by the Clinton Presidential Library and by the National World War I Museum and Memorial.

## FORUMS ON CONTEMPORARY ISSUES

This program grew out of a decade-long collaboration between the National Archives, the National Issues Forums Institute, and the Kettering Foundation. In late 2007, Kettering senior associate Bob Daley approached the archivist of the United States, Allen Weinstein, with





of major public policy issues in the midst of a presidential campaign.”

As education specialist at the Clinton Presidential Library, most of the programs I provide are for pre-K through 12th grade students; elementary and secondary teachers; and families with young children. I worked closely with Malcolm Glover, a University of Arkansas Clinton School of Public Service graduate, to recruit and train moderators for four forums, held in the fall of 2008. Three forums were open to the public, and the fourth was for a group of about 30 high school students from Hamilton Learning Academy, an alternative school. The forum on “Closing the Achievement Gap” resonated with them on a very personal level. At the conclusion of the program, students completed the postforum questionnaire. When asked, “Did you learn something today that you didn’t already know?” one student wrote, “That adults care what we think.” I was blown away by her response.

### ADVISE THE PRESIDENT ISSUE GUIDES

In late 2010, some of the Presidential Libraries began work with Kettering to create a series of issue guides based on past presidential decisions. Each library was asked to designate a liaison to participate in research

the idea of having all the Presidential Libraries host forums on contemporary issues between Labor Day and Election Day 2008. Weinstein agreed, later stating in a press release that it “is consistent with the National Archives’ emphasis on civic education. Presidential Libraries are public places and it is appropriate for citizens to engage in intense discussions



exchanges at the foundation. Given my positive experience conducting contemporary issues forums, I jumped at the chance to create an issue guide to teach students about President Clinton while also introducing them to public deliberation.

Glover, assisted by Clinton School student Kate Cawvey, served as the chief researcher and primary writer for the *Advise the President: William J. Clinton—What Should the United States Do about the Kosovo Crisis?* issue guide. Developing the guide took almost two years and included participating in several research exchanges in Dayton. These exchanges provided an opportunity to interact directly with Kettering staff and representatives from the four other Presidential Libraries that were working on Advise the President issue guides relating to the Truman, Eisenhower, Ford, and Reagan administrations.

Along with our colleagues from the other libraries, we explored the balance between providing adequate historical background on the issue and offering too much introductory information. In these research exchanges, we worked to frame the issue, particularly on creating tensions within and among each option, making sure that each option was equally appealing and equally unappealing so students could under-

stand that every potential action has both benefits and downsides.

Many versions of the guide were tested with different groups. A particularly memorable program in the fall of 2011 involved a group of AP history students from Little Rock Central High School. After reviewing all of the options, a male student stated that “all the choices suck,”

## **Diplomatic Pressure, Military Action, or a Hands-Off Approach: What Should the United States Do about the Kosovo Crisis?**

### **POSSIBLE COURSES OF ACTION**

#### **OPTION ONE: PROMOTE DIPLOMATIC RESOLUTION**

Use diplomacy to focus on crafting a peace agreement between Kosovar Albanians and Serbian leaders to end the violence.

#### **OPTION TWO: USE MILITARY FORCE**

Commit the US Armed Forces to a military mission against Serbian forces in Yugoslavia to end ethnic genocide in Kosovo.

#### **OPTION THREE: FOCUS US RESOURCES AT HOME**

Denounce the violence, but stay out of the conflict; concentrate on more important US interests at home.





expressing his dissatisfaction with each of the options. His frustration provided an opportunity to explore how the president is often faced with difficult decisions that do not have a good answer or a correct response. This deliberative moment confirmed that the framework we developed truly included tensions.

Over the next year and a half, the issue guide was completed. In August 2013, the program moved from the pilot phase to being listed in the education programs manual published by the Clinton Foundation at the start of each school year.

As part of her Clinton School Capstone Project, Cawvey designed a moderator's guide for the Kosovo crisis issue guide and led two mod-

erator training sessions. The first session was for Clinton Presidential Library volunteers who work with school groups. The second session was offered as a professional development workshop for high school teachers in the Little Rock School District (LRSD). Neither training went particularly well. Both the docents and the teachers were incredulous that students could actively engage in the deliberation with little or no preparation. They didn't believe that students could have this kind of conversation without being well versed in the subject. Yet, in spite of their tepid response, a couple of LRSD teachers scheduled visits to the library for students to participate in the program.

## FORUMS WITH YOUNG PEOPLE

Each forum with students is different, and I often find myself wondering whether this is the one that isn't going to work. Many times, students are quiet at the beginning. The format is unfamiliar and requires them to participate in a way that is much different than listening to a lecture. Forums can be uncomfortable for students, particularly those who are accustomed to always having the right answer. Conversely, teachers have indicated at the conclusion of multiple forums that the students who contributed significantly to the deliberation were those who rarely speak in class.

For a forum to be successful, the participants must interact with one another, not just respond to the moderator. In one of the pilot forums, a participant exclaimed that "America is a bully" soon after the start of the forum. I added her comment as a pro under the "Promote Diplomatic Resolution" option. Later, she suggested using military force to compel Milošević to negotiate with the Kosovars. One of her classmates challenged her suggestion by responding, "How is that not being a bully?"

While it can be challenging to moderate forums with students, in every forum I've been a part of,

the group has inevitably reached a deliberative moment. It's important to engage students in this kind of activity so they can wrestle with the options and make connections to contemporary issues. Forums allow students to view history as a series of decisions made by groups of people rather than seeing their actions as foregone conclusions.

## ANOTHER ISSUE GUIDE EXPERIMENT

In the summer of 2014, the Presidential Libraries were invited to participate in a second round of issue guide development. Given our positive experience, Glover and I signed on to create a second guide for the Clinton Presidential Library. We selected a domestic issue and decided to create an issue guide on



**Forums allow students to view history as a series of decisions made by groups of people rather than seeing their actions as foregone conclusions.**

the economic issues Clinton faced following his inauguration in 1993.

Research exchanges were held at the foundation in Dayton between September 2014 and February 2016. At the October 2015 meeting, the Presidential Libraries exchange participated in a joint plenary session with two other research exchanges. The Historic Decisions participants, from museums across the country, were developing programming and issue guides that integrated historical and civic education, while the Location-Based Issue Guides participants were creating frameworks that address site-specific contemporary issues.

A year later, I participated in a meeting of the Historic Decisions group focused on how the museums planned to use the issue guides at their institutions. Prior to the meeting, I reviewed reports from each institution on their test forums. I learned more about each issue guide at the meeting and offered suggestions based on my experiences using the Kosovo guide at the Clinton Presidential Library. During one of the breaks, I visited with Lora Vogt, curator of education, and Cherie Kelly, school programs manager, from the National World War I Museum and Memorial. We began to discuss the possibility of collaborating on a program.

## A COLLABORATIVE EFFORT

Back at my office, I noticed that the World War I issue guide and the Kosovo issue guide share a common theme. Both issues require participants to explore America's role in the world and to consider similar options. I also began to recognize the connection between World War I and President Clinton. World War I began with the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand by a Serbian nationalist in Sarajevo. The crisis in Kosovo resulted from ongoing ethnic tensions dating back at least a century. When President Clinton was deciding how to respond to the actions of Slobodan Milošević, he had to consider the history of the region. The Battle for the Balkans program was born.

After I confirmed Vogt's and Kelly's willingness to travel to Little Rock to assist with the program, I applied for and later received a Heritage Month grant. I proposed a large-scale student forum with half the participants deliberating using the Kosovo issue guide, and the other half using the World War I issue guide. The idea of collaborating in this way was new for both institutions. The National World War I Museum and Memorial had partnered with the Truman Presidential Library for traditional teacher workshops. While the Clinton

Presidential Library had hosted contemporary forums for students, the only Advise the President forums offered were those connected to the Clinton administration.

In March and April 2017, I recruited schools to participate in the program. These efforts resulted in the participation of 110 students and 12 teachers from 4 different schools. The schools were a mix of urban and suburban, as well as traditional public schools and charter schools. These students would not normally interact, either in their daily lives or during the majority of education programs offered at the Clinton Presidential Library. On the day of the program, students were given a name tag to fill out with a table number pre-printed on it, which ensured that each table would have a mix of students from each school.

The students were engaged in meaningful deliberation about the role of the United States in the world. Their opinions varied widely. After 30 minutes, students were asked to share something from the discussion. Most of the reports centered around the most popular option at that table, but some students brought up points of contention between participants. Following the table shares, the decisions for each scenario were revealed. In addition, Vogt spoke about the significant toll that enter-

ing World War I took on the United States, then I explained the connection to President Clinton and modern foreign policy decisions. Students, teachers, and moderators all provided positive feedback at the conclusion of the event.

### **A CIVIC EDUCATION CHALLENGE**

Shortly after the program, I was invited to present at the National World War I Museum and Memorial as part of a week-long teacher seminar entitled “World War I and Its Aftermath.” The seminar was being presented by the museum in partnership with The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History.





On the fourth day of the seminar, I gave a presentation on using Historic Decisions issue guides with high school students and the Battle for the Balkans program. Following my presentation, the teachers were divided into three groups. Vogt, Kelly, and I each moderated a deliberation. I used the Kosovo guide, and they used the World War I guide. Many teachers seemed reluctant to voice an opinion about the conflict they had been studying for three and half days. Their response echoed my past experiences with teachers. It is sometimes difficult for adults, particularly teachers, to resist the desire to be seen as an expert on a specific topic. Students seem much more willing to consider the benefits and consequences of different options. One of the things I stress when lead-

ing forums is that there are no wrong answers. If you call out a negative consequence of a possible option, you are reflecting the things that you value. Even if I don't agree with your assessment of the situation, I must respect that your values may not match my own. This is a valuable lesson for students. Two notable things resulted from this summer seminar: I have been invited to present on deliberation at the National World War I Museum and Memorial 2018 Teacher Institute; and one of the teachers from the seminar requested 30 copies of the Kosovo guide for use in her classroom.

Based on the student and teacher responses to the Battle for the Balkans program, the Little Rock School District has asked to bring all 10th grade students from all 5 high schools, roughly 1,400 students, to participate in the Kosovo forum. While accommodating this request will be challenging, I know from work over the last decade that it will be worth the effort. The Advise the President and other Historic Decisions issue guides provide a unique opportunity for true civic engagement. ■

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# Science and the Cultivation of Public Judgment

By Daniel Sarewitz

**D**emocratic politics—to adjudicate value disputes—and structured rational inquiry—to establish a factual basis for action—are foundational aspects

of Western society, but I want to put on the table the proposition that there are big problems in the relation between the two. When science is relevant to political questions, everyone wants it to be on their side, as it symbolizes some kind of unified, theoretically and empirically validated way of looking at the world. People want to be able to claim they are basing their decisions on that. So, there is powerful appeal to the idea that if we can bring science to bear on political problems we are trying to address, this will improve our ability to act. There is some truth to this, of course. More insight about the factual elements of political challenges can help guide better action.



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## KETTERING FOUNDATION RESEARCH

has long found that there is real political power to be had in the way issues are named and framed. The manner in which a problem is articulated has the power to either engage people as citizens and actors or push them to the sidelines as spectators. At the same time, the manner in which issues are framed has the power to produce fruitful conversations, during which options and trade-offs are evaluated, but it also has the power to produce divisiveness and unproductive debate. Kettering has seen these fundamental problems of issue naming and framing play out across a wide range of arenas and topics. Lately, though, it seems as though a certain class of problems, those with a scientific component, are especially mired in polarization and rancor.

With this as background, Kettering set out to find whether there was anyone in the natural sciences, frustrated with the current state of affairs, who might want to explore new ways forward. This led to an exploratory research exchange at the foundation entitled “Science and the Cultivation of Public Judgment.” Building on this exchange, Daniel Sarewitz later joined us as a featured speaker during a Dayton Days research session. Out of this came the present opportunity—collaborative research between the Kettering Foundation and Daniel Sarewitz and his colleagues at Arizona State University’s Consortium for Science, Policy, and Outcomes (CSPO).

As it currently stands, there are a number of domestic and international initiatives in the “science and democracy” ballpark. However, many of these operate from a deficit standpoint, meaning that the real problem is usually articulated as a matter of citizens lacking scientific literacy. A proper understanding of the issue at hand is certainly important, but so too is the manner in which issues are named and framed. If issues are named and framed in technical ways that fail to consider what is valuable to citizens, there will be great difficulty in engaging citizens and

But, sometimes this is a deceptive and unhelpful way to look at things. To start with, the very idea of “science” is a complex one. Alvin Weinberg, a physicist who headed Oak Ridge National Laboratory and first worked on nuclear weapons and then on nuclear power generation, was one of the first to understand that the types of science called upon to address questions relevant to politics were different than standard lab science. In the 1960s, for example, Weinberg and other physicists were being asked to address questions about long-term nuclear power safety, about nuclear waste, and risk, and it turned out those were questions scientists could certainly study, but would never be able to answer definitively. He called that sort of endeavor—when questions could be asked of science, but science could not provide certain answers—“trans-science.” And it turns out that on many public issues, the complexity of reality, and the mix of values and facts, is such that definitive knowledge cannot be achieved.

For example, should women in their 40s and 50s get mammograms? The question sounds like one for science. But there is no one way to look at the problem. Breast cancer comes in many varieties and is influenced by many factors ranging from genetics to diet; the state of

knowledge about the disease, and the therapies available to deal with it, are constantly evolving; and people have different views of acceptable risk. Trying to answer what seems like a simple question turns out to foster endless debate among scientists, doctors, and patient-activists, and the idea that a set of facts can dictate that decision goes up in smoke. In such cases, facts and values are not separate. Facts can be assembled and interpreted in ways that align with one set of values or another. This isn't a matter of bias; it's a matter of a complex world that can be interpreted through many lenses. If you are worried about unnecessary treatment from false positives, you are viewing the question of mammograms through a different lens than if you think everything should be done to protect every life possible, no matter what. So, the question raised by trans-science is how to make science and democracy work together productively.

Some of the underlying themes I've heard at the Kettering Foundation have to do with erosion of public trust in institutions. We see skepticism around some things scientists have to say, but the public still buys into the notion that advancing knowledge is important for society. Science remains a highly trusted institution.

promoting productive conversations. After all, these issues are matters of judgment—ones in which citizens in communities must collectively decide what they ought to do about the problems that confront them. What can be done to jump-start the routines through which citizens and communities begin to exercise the judgment necessary to confront these thorny issues?

The idea here is to try something different—for a group of scientists to experiment with the democratic practices of naming and framing, such that citizens and communities might productively confront difficult issues on the horizon. As Sarewitz mentions, the issue at hand is self-driving cars, the emergence of which raises a number of economic and safety concerns that communities will be forced to confront. To do this, CSPO will start in the community with citizens (as opposed to starting with policymakers or experts) to ascertain what concerns people when they think about self-driving cars. These citizen concerns and expressions of things held valuable will serve as the basis for an issue guide that communities might use. Two CSPO members have participated in a Kettering exchange of issue guide writers to learn and share ideas with others around the country who are similarly attempting to more democratically name and frame issues. We at Kettering stand to learn a great deal from CSPO's efforts. We will be able to see, through an issue guide, how a complex scientific issue can be named and framed. Perhaps more important, though, we will learn from the reflections of the CSPO scientists themselves. What did they learn through this work? How, if at all, will this impact what they do moving forward? Are these democratic practices consistent with their role as scientists?

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*Driverless car focus groups held in Baltimore and Cumberland, Maryland, August 2017.*

But that could change. Scientists often say “don’t politicize science.” Yet, science cannot help but be politicized because in the real world, science and values are often impos-

sible to separate. So the authority of science—which comes from its amazing success at unraveling natural phenomena—is imported into the political arena and applied inappropriately to problems that are trans-scientific.

Such efforts to “scientize” democracy are increasingly familiar. But issues like climate change, genetically modified foods, and the regulation of toxic chemicals, in which science (actually trans-science) has been asked to do the work of democratic politics, typically spiral into endless controversy, often carried out in the guise of technical debate.

Trans-science issues often are associated with dilemmas related to technology—whether it’s breast-cancer screening or regulating the combustion of hydrocarbons. Technological change is a powerful



force of social change—perhaps the most powerful such force in today’s world—yet it is rarely subject to focused, anticipatory democratic deliberation. Self-driving cars appear to be the future of personal transportation. At the convergence of rapid innovations in artificial intelligence, technology platforms, and transportation, autonomous vehicles are poised to revolutionize all aspects of mobility. The broad diffusion of self-driving cars into society—which by some estimates could occur as soon as the next decade—represents an example of “creative destruction,” a term used by the economist Joseph Schumpeter to describe the incessant process of new technologies and industries replacing older ones.

Creative destruction, as the term itself implies, can be destabilizing and disorienting. Some of these changes are positive and some are harmful, but it is impossible to know in advance what all of the costs and benefits will be or how they will be distributed across society, over time, and at different scales. Because these changes are so significant and wide-ranging, the voices and values of everyday citizens must play a central role in the decisions that determine how technological advances affect broader society. When citizen voices are added to professional expertise and other forms of knowledge,

choices can better reflect, include, learn from, and align with public values and concerns. ■

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**The voices and values of everyday citizens must play a central role in the decisions that determine how technological advances affect broader society.**





# How I Learned What Not to Do as a School Superintendent

By Charles Irish



**E**arly in my career as a superintendent of schools, I tried to follow in the footsteps of my mentors. They taught me that success in the community would mostly be about selling your solutions to a “yet-to-be-informed” public. More than once I was told:

People don’t know what they want or need. You have to patiently educate them. Sometimes you do that by bringing them together and pointing them toward the right answers, helping them to uncover for themselves what is the right thing to do. That’s what leadership is all about.

In time, after frustrating experiences and a lot of soul searching, I concluded that my mentors’ model of leadership was insincere and unsustainable. I worked hard at try-

ing to forge a better way, but long-established customs, even community expectations, encouraged the kind of relationship my mentors had established. The following story is about the journey that brought about a new way of thinking.

## **PUBLIC INTRODUCTION**

In the middle of my first year as superintendent, the district was ready to implement some significant curriculum changes. A large group of parents, unhappy with the changes, asked for a meeting. When they arrived and settled in, I began to make a presentation about the need for the changes. I had been talking for less than a minute when a man stood and said: “You’ve got the wrong idea. This is our meeting. Now, sit down.” I was angered and quickly tried to figure out how to react in a

way that said, “I’m in charge here.” Over many years, it had been embedded in me that his kind of boldness on the part of citizens was wrong and needed to be nipped in the bud. I could hear all my mentors say: “Don’t let him get away with that. You’re the boss.”

My mentors had all been seasoned community leaders—college professors, experienced school administrators, church ministers, and even a former state superintendent. The message was always the same: Be the person in charge. Their advice was rooted in the notion of control, always, at all costs. The goal is to get people to do what you want them to do. Some even made it seem to be a holy calling. “It’s what they (the public) want you to do,” I was told.

Here I was, faced with my first moment of truth.

I don’t know whether it was instinctual or simply a rookie lacking confidence, but I betrayed my mentors and said: “You know what? You’re right. The meeting is yours.” We fumbled through the meeting and developed a resolution satisfactory to all. It was one of those blips in history that is quickly forgotten by everyone—except me.

In one simple statement, I had rejected my mentors. Why did I do that? Had I thrown away my career? Was I really rejecting all of my teachings, or had I simply been cowed

by a group that took charge? Better yet, I asked: “What do I do now?” It didn’t take long for that next challenge to present itself.

## A CONTROVERSY

Soon after the curriculum resolution, I was informed that a community member had demanded that the district remove a portrait of Jesus that was displayed in an elementary school. The portrait had been placed in 1946 in honor of a beloved superintendent. In short order, we had drawn coast-to-coast attention and had become the battle ground for civil rights and religious groups. Individual letters and newspaper editorials poured in from all corners of the nation, demanding this and threatening that. Even our Board of Education was split.

I thought I would resolve the issue quickly by convening a large group of the local clergy. I had assumed that there really wasn’t a choice about the final outcome. The portrait had to be removed. Our role would be to come together and figure out how to make that happen as painlessly and as respectfully as possible.

I was wrong.

This group was divided. Their body language, facial expressions, and even their choice of which side of the room to sit let me know that this wasn’t going to be easy. Before





the meeting began, some of them let it be known to all that there would be a severe price to pay if the picture was removed. It was obvious that they were not interested in a dialogue. Still, we tried to talk.

During what appeared to be an unfruitful exchange between some of the participants, a Methodist minister, who had remained silent to this point, spoke forcefully, pleading for a civil and thoughtful conversation. I could see that his appeal brought about little change in the positions staked out, but I did notice he engendered respect from several of the participants. He was a person I wanted to watch.

The clock was ticking on the timeline established by the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) before it would bring suit against the

school district. Therefore, at our next public meeting, I found it necessary to make a statement about the school district's next steps. The audience was large and diverse. Several major TV and newspaper reporters were in attendance. Many local citizens were there to express their desire to resolve the issue without being drawn into a highly publicized suit in which the schools would end up as the unwitting pawn between forces that had no interest in our community. On the other hand, there were some individuals clearly seeking a fight.

The time came for me to make my statement. It was short. I simply said: "We're not going to do anything until we've had time to talk about this as a community. It's our community and it's our decision. We'll let you know what we decide when we decide." That didn't make many people happy, especially those who wanted the picture removed immediately. My comments probably sounded bold at the time, but they were nothing more than an attempt to get off the stage and to buy time. I wasn't nearly as concerned about the initial response to my comments as I was trying to figure out how we were going to have a productive community conversation in the midst of so much anger.

## THE NATURE OF PUBLIC FORUMS

To begin that conversation, I set out to create forums in all the usual

**“ This group was divided. Their body language, facial expressions, and even their choice of which side of the room to sit let me know that this wasn't going to be easy.**

places: school buildings, churches, civic halls, even in some individuals' homes. We defined our role simply as listeners. But those meetings turned out to be anything but dialogue. People were divided into two very polarized camps around the choices I had framed for them: fight the ACLU or remove the picture. The participants were not shy about expressing their perspective of the stance taken by "the other side." After a couple of weeks, I had heard nothing but vitriol.

Meanwhile, I noticed a remarkable difference in some get-togethers that were arranged by the Methodist minister who I had earlier heard calling for people to be civil with one another. While the meetings brought together individuals with differing perspectives, I found them to be different from the meetings I had led. While attendees passionately expressed their convictions, the conversations were far more respectful than the meetings organized by the schools. I didn't perceive that anyone had a change of heart, but I sensed that they did listen to one another.

It soon became apparent to us that the most polarized and unproductive meetings were those convened and led by people from the school district. Organized groups attended those forums and freely expressed anger, and those of us representing the schools were the recipients of that anger.

At that point, I was coming to believe that lining up groups to make presentations to the Board of Education was worse than a hollow exercise. It isn't genuine conversation and most people exploit it for what it is—theater.

### LISTENING FOR PUBLIC VOICES

Still, we had to resolve the matter. One morning I walked into a local coffee shop where a group of regulars were talking about the issue. Barely acknowledged by them, I sat down and listened. It was a totally different conversation from the ones I had been experiencing. People were disagreeing with one another, but their demeanor was respectful. Even though they came from differing perspectives about the needed resolution, they were all troubled with the situation.

Then, just as I was about to leave, a woman named Julie spoke: "I know it's not right for the picture to be hanging in a public school, and it has to be removed. But with all the garbage allowed on TV and the uncontrollable violence all around us, I feel like we're losing as a society. It just makes me sad." Then there was silence with everyone slowly nodding their heads in agreement. Just like that, in less than 10 seconds, she had put a name on the issue that clearly resonated with everyone there.



I talked with her later and asked her what she meant by her statement. She said she had been talking with others over the previous few weeks and, just like them, she was working through her thoughts and reactions. She spoke about what had stuck in her mind from the many informally networked conversations that had been taking place throughout the community.

She said she initially came to the issue believing that the picture should remain in its present location. However, in the interim she had several conversations with friends and fellow church members. Their conversations took many turns, but in time she concluded that the picture had to be removed. Still, it left her with a deep sadness: “I just feel like we’re losing.”

The next evening, I used her words to express what I had learned from the community as I announced that the portrait would be moved to the Methodist church across the street where the honored superintendent had been a member. In the elementary school, a placard describing the events would replace the portrait. Few minds had changed from their original opinion, but the eventual “community-led ceremony” around the transfer of the portrait seemed to end the storm, and the community returned to business as usual.

## REFLECTIONS

Averting that crisis left those of us in the schools feeling satisfied with the way we handled things. We had taken on an issue that had the potential to turn the community upside down, and we believed that we had put the problem to rest with little lasting damage having been done. Among the school leadership the general response was to wipe one’s brow and proclaim, “Whew, we sure missed a bullet this time.”

Inside my mind, however, a persistent voice remained: “There remains a group of folks who feel that they lost, and we have completely overlooked them and that point.” In the midst of our desire to keep the relationship between the schools and community on an amicable footing, we had focused exclusively on getting the matter behind all of us. With the picture in its new home and newspaper editorials patting everyone on the back, we moved on. The conflict was over, so there was no longer a need to talk. Most everyone believed that an absence of conflict equated to a good relationship.

There are so many tangents we could have taken, but didn’t. We should have recognized that there were many citizens who felt disenfranchised from society. It wasn’t just about a picture of Jesus. It was a feeling that was expressed so well by the woman who caught my attention:

“I just feel like we’re losing.” The power of the statement had struck me immediately. Even so, its full meaning would take more than a decade to sink in. While a community cannot control social change, we could have talked about it in schools, churches, and other gathering places. Our experience with the picture could have been the impetus for that, but no one took advantage of the opportunity. Gradually but surely, that window closed. We had missed a giant opportunity to learn as a community. That’s the saddest part of the story.

Several years later, I can look back on that experience with more clarity. I can see now that the schools had not exerted as much control over the community conversations as we believed at the time. We thought that we were in charge of the conversations and that they were happening because we asked the community to talk about the matter.

In a sense, we had approached the subject as if it wouldn’t be discussed at all if we didn’t organize the dialogue. Yet our attempts to bring folks into our spaces were generally met with unfortunate responses. The meetings we organized on our turf seemed to draw in those who occupied the extreme positions. While our gatherings usually ended in a heated exchange, there were other places in town where people were



**Our most profound act was actually to not act, and to simply say that “we need to talk.”**

having constructive, civil conversations. The real dialogue had taken place far more on the community’s terms than ours. It wasn’t until I had encountered the woman who expressed her feelings about “losing” that I began to see that learning was taking place without the school’s direction.

We in the schools may have acted as a catalyst, but the people in the community would decide how they wanted to respond. Our most profound act was actually to not act, and to simply say that “we need to talk.” It would be wrong to say that we weren’t learning; we just didn’t know what it was. What I knew for sure was that I was left with a nagging feeling that dealing with a problem and winning a majority are not the same thing. That sense of unease would frame our approach to challenges in the future. ■

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