A **COUSINS RESEARCH GROUP** Report
on Higher Education in Democracy

SHIPS PASSING IN THE NIGHT?

by David Mathews

ABOUT THE **KETTERING FOUNDATION**

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

ABOUT THE **COUSINS RESEARCH GROUP**

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

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MARGUERITE SHAFFER, director of American studies at Miami University, is one of a surprisingly large number of faculty members who are at odds with an academic culture that isn't hospitable to their efforts to combine a public life with a scholarly career. She is concerned about what is happening in her field and about the world her two children will inherit. I have often quoted what she said in an interview for the 2008 issue of the *Higher Education Exchange* because it captures so well what troubles other faculty:

> I have joked with colleagues that I am in the midst of an academic midlife crisis—questioning every aspect of life in academe. In thinking about my future in the university, I have wondered whether my time will be well spent researching and writing a scholarly monograph that might well get me promoted, but that will be read by only a handful of like-minded scholars with similar intellectual interests. I have questioned the time I devote to teaching critical thinking skills to students who are socialized, both inside and outside the university, to care more about their final grades and potential career options than the knowledge they can share and the collective future they will create.

ALL IN ALL, THERE IS MUCH TO ADMIRE IN THE CIVIC ENGAGEMENT MOVEMENT ON CAMPUSES.

The Shaffers of academe are one of the forces driving a civic engagement movement on campuses across the country. Not so long ago, the civic education of college students was of little concern. Now, thanks to educators like Shaffer, that indifference is giving way. Leadership programs are common, and students are taught civic skills, including civil dialogue. There are also more opportunities to be of service these days, which is socially beneficial as well as personally rewarding. These opportunities are enriched by students' exposure to the political problems behind the needs that volunteers try to meet. University partnerships with nearby communities offer technical assistance, professional advice, and access to institutional resources. Faculty, who were once "sages on the stage," have learned to be more effective in communities by being "guides on the side." All in all, there is much to admire in the civic engagement movement on campuses.

WE HAVE SEEN THE CIVIC ENGAGEMENT MOVEMENT CLEARLY IN THE COMMUNITIES ON THE GULF COAST THAT ARE RECOVERING FROM HURRICANE KATRINA.

Another civic engagement movement is occurring off campus. At Kettering, we have seen it clearly in communities on the Gulf Coast that are recovering from Hurricane Katrina. We have combined what we learned from several communities into a fictional composite in order to report from across the region. In this representative community, "Don" and his wife, "Mary," live in an old fishing village much like Bayou La Batre, Alabama. The community traces its origins back to an 18th-century French settlement, and Don's family has been there since 1831. Mary came from Pennsylvania for a vacation—and stayed—as have other northern transplants. The residents of the community include Creoles descended from French and West African ancestors, as well as a large group of fishermen who recently arrived from Southeast Asia. There have been some tensions among these different groups but, fortunately, no serious clashes.

The hurricane destroyed a good many houses, and Don and Mary are still living with relatives in the area. Their hardware store was damaged, though not badly, and they were able to reopen within a year. Business is slow, however, because many people left for less vulnerable areas of the state. The fishing industry was hit very hard; boats were blown inland, and it took considerable effort to get them back into the water. Fishing is a competitive business, yet most families pitched in to help one another.

When the schoolhouse collapsed, churches that survived made space available for classes while a new building was being constructed. Don volunteers at the local fire station, which received supplies from a station in another small town two states away. This assistance was critical while waiting for state and federal support to arrive. Crime has gone up, but the police chief has begun a program of community-assisted policing, which he hopes will be effective if neighbors will participate.

The big news is that outside developers, aided by a planning grant from the state development office, are considering buying up a large tract of land just south of the town limits. They intend to build a "world class resort." Some people see prosperity just around the corner; others worry that the developers will dominate the reconstruction and shut them out of the decision making about the community's future. This prompted some concerned citizens to meet every week at the fire station to develop their own plans for the town. People wanted to restore their community—both its buildings and way of life—and felt that they had to come together as a community to do that. The community was both their objective and the means of reaching that objective. This has been the goal for many of the other civic engagement movements in communities that

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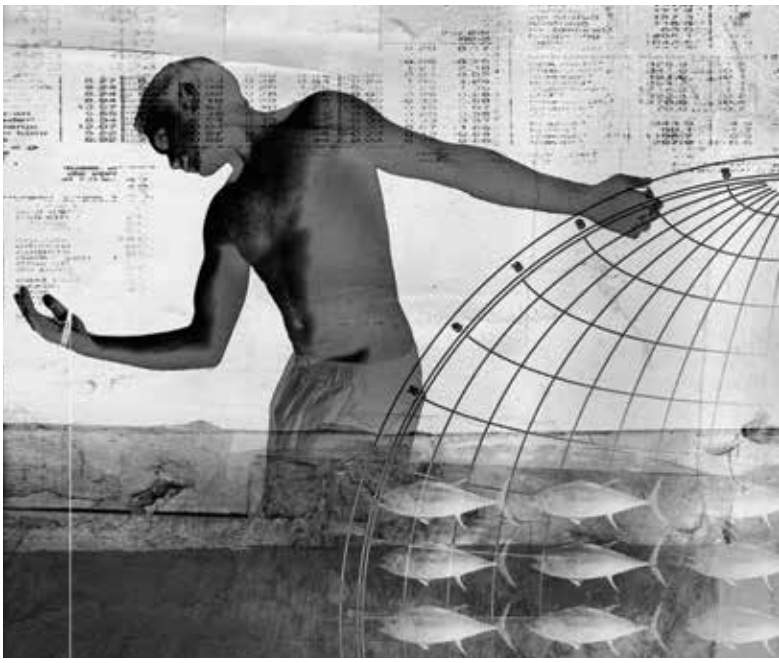
Interestingly, a year or so after Katrina, a group of scholars studying communities that survived disasters validated the instincts of Don, Mary, and their neighbors. These communities were resilient because they had developed the capacity to come together. And the resilience proved more important than individual protective measures like well-stocked pantries.[1]

People with a democratic bent like Don, Mary, and their neighbors don't want to be informed, organized, or assisted as much as they want to be in charge of their lives. And they sense that this means they need a greater capacity to act together despite their differences. That is why they say they want to come together as communities to maintain their communities. Unfortunately, they often have difficulty finding institutions that understand their agenda.

Nongovernmental organizations, according to a recent Kettering and Harwood study, are often more interested in demonstrating the impact of their programs than in facilitating self-determination and self-rule.[2] Even citizens may be uncertain of what they can do by themselves and want to put the responsibility on schools, police departments, or other government agencies. For instance, in one community, citizens decided that there weren't enough adult mentors for the young people who were getting into trouble. Yet rather than identifying places where youngsters could find adults within the community who would be responsive, these citizens wanted social workers to handle the problem.



THE WETLANDS OF DEMOCRACY

Prompted by what we *don't* know about communities coming together, the Kettering Foundation has begun to collect stories and analyze case studies.[3] One of the first things we learned from people like Don, Mary, and their neighbors is that they absolutely refused to call what they were doing "politics." They wanted to distinguish what they were about from what goes on in elections and governments, although they usually voted and weren't rabid critics of the government.

We don't have a name for what we are seeing, but the more we see, the more we have come to believe that we are looking at something more than civil society at work, more than revitalized public life, and more than grassroots initiatives. We don't think we are seeing an alternative political system like direct democracy; rather, we are looking at the roots of self-rule. Democratic politics seems to operate at two levels. The most obvious is the institutional level, which includes elections, lawmaking, and the delivery of services. The other level is underneath these superstructures, and what happens there is much like what happens in the wetlands of a natural ecosystem.

We have been experimenting with a wetlands analogy to describe what supports and sustains institutional politics. Wetlands were once overlooked and unappreciated but were later recognized as the nurseries for marine life. For example, the swamps along the Gulf Coast were filled in by developers, and the barrier islands were destroyed when boat channels were dug through them. The consequences were disastrous. Sea life that bred in the swamps died off, and coastal cities were exposed to the full fury of hurricanes when the barrier islands eroded. The wetlands of politics play roles similar to swamps and barrier islands. They include informal gatherings, ad hoc associations, and the seemingly innocuous banter that goes on when people mull over the meaning of their everyday experiences. These appear inconsequential when compared with what happens in elections, legislative bodies, and courts. Yet mulling over the meaning of everyday experiences in grocery stores and coffee shops can be the wellspring of public decision making. Connections made in these informal gatherings become the basis for political networks, and ad hoc associations evolve into civic organizations.[4]

In the political wetlands, as in institutional politics, problems are given names, issues are framed for discussion, decisions are made,

resources are identified and utilized, actions are organized, and results are evaluated. In politics at both levels, action is taken or not; power is generated or lost; change occurs or is blocked. We aren't watching perfect democracy in the political wetlands because there isn't such a thing. But we are seeing ways of acting, of generating power, and of creating change that are unlike what occurs in institutional politics.

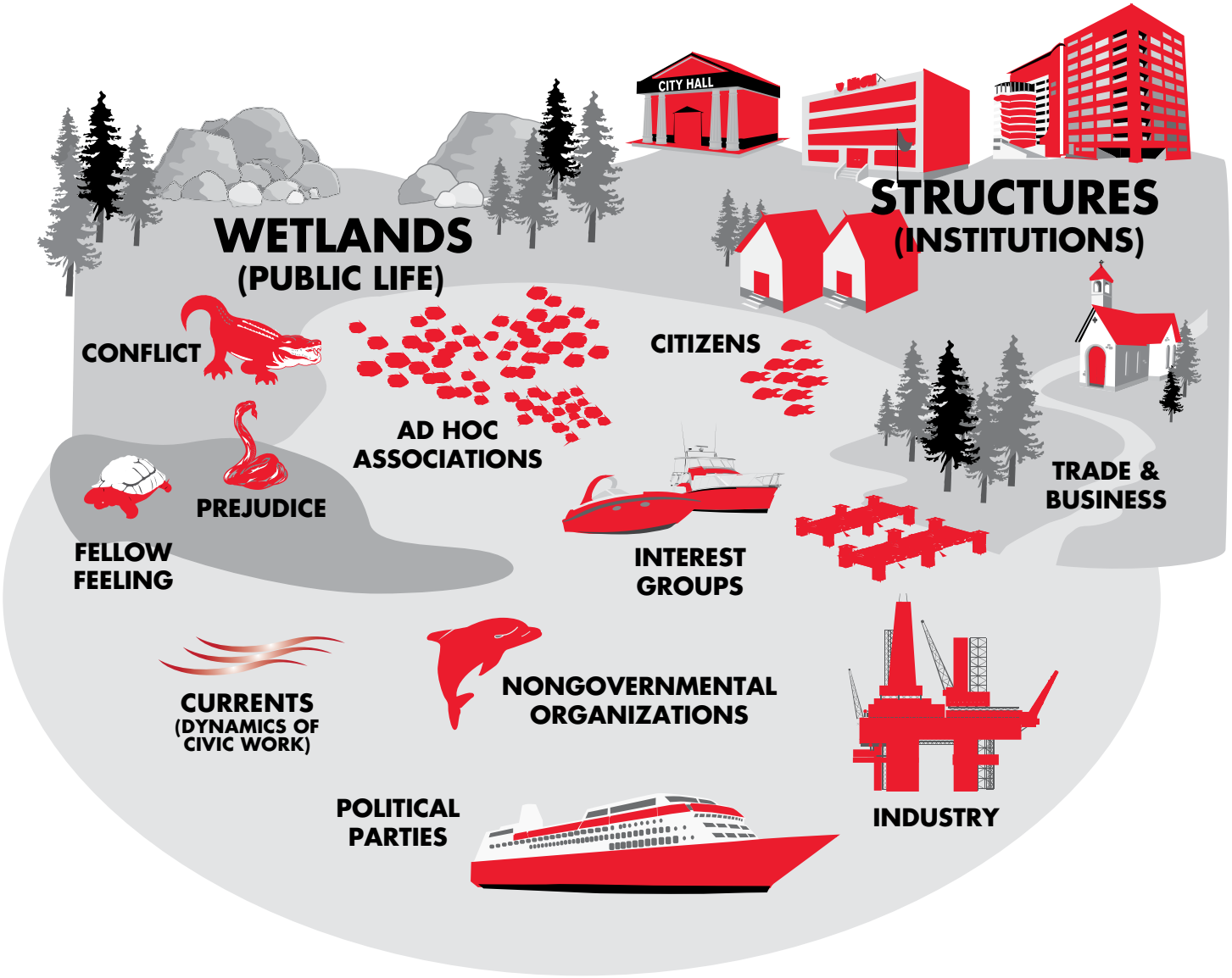
Recently, we have been calling these characteristics "organic." Like any generalization, this one has its drawbacks. Still, we were drawn to the term, in part, because it doesn't have the varied meanings of words like *civic* and *public*. The word *organic* connotes things that are natural or close to ordinary life, things that are human and function like living organisms. That which is organic is also loosely structured, more like a blob than a square or, in political terms, more informal than formal. There are other qualities that seem to be unique to organic politics:

- Citizens are defined by their relationships with other citizens rather than with the state.

- Relationships are not the same as those of family and friends, yet they are unlike those in institutional politics, which may be based on patronage or party loyalty. Organic relationships are pragmatic or work related. They form when people coalesce in order to rescue and restore during a disaster, when they build houses for the homeless, or when they assist the police in watching for drug dealers in their neighborhoods.

- The names people give to problems reflect the things they hold dear and their basic concerns—their highest hopes and deepest fears as human beings. Safety from danger. Being treated fairly. The freedom to act as they see best. These names are different from those that people use when they are acting as professionals and politicians. For example, citizens want to feel that they are safe in their homes, and this feeling of security is less quantifiable but more compelling than the statistics professionals use to describe crime.

- The knowledge needed to decide what to do about these problems is created in the cauldron of collective decision making. It is formed by the interaction of people with other people, by the comparison of experience with experience. This knowledge is different from the way scholarly knowledge is created, which is through rigorously disciplined science.



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- Decisions are based on the recognition that concerns are interrelated as well as competing, which is not the assumption in majority voting. Organic decision making is deliberative. Deliberation involves carefully weighing possible actions against what people consider most valuable, which has to be determined in a specific context. Institutional decision making can also be deliberative, although it is more often based on negotiation and bargaining.

- The resources needed to implement decisions come from citizens' innate abilities, abilities that are magnified when people join in collective efforts. Citizens' resources are often intangible, such as commitment and political will. These are different from the resources of institutions, which tend to be material and technical.

- The citizenry acts in various ways, which are loosely coordinated by a shared sense of direction. Actions taken by institutions are usually uniform and directed by a single plan or central agency.

- The commitment of resources to action is enforced by covenants or the promises people make to one another. Institutional commitments are enforced by legal contracts.

- Power comes from the ability of citizens to make things through their collective efforts and from the relationships forged in these efforts, rather than from institutional authority.

- Change comes about through collective learning and the innovation it generates, rather than from modifications of law and policy.

Organic politics has its own structures: not board tables but kitchen tables, not assemblies like legislative bodies but common gatherings, once in post office lobbies but now on the Internet. These structures are more like sand than concrete. Ad hoc groups and alliances form, then fall away as a project is completed, but reappear when another task is at hand.

WHY THE DISCONNECT?

It would seem that two civic engagement movements, occurring at the same time and often in the same locations, would be closely allied—perhaps mutually reinforcing. That doesn't seem to be happening very often. Research reported by Sean Creighton in the 2008 issue of the *Higher Education Exchange* suggests the connection is quite limited. Even though academic institutions have considerable expertise and a genuine interest in being helpful, they don't necessarily know how to relate to the self-organizing impulses of Don, Mary, and their neighbors.

Creighton found that few university-community initiatives "focused on building relationships with community partners, much less on projects that increased the civic capacity of those community organizations and the individuals they served." There are exceptions, of course. But, by and large, we have found that the emphasis is on institutions serving communities better by listening carefully and communicating more clearly.

Academics and neighborhood associations are quite aware of power differences between them, and universities often try to share institutional power; that is, to "empower" citizens. Yet, communicating with, serving, and empowering communities isn't the same

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as building indigenous civic capacity—the capacity of a citizenry to join forces and act.

One study isn't enough to generalize about all types of partnerships, so the Creighton report is more of a caution light than a stop sign. Efforts by colleges and universities to reach outside their walls is certainly a positive development. Too much benefit has come from the service provided by academic institutions to take their contribution lightly.

Why, though, are these two civic movements in danger of passing like the proverbial ships in the night? More important, how might these efforts become mutually supportive? One reason may be that like the natural wetlands, the value of the political wetlands isn't easily recognized.

Because politics in the wetlands appears insignificant or deficient by institutional standards, professional staffs tend to colonize democracy at this level and remake it in their own image. The mechanisms for doing this are well intended and familiar: empowerment projects, participatory mandates, accountability standards, and engagement campaigns. These build support for deserving institutions (like public schools), promote better understanding of government agencies, and provide institutional legitimacy. Their goal is to connect citizens to institutions; yet, in the rush to do that, the need for citizens to *first* engage one another is often overlooked.

Fixation on institutional politics may be another factor in obscuring the significance of what happens in the larger ecosystem of democracy. And this fixation may contribute to lack of discussion of the various kinds of democracy that are being promoted by both on- and off-campus engagement projects. One common reaction to the variety of initiatives in civic education, for instance, is to think of them as competing methodologies serving the same end. In fact, these campus projects may reflect very different notions of democracy, particularly different concepts of the role of citizens.

Some colleges and universities insist they serve democracy simply by existing. Maybe so, but what *kind* of democracy? Even when academics use the same terminology, they may not have the same concepts of democracy in mind. As reported in the 2006 issue of the *Higher Education Exchange*, Derek Barker found five distinct practices all using the same generic label, the scholarship of engagement.

Nothing is wrong with this variety; nonetheless, wouldn't it be beneficial if the concepts of democracy in different projects were made more explicit? One of the characteristics of democracy is a vigorous debate over its meaning. A crucial distinction needs to be made between projects that address the problems *in* a democracy (violence, injustice, poverty) and those that deal with the problems *of* democracy (moral disagreement, polarization, alienation).

Both kinds are worthwhile, yet the problems of democracy may be getting less attention. If so, the potential in making use of what happens in the wetlands of democracy will remain unrecognized.

One indication that the problems of democracy aren't visible is the way that deliberative democracy has been interpreted. The recent attention given to the important role deliberation plays in democracy has come about because of a serious problem of democracy—how to justify or make legitimate decisions when there are significant moral disagreements over which decisions are best. Deliberation is key because it takes into account the things that are held valuable, which gives rise to moral disagreements. That is a far cry from the way public deliberation is often understood today, which is merely as one of many techniques used to promote civil discourse. We could certainly do with a little more civility in our political rhetoric—but public deliberation is far more than a methodology for ensuring politeness. It is an essential element in a democracy in which citizens are actors producing public goods.

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Make no mistake; anytime there are moral disagreements, emotions will flare. That happens in deliberations. Far from suppressing emotions, deliberations recognize and help people work through strong feelings. The objective is to make sound decisions that have legitimacy because the concerns that produce the emotions have been recognized. Although not resulting in total agreement, deliberation helps people find enough common ground to act together. By doing this, it enables citizens to become effective political actors.

One of the most powerful insights to come from deliberative forums is the political power available in seemingly trivial activities, like giving names to problems that need to be solved. When people fail to see names for problems that reflect their personal experiences and what they value, they feel outside the political system looking in. On the other hand, when people deliberate, they usually rename problems in their own terms. They claim the power inherent in owning their problems.

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MOVING ON

The challenge higher education faces is to not let its engagement movement stall; one way to do that is to align its efforts more closely with those of Don, Mary, and their neighbors. Some colleges and universities are already beginning to do this. Kettering doesn't know about all of these initiatives, so I can only draw from a few examples we have information on.

As already mentioned, citizens don't necessarily see the potential in the wetlands of democracy or the power that comes from joining forces with other citizens. An experiment on the Wake Forest campus has broken through that barrier with a four-year program that gave students a better sense of how they can become effective political actors, not just on election day, but every day.[5] Two faculty members, Katy Harriger and Jill McMillan, introduced deliberative democracy as a way of doing politics. Deliberative forums were organized at multiple sites: in classrooms, in the campus community, and in the town where the university is located. Deliberation wasn't presented as just a way of conducting forums, but as a way of living democratically.

This experiment shows that deliberative democracy challenges academic institutions at every level: from the nature of teaching and the character of the extracurricular program to the very meaning of scholarship. Perhaps the greatest challenge is epistemological. Deliberation creates morally relevant public knowledge about what is most important to people's collective well-being. This knowledge has to be socially constructed by citizens; it is neither better nor worse than expert, scientific knowledge, just different. The role of public knowledge (perhaps better called practical wisdom) is to generate sound judgments about what should be done in politics. How institutions of higher education contribute to this knowledge, which people need to rule themselves wisely, is an open question.

On another front, a new coalition of cooperative extension folks is taking on the challenge of finding ways to strengthen the democratic capacities in organic politics in order to form resilient, self-governing communities. We can hope that this coalition will be able to better align the ways their institutions go about their business with the way citizens go about theirs.

Still another group of initiatives is emerging from more than 70 centers and institutes that have sprung up around the country using public deliberation to give people direct experience with organic politics. Some promote deliberative forums to make the collective decisions that are needed to launch collective

action on state and local problems. Others use the forums to combat the polarization that creates stalemates in our policymaking. These forums, often based on the National Issues Forums series of issue books, look at the pros and cons of three or more possible courses of action on controversial issues like abortion, race relations, and environmental protection.

Some of these institutes, such as the ones at Hofstra and Kansas State, are embedded in their universities. Others are freestanding, like the one in Alabama, and have ties to several universities. A number of institutes, including the one at the University of Hawaii, have strong connections to state legislatures. Still others are embedded in their communities but collaborate with a nearby university, as is the case for Penn State and the ad hoc Public Issues Forums of Centre County group.

Whether its these 70 plus centers and institutes, the cooperative extension coalition, experiments in undergraduate education like the one at Wake Forest, or other initiatives I haven't mentioned here, higher education is not only keeping its civic engagement movement going but also giving that movement a stronger democratic cast. The academy is bringing its efforts more in line with the efforts of people who want to do the work of citizens.

HIGHER EDUCATION IS NOT ONLY KEEPING ITS CIVIC ENGAGEMENT MOVEMENT GOING BUT ALSO GIVING THAT MOVEMENT A STRONGER DEMOCRATIC CAST.

We need more opportunities on and off campus for Marguerite Shaffer and her colleagues to meet with Don, Mary, and their neighbors, not as service providers and recipients, but as coproducers of democracy. The exchange can also help academic institutions renew their sense of themselves. Colleges and universities are more than knowledge factories to be judged solely by their efficiency. From the American Revolution through the Civil Rights Movement, they have been part of the greatest experiment of all, an experiment based on the proposition that we, citizens, can actually govern ourselves.

Notes

1. Monica Schoch-Spana et al., "Community Engagement: Leadership Tool for Catastrophic Health Events," *Biosecurity and Bioterrorism: Biodefense Strategy, Practice, and Science* 5, no. 1 (2007): 8-25; and Paloma Dallas, "Studies of a Role for Communities in the Face of Catastrophe," *Connections* (2008): 31-34.

2. Richard C. Harwood and John A. Creighton, *The Organization-First Approach: How Communities Get Crowded Out* (Dayton, OH: Kettering Foundation and The Harwood Institute for Public Innovation, 2008).

3. The foundation's findings have been reported most recently in David Mathews, *The Ecology of Democracy: Finding Ways to Have a Stronger Hand in Shaping Our Future* (Dayton, OH: Kettering Foundation Press, 2014).

4. The Harwood Group, *Meaningful Chaos: How People Form Relationships with Public Concerns* (Dayton, OH: Kettering Foundation, 1993).

5. That experiment is documented in Katy J. Harriger and Jill J. McMillan, *Speaking of Politics: Preparing College Students for Democratic Citizenship through Deliberative Dialogue* (Dayton, OH: Kettering Foundation Press, 2007).

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