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**The Civic Mission
of
Higher Education:
From Outreach to Engagement**

**From the Workshop on
Higher Education and Public Life**

A REPORT BY
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*Kettering
Foundation*

This workshop was organized jointly by the Kettering Foundation and a nationwide alliance of Public Policy Institutes.

Currently, there are 30 Public Policy Institutes (PPIs) associated with institutions of higher education throughout the nation. Their work is carried out in cooperation with a civic network called the National Issues Forums (NIF). The emphasis of this nonpartisan effort, which involves several thousand community-based organizations, is to build civic capacity through public deliberation. For more information about NIF and PPIs, please visit the National Issues Forums Institute Web site: www.nifi.org.

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When the Kettering Foundation convened the first Seminar on Higher Education and Public Life in the summer of 1998, terms such as *engagement*, *community*, and *civil society* had little currency in the academic world. Colleges and universities generally acknowledged a link between education and democracy in their mission statements, and service-learning and other citizenship-building programs were becoming an increasingly common feature on American campuses. But the conversation about higher education's role in building and serving a democratic society was still confined to a relatively small number of American educators.

By the summer of 2001, when the foundation joined with a national network of Public Policy Institutes to host its fourth annual gathering, *civic engagement* had become a bona fide catchword within the academy. On campuses across the country, new institutes, programs, and partnerships were springing up under the banner of civic engagement. In a report by the Kellogg Commission on the Future of State and Land-Grant Universities, subtitled "The Engaged Institution," 26 university presidents and chancellors called on institutional leaders to revitalize their commitment to public life and make civic engagement "the core mission of the university." The American Council on Education, the Association of American Colleges and Universities, and Campus Compact banded together to find ways to strengthen the bond between higher education and democracy. In a widely publicized initiative, the University of Maryland launched a new Democracy Collaborative, championing the idea of "the engaged university." The American Political Science Association formed a task force to better understand the link between education and civic engagement. Kennesaw State University in Georgia went so far as to declare 2001 the "Year of the Engaged University."

With so much attention being given to the subject, the Kettering Foundation and the Public Policy Institutes opted for a shift of focus as the Washington meeting entered its fourth year. What was needed, the organizers sensed, was not so much a seminar exploring new ideas and initiatives in higher education — useful as they may be — as an exchange between reflective practitioners about the practical aspects and ramifications of their work. In concrete terms, what does civic engagement really entail? What are some of the more innovative and promising examples of this kind of work? What can be done to support these efforts and make them a more integral part of their institutions? To what extent can they be replicated? And, not least, what implications do they have for American higher education as a whole?

Held at L'Enfant Plaza in Washington, D.C., the Workshop on Higher Education and Public Life brought together some 77 participants to explore these questions. It was a diverse group composed primarily of faculty, administrators, trustees, and representatives of national associations, but also a number of college presidents, students, community leaders, foundation executives, and journalists. In contrast to previous gatherings, the heart of the workshop consisted of a series of extended breakout sessions rather than large-group discussions. The small-group dialogues focused on three pressing issues on college and university campuses: alcohol abuse, racial tensions, and the decline of confidence and participation in the political process. The goal of these sessions was not so much to explore specific issues as to examine practical and effective methods for public work by institutions of higher education. The workshop also included a deliberative forum on the social value of higher education. Using an issue book prepared by the National Collegiate Honors Council and the National Issues Forums, the group took up the question, "What kind of education do we need after high school?" In addition, C. Peter Magrath, president of the National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges, presented a dinner talk on "The Engaged Institution."

The workshop was organized jointly by the Kettering Foundation and a nationwide alliance of Public Policy Institutes, centers that offer training in what might be called the "arts of democracy" — deliberation, issue-framing, convening and moderating forums, public action, networking, working with officeholders and the like. Usually affiliated with colleges and land-grant universities, there are now Public Policy Institutes in more than half the states in the Union. What gives value to their work, particularly in the context of the current push for civic renewal, is that they represent a broad-based network of faculty, administrators, and community leaders already actively committed to the academy's civic mission. For more than a decade, they have been laboring at the intersection of higher education and public life — fostering civic participation, strengthening community ties, identifying and exploring complex public issues, and offering training and support for democratic problem solving from the ground up.

As a research organization, the Kettering Foundation has been working closely with the Public Policy Institutes for more than a decade. "We think these institutes have struck a very important new chord in American higher education," Kettering Foundation President David Mathews said in his wel-

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coming remarks. “The work they are doing embodies a different kind of engagement than the kind people usually refer to. They not only reach out to their communities and ‘serve’ the public, but they are involved in *public-making*. People often define the public as something that is ready-made and needs to be served — like a market or an audience or a constituency. Public-making expands on that idea by defining the public in terms of relationships, in terms of people joined together in the act of deciding and acting together on a common problem.” This notion has powerful democratic implications, Mathews said. For while public-making may not be an overtly political act, at least in the conventional sense, it engages people in the process of working together toward a common end. That is a distinctly political endeavor.

According to Mathews, the work of the Public Policy Institutes is valuable in three important respects. First, it has given disaffected students on a number of campuses a new way to look at politics. Second, it has been effective in fashioning a link between the campus and the larger community. And third, it has proved effective in addressing complex and pressing issues on campus. The aim of the workshop, as Mathews said, was to bring together representatives of the Public Policy Institutes with others in higher education to explore and give substance to these findings.

ENGAGING STUDENTS

Public cynicism and mistrust of government has reached record levels in recent years. While the trend is fairly consistent across lines of gender, age, and class, undergraduate students are especially pessimistic and resigned about the political system. According to recent studies, about two-thirds of college students believe that politicians are motivated by selfish concerns and that government is run by a narrow elite more concerned with protecting special interests than looking out for the common good. This cynicism is reflected in record-low voter turnout figures in recent elections. In 1996, for example, the number of eligible 18- to 24-year-olds who turned out to vote was a mere 32 percent — 22 percentage points below the national average among eligible adults.

“Politics” has become a dirty word on college and university campuses. In an essay in the March/April 2001 issue of *About Campus*, Richard Cone, David Cooper, and Elizabeth Hollander offer a telling example of how students feel about the political system. Describing a focus group of Brown University’s best and brightest students, they write: “The

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Lock Haven University
of Pennsylvania

leader asked the students, all of whom were involved in community service work, to comment on their political participation. Half of them were not planning to vote because they didn't know enough, because it didn't matter, because they didn't know whether to vote in their home state or in Rhode Island. When asked who was going to run the democracy if they didn't participate, they became uncomfortable and didn't know how to respond. One finally said, "The democracy is broken. Why do you expect us to fix it? Isn't that your job?"

For a number of institutions represented at the Washington workshop, the disconnect between students and politics has been at the center of ongoing dialogue and deliberation for some time. While it's clear that "students don't like politics," as Douglas Challenger of Franklin Pierce College commented, "they do like deliberation and the sustained dialogue process." It seems that bringing students together in a structured setting to explore pressing social and political questions brings about not only a heightened awareness of the issues but also a richer and more complex understanding of their contribution as citizens. In some cases, it also leads to greater involvement in campus and community affairs.

Renée Daugherty described a project she codirected at Oklahoma State University involving some 200 freshmen students in the OSU President's Leadership Council. She and her colleagues organized a series of nine forums on the issue of money and politics. The goals were to explore how students felt about the issue, and to promote what she called "a habit of deliberating on public issues." Given that the students in the program will pursue key leadership roles on campus and are likely to assume civic leadership roles after they graduate, the project team felt that it was important to introduce them to the concepts of public deliberation while they were still freshmen.

According to a report Daugherty shared with the group, most of the students in the forums had not considered the role of money in politics relevant to their lives. But after reading the issue books and participating in the forums, "some expressed a desire to learn more and become more participatory in political issues, especially those involving campaign finance." Summer Stowe, a student at Oklahoma State University who participated in the forums, related that she and her friends saw deliberation as a very useful method, one that ought to be practiced not only in forums, in student government, and in the classroom, but also in "everyday conversation."

By analyzing surveys taken before and after the forums, Daugherty and

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her colleagues also found that students' positions were influenced by their experiences in their forums. "In each case," Daugherty said, "shifts moved from a position of strong agreement or favor to a more moderate position." This suggests that as students subjected their attitudes to the test of public discussion and debate, many found themselves reassessing and sometimes tempering their views.

At The Ohio State University, David Patton organized a similar program to explore how students feel about the growing influence of money in politics. The goals in this case were to gauge students' attitudes and feelings on the subject, as well as to examine whether forums affect their critical thinking. It proved to be quite a challenge to get students to attend the discussions, Patton said. "Their interest seemed low. Many said, 'Politics? Not interested.' Or, 'I don't like politics.'" Of those who did attend, many said they came in response to personal invitations or to show support for a particular student-moderator.

Despite tepid interest on the part of the students, the discussions proved to be quite rich and stimulating, Patton said. After one of the forums, a student wrote: "Prior to my involvement, I knew very little about the large encompassing role that money plays in politics. From this experience, I know that I've become more interested. Where this interest will lead, I'm not sure. Maybe to take organized action, or maybe just to be better informed when I vote for a particular candidate."

According to Patton, the process of becoming an engaged citizen is an incremental one. The first step is awareness. Once you are attentive to a specific issue or problem, you tend to seek out more information about it. At that point, you may begin to identify and support political candidates who reflect your views on the issue. Taken a step farther, that interest may prompt you to become actively engaged in addressing the issue. The idea that participating in a forum or two will automatically transform students into engaged citizens is a bit far-fetched, Patton admitted. "But through our activities, we were at least able to *start* students thinking about what they might believe, and possibly make them more aware of where they stand on some of the issues."

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Franklin Pierce College

For Jim Knauer of Lock Haven University of Pennsylvania, the experience of deliberative dialogue is especially valuable when students have some personal investment in the process. He described an honors class he teaches in which students help to frame and moderate forums on America's future. They begin by framing three choices or perspectives on the issue. In

a series of three 75-minute classroom discussions, they then explore the pros and cons of each option. After the face-to-face forums, the dialogue is continued on-line using Web-based courseware. Knauer feels that this approach gets to the heart of what he is trying to teach. "The heavy involvement of students in shaping and running the program provides an experiential learning dimension that I think transforms the quality of their education and their engagement in it," he said.

One of the most difficult issues facing civics educators, Knauer maintained, is how to create a democratic experience for students within settings or institutions that do not necessarily embody the principles of democracy. "We need to think very seriously about how we educate for democracy within institutional structures that will never be, in any strict sense, democracies themselves. I think we have to ask, What would an educational institution look like if it were *in* a democracy, but not itself a democracy?"

This point was echoed by several participants. "If you look at a lot of classroom activities," said Richard Dubanoski, dean of the College of Social Sciences at the University of Hawaii, "we have the expert lecturing the students. We don't engage them in the conversation, in active learning, or in any kind of critical thinking." While it is unlikely that participating in a few forums will transform a student's learning experience, he said, creating opportunities for a different kind of dialogue can have a deep impact if it is an integral and ongoing practice within the institution. "Experiencing one deliberative process is not going to be enough to shape a habit," Dubanoski said. "But if students are having continual experiences, from the time they come to the university until the time they leave, then there is a chance that they will take on the habit of deliberating."

Another way that institutions can teach the arts of democracy is to engage students directly in issues affecting the campus community. "Students could take a much more active role in the making of institutional decisions," observed Paul Gaston, provost at Kent State University. "That would bring politics right to the dormitory door and make the process of deliberation a very serious and direct one for students." One example of this, he said, is the way Kent State has used a deliberative process to engage students in the planning of a new residential hall. Students have been crucial to the process of exploring alternative floor plans, finding new parking strategies, and negotiating the tradeoffs between historic preservation and student convenience. In Gaston's

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view, the institution could have taken the process a step farther by exploring “the economics and the politics of the situation.” But in practical terms, he said, this example shows how the deliberative process can serve as “a laboratory of democracy.”

The key to promoting this type of engagement is to make open dialogue and deliberation an integral part of the institution’s way of doing business, several participants observed. Pat Keir, president of Miramar College, stressed that faculty and administrators must model deliberative practices, not just champion another *technique*. Every level and department of the institution should reflect a commitment to civic engagement, she said — particularly leading administrators and governing boards.

At some institutions, engaging students means creating opportunities for them to live and work together as citizens. Larkin Dudley, professor of public administration at Virginia Polytechnic Institute, observed that there is a growing movement, particularly at large research universities, to create “learning communities” — communities in which students share ideas and work together to achieve common learning objectives. Dudley described it as “an attempt to find alternative ways of creating community.” Since group inquiry is an integral part of what makes a learning community, the deliberative process can be a very effective vehicle toward that end. The deliberative process is especially valuable as a tool for identifying shared values.

There seemed to be a general consensus that classroom and campus forums really do engage students. A deliberative discussion can be a point of entry to political awareness and engagement because forums “bring politics down to a more manageable level for most students,” as Roy Varnado of Gulf Coast Community College in Panama City, Florida, put it. “*Politics*, in a deliberative setting, is not as forbidding or as grandiose,” he said. In the end, it may refer to “nothing more than the process of putting up a new sign on the street corner.”

But for students to become actively engaged in the process, they have to feel that their voices matter and that the conclusions they arrive at carry some weight. They know as well as anyone that talk, on its own, has little value. It must be wedded to action. The link between deliberation and decision making therefore has to be made clear at the outset. Students do not necessarily need to make the decisions, but they need to be aware of the role they play in the decision-making process. Barbara Brown of the Clemson University

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West Virginia Center for
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Cooperative Extension Service underscored the point: “If you work extra hard to make sure students are empowered,” she said, “they run with it.”

One way to make the connection obvious to students is to provide them with tools for addressing and “working through” issues with which they are already involved. “Go where the students are going,” advised Bernie Ronan of Mesa Community College in Arizona. “Try to encourage deliberation around the work they are doing and make it *public* work.” Lock Haven’s Jim Knauer agreed. “One of the problems is that students are not citizens, they are managed individuals,” he said. “So we need to look for ways of carving out citizenlike opportunities for students if we want to sustain deliberation. Students may find deliberative talk interesting just on its own merits, but if we’re really talking about public-making, it can’t just be about sitting around and talking. It has to be about developing programs that students own and shape.”

A recurring question at the workshop revolved around the problem of assessment. To what extent can the results of deliberation be measured and evaluated? Do these sorts of practices actually increase student involvement? How do they affect an institution’s ability to deal with thorny campus issues? While a handful of studies have been done, there is not enough hard data to make a convincing case one way or another. “What we need,” said Margaret Holt of the University of Georgia, “is some research that follows up on people who participated in these various experiments. Can we see evidence that students who participated in forums over a two-year period are more responsible or mature than people who were not part of the group? Does participation in forums affect their critical thinking about issues? Studies need to be performed to see if, in fact, they do make a difference.”

The problem of evaluation remained a thorny one for the group. While many participants spoke eloquently about the fruits of deliberation on campus, most of the accounts were anecdotal. Nancy Thomas, senior associate of the New England Resource Center for Higher Education (NERCHE), noted that deliberative practices are being widely replicated throughout higher education. In her view, this “widening of the circle” has implications for assessment. She first realized this, she said, after being approached by several institutions that were searching for new approaches to engagement on campus. In each case, she introduced them to a methodology of issue framing, deliberation, and choice work. “We took a process, we applied it very narrowly, and it has multiplied,”

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she said. “For me, that’s a sign of success. I would make the case that that’s a form of assessment.”

The danger in trying to evaluate these kinds of practices is that it reduces the art of deliberating together to a mere technique or methodology. Betty Knighton of the West Virginia Center for Civic Life urged the group to think more broadly about the civic purposes of higher education. Public deliberation is not merely a tool for promoting political awareness and participation, she said. At bottom, it is about preparing students for lives of engagement in the broadest possible sense. The skills of issue framing, deliberation, and choice work are applicable in many areas of life, not just politics and community affairs. They are especially valuable on the job, she said. “Public deliberation allows students to be better equipped for the jobs they are being trained for. Whether they are preparing to become social workers, nurses, or architects, they will need to understand the process of engaging the public and understanding its needs. Where I’m seeing the greatest impact of this kind of work, is where it is incorporated and integrated into the way departments train future professionals, not where it’s taught as a separate course in public deliberation.”

Approaches vary, but it seems clear that the traditional civics class — where the professor stands before the class lecturing about the principles of democracy and civic virtue — is a thing of the past. Given the cynicism and frustration with which most students regard politics today, teaching the arts of democracy requires a more integral and hands-on approach. The most effective methods are those that engage students in a democratic process of their own — those that ask students to identify common problems, consider a diversity of perspectives, and think seriously and strategically about practical remedies. The act of deliberating together may not strike students as especially *political*, in their pejorative sense of the term, but it goes a long way toward engaging them in a public process that has political consequences. Far from being merely a pedagogical tool, public deliberation helps students think of politics not as something distasteful and far-removed from their everyday lives but as a process embodied in the public life that we share.

ENGAGING THE COMMUNITY

In 1936, philosopher John Dewey stated that the aims of liberal education must be about more than preparing students for lives of personal fulfillment and professional accomplishment. The ultimate rationale for liberal education, he claimed, is to make democracy work. That means institutions must be actively engaged in the problems of their communities and must

model the qualities of citizenship they hope to inculcate in their students. In an oft-cited rejoinder, Robert Maynard Hutchins, then president of the University of Chicago, strenuously disagreed with Dewey, asserting that the real objective of liberal education is to cultivate intellect and civic virtue through reading and reflecting on the great works of the Western canon — preferably in an academic environment free of worldly pressures and distractions.

The Dewey-Hutchins debate has continued in higher education on and off for more than half a century. However, current trends within the academy suggest that Dewey ultimately had the stronger argument. Many colleges and universities are now experimenting with community and service-based learning and are putting a higher premium on outreach and civic engagement. They are also dispensing with the disciplinary and individualized academic model in favor of problem-based and collaborative learning approaches. The walls separating colleges and universities from society at large are beginning to fall away.

Still, there are many obstacles to bridging town and gown. Scholars are still rewarded for writing and research rather than teaching or participating in community affairs. Academic specialization often discourages faculty from engaging in interdisciplinary public issues. The community itself often sees the college or university as disconnected and out of touch. And as commuting distances continue to grow, faculty, administrators, and sometimes students themselves, often bypass the community altogether on their way to work or their next class.

Despite the challenges, the effort to “relocalize” is gaining momentum in higher education. More and more colleges and universities are beginning to reassess their role within the community in order to better serve its needs. Some institutions have found that their most important function is to serve as “community spaces.” “Our college is an integral part of the community,” said William Cramer, Jr., chairman of the board of trustees at Gulf Coast Community College. “People see it as something that is a resource they can use for many different kinds of activities — including education. We have been successful in bringing the community to our campuses to engage in various kinds of activities and discussions. People feel comfortable using the college because it has a natural role in the community. We are not seen as having an agenda, like other organizations, so more people are likely to participate in activities that we host.”

Gulf Coast Community College has served as a venue for town meetings with elected officials, forums on race relations, debates about proposed highway bills, and study circles about affirmative action. But the college has

not simply hosted public events; in many cases it has also served a crucial role in framing issues, providing essential background information and research, structuring and moderating public forums, and helping the community to discover its “public voice.”

Lynn Gager, coordinator of the college’s Public and Community Services Program, offered a vivid account of the institution’s role in resolving a contentious community dispute. The issue revolved around whether to conserve Panama City’s beaches or open them up to increased development and tourism. While the community clearly favored both, it found itself bitterly divided on how to accomplish its goals. The college was then asked to conduct a series of land development regulation workshops. The purpose was to engage citizens in voicing their concerns, expressing their hopes and visions for the future, exploring potential solutions, weighing the pros and cons of different strategies, and establishing common ground. While the participants expressed doubt and skepticism at first, they grew to appreciate the process and its effectiveness, Gager recalled. The process did not lead to consensus on all the issues, but it brought agreement on a majority of them. Participants also came to recognize that the best decisions come from citizens willing to actively engage with one another in public work.

Community colleges are obviously better equipped than large research universities or liberal arts colleges to work with their communities in this way. By their very nature, they have a strong link to the town or region where they are based, and they are usually regarded as a community resource by local residents. But as Bernie Ronan pointed out, there are also unique challenges facing community colleges. Students are seldom enrolled for more than two years, and they tend to live off-campus and commute in. These factors make it difficult to foster a strong sense of community within the institution. The best approach, he observed, is to target civic engagement efforts to faculty rather than students.

Some participants stressed that traditional forms of outreach and engagement can be ineffective — sometimes even counterproductive — in forging ties with the community. All too often, townspeople regard their local college or university as separate and distinct from the rest of the community. And it is not uncommon for local residents to view academics with suspicion, even scorn. Their mistrust can be attributed, at least in part, to a pervasive “service” mentality in the academy that aims to “do good” in the community without really engaging people in a dialogue about their real needs

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THE ENGAGED INSTITUTION

In a dinner speech at the Workshop on Higher Education, C. Peter Magrath, president of the National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges (NASULGC), observed that the metaphor of the university as an ivory tower has outlived its usefulness. “I wish we would redefine the notion of the university as a hallowed, pristine place where everybody abides by different rules than apply to other mortals and men,” he said. “Ivory has been banned in the international markets — and appropriately so. It has no place in our colleges and universities either.”

Reporting on his work as part of the Kellogg Commission on the Future of State and Land-Grant Universities, Magrath argued that the best candidate for a new metaphor is that of the “engaged institution.” “The leading and most useful colleges and universities of the twenty-first century,” he said, “are those that are going to be fully engaged with their students, their communities, and their world.”

Magrath defined “engaged institutions” as colleges and universities that “work with their community as partners to discover new knowledge, promote learning, and apply it throughout their region. As partners, they work with the public schools, community organizations, and business and industry to meet mutual needs, drawing on the talents and resources of the college or university.”

Made up of 26 past or present university chancellors and presidents, the Kellogg commission was formed in 1996 to help set the direction for public universities in the twenty-first century and to recommend specific reform proposals to “speed up the process of change.” The commission was charged not only with defining and bringing to public attention the kinds of changes occurring at public universities today, but also with analyzing necessary reforms and proposing strategies for bringing them about.

“Yes, education involves classrooms and learning,” Magrath pointed out. But in addition to formal learning, education “also includes practice and meeting the needs of communities and regions, as identified through a collaborative process.” That, he said, is “the engaged institution.”

Needless to say, engagement should not come at the expense of other priorities. “We’re not talking about this as an added thing,” Magrath concluded. “We’re talking about changing and revaluing and doing away with some of the stuff we do. I don’t want to undo everything we’ve got. I think we have a lot that is good. But I’m on the side of those who don’t think the status quo is an option.”

and desires.

The way around this problem is to dispense with the traditional *out-reach* paradigm that seeks to provide services *to* the community, *on behalf of* the community. What is needed instead is an engagement model that looks for opportunities to partner *with* communities to meet collective needs. To be effective, the process must be reciprocal: it must serve the community while at the same time establishing learning opportunities and a framework for academic research on the part of the institution.

A good deal of the discussion was given to wrestling with these competing approaches to engagement. For some institutions, the distinctions are not always clear. Susan Howard, interim executive director of the Phi Beta Kappa Society, described how the University of Texas at Austin made an attempt some years ago to expand its campus. “The university was trying to do some very positive things,” she recalled, “but without consulting the members of the community. The community got up in arms about it. After some quite vehement false starts, a series of town meetings came out of it that were very deliberative in nature. They looked at how to use the schools as community centers and so on. It turned out to be a very positive growth step, though it could have turned out very badly for everyone involved.”

Engagement, at its best, hinges on the deliberative process because it provides a mechanism by which the institution and the community can work together toward a common objective. “When you’re deliberating,” said Ike Adams, Jr., dean at The University of Alabama, “you’re not only attempting to weigh the pros and cons of the people who are there, but you’re also trying to get everybody’s position on the table so that you can arrive at a fuller understanding. In the process, you may develop a relationship that is worthwhile in the future.”

Jason Dunick, a student at Kent State University, described a series of forums he and some fellow students organized on the issue of race relations. “As a group of students, we were fortunate to work with a community organization that was also dealing with the same question,” he reported. “A wonderful relationship developed where we were doing forums in the community and on campus and then reporting back to each other. We had a dialogue about what worked and what was addressed on campus and how those issues related to those in the community.”

This kind of engagement — where the institution and the community are involved in a common enterprise — is still relatively uncommon at

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most colleges and universities. But it gives added depth and meaning to traditional concepts like *service* and *outreach* by making the community a partner in the pursuit of academic knowledge and understanding.

An additional step, perhaps, would be to reverse the equation — to take academic issues public, as it were, and ask citizens for help in shaping the agenda of higher education. As it happens, Phi Beta Kappa is conducting a unique experiment along these lines. With the help of the National Collegiate Honors Council, Phi Theta Kappa, and several State Councils for the Humanities, the honors association is planning to conduct a series of public forums exploring “the social value of the liberal arts.” “We really hope to make this a national conversation — to truly take it to the people,” said project director Susan Howard.

David Mathews described it as a “most exciting experiment.” By organizing a public discussion about academic issues on a national scale using a carefully organized deliberative approach, Phi Beta Kappa is breaking new ground, he said. “They are proposing to take something that is intensely academic — the role of the liberal arts — directly to the public. What we might learn from that can be extraordinary.”

ENGAGING THE ISSUES

The true test of an institution’s civic mission is how it deals with troublesome and contentious issues on campus. Most colleges and universities are content to educate for democracy, not practice it. But some institutions have begun exploring new mechanisms of “working through” campuswide issues that revolve around group inquiry and deliberation. Colleges and universities are appropriate venues for exploring thorny issues because they are communities in their own right and exemplify the problems of society at large. Further, they are institutions of learning where intractable issues can serve to deepen the pursuit of knowledge and understanding.

One issue discussed at some length at the workshop is the rise of alcohol abuse on campus. National studies report that four out of ten students drink in binges and that heavy drinking is a significant factor in academic failure, dropping-out, vandalism, violence, injuries, even deaths. “It’s the kind of issue that gives board members nightmares,” observed Bob Kingston, senior associate of the Kettering Foundation, who moderated several of the plenary sessions. It is a vexing problem, he said, because, like many issues, it has no straightforward solution. Worse, it is not always clear exactly what is at issue. Is it a disciplinary problem? Is it a safety problem? Or is it a public health problem? “Ultimately,” Kingston said, “it is the sort of issue that cannot be addressed by new laws or ordinances. It can only be addressed by

the sharing of understandings and experiences over time.”

What is needed in these types of situations is an open and deliberative dialogue that allows people “to begin to name and frame the issue,” said Margaret Holt. The process allows them to begin asking difficult questions like, “What matters to us?” “What do we value?” “What are we struggling with?” “What are the tensions?” “What are the choices before us?” When an issue is framed this way, she said, “it allows people to understand the major options before them, and why some people support them and why others oppose them.”

Ike Adams, Jr., stressed that public deliberation is not another ideology to which people need to be converted. It is, rather, “a deep, historical, political habit among people who live with one another.” It represents “a different way of talking,” one that attempts to move “beyond initial positions that people hold to get at their deeper motivations.” The process is aimed at “weighing carefully the views of others, appreciating what they consider valuable, and working through conflicting options and emotions that arise.” Douglas Challenger described it as diametrically opposed to the traditional panel-discussion approach. “I think there is a big difference between those two ways of trying to address an issue,” he said. “One is monological, the other is dialogical.”

As a professor at Franklin Pierce College, Challenger has experimented with a variety of approaches that incorporate dialogue and deliberation. Some years ago, in the wake of a series of racially motivated attacks on campus, he restructured his sociology class to include a series of forums on ethnic and racial tensions. The class worked for the better part of the semester to frame the issue, prepare discussion guide books, and learn how to moderate deliberative discussions. The culminating event of the class was a series of campuswide forums, organized and moderated by the students, on how to improve racial tensions at the college.

While the process was a wonderful learning experience for the students (who wrote glowing evaluations of the class at semester’s end), the forums also helped to alleviate the crisis on campus, according to Challenger. The college president and academic dean were so impressed by the forum, he said, that they decided to make public deliberation and sustained dialogue an integral part of the freshman seminar. To date, the college has taken up a range of issues, from gender and sexual orientation to alcohol abuse, using this approach.

In addition to promoting campuswide dialogues, Challenger now assigns

“Students may find deliberative talk interesting just on its own merits, but we are really serious about public-making, it can’t just be about sitting around and talking. It has to be about developing programs that students own and shape.”

-Jim Knauer
Lock Haven University
of Pennsylvania

what he calls a “public voice paper” in his classes. The purpose of the assignment is to have students reflect on what they heard in the forums. But instead of having students write about their own ideas on a given subject, the paper requires that they summarize where the group stands on the issue in question — where they agree and disagree, where they need to explore the issue in greater depth, how their thinking has changed and evolved, and so on. “What they’re doing is trying to capture how they’re thinking as a group,” he said. “It’s a valuable way of making reflection part of the process. I think it reinforces what deliberation is all about. It also helps to build community.”

Other participants related similar experiences. Doug Walters described a series of student-led forums held at the University of Charleston, where he is dean of students. The goal of the discussions was not only to engage the student-body, he said, but to create greater awareness and understanding of specific issues facing the institution. To maximize student involvement, the university offered small stipends to campus organizations to help organize the events. The forums were such a success, he said, that the university plans to expand the program next year.

At some institutions, dialogue and deliberation have been incorporated into peer-mentoring programs. At the Universities of Georgia and Texas, for example, juniors and seniors lead deliberative discussions with freshmen, on pressing public issues. Students generally make good moderators, several participants observed, and when forums are led by the students themselves, the discussions are always more lively and engaging than when they are moderated by members of the faculty or staff.

In some cases, faculty and administrators have adapted the deliberative approach to the process of institutional decision making as well. At Virginia Tech, for example, the leadership council has worked with administrators to frame and deliberate about issues such as parking, scheduling, and how best to provide student services. According to Larkin Dudley, the process “has proven to them that you can empower each other to really make a difference. They can change things in the community.”

Little research has been done on the effects of deliberative forums on student attitudes and behavior, but it seems clear that the process is a powerful way for institutions to explore difficult issues affecting the campus community. It models a distinctly civic approach to addressing common problems, while at the same time engaging students in a way that is meaningful and relevant to their everyday lives.

SUMMARY

A new movement is taking shape in American higher education, one aimed at educating for democracy, nurturing community, and promoting civic participation. Across the country, colleges, universities, and academic associations are striving to make civic engagement an integral part of the way they do their work. More and more institutions have come to recognize that traditional extension and outreach programs, though important and necessary, are not sufficient to heal the rift between higher education and public life. What is required is an approach that extends beyond service and outreach to actual engagement.


At the Workshop on Higher Education and Public Life, participants discussed three concrete strategies for infusing engagement into the curriculum and institutional life — engaging students, engaging communities, and engaging complex issues on campus. Each of these approaches, while different, puts a premium on the process of public deliberation — on bringing people together to identify what is at issue, exploring practical solutions, weighing the pros and cons of each alternative, “working through” potential tradeoffs, and finally arriving at a collective sense of where the group stands.

Under the auspices of some 30 Public Policy Institutes, educators throughout the country have sought to apply these principles in classrooms, in communities, on campus, even in meetings among faculty and administrators — sometimes with dramatic results. By and large, these efforts are still undervalued, underfunded, and underdocumented. Nevertheless, they demonstrate a variety of innovative and effective civic-engagement strategies that ought to be more widely replicated in coming years.

In his closing remarks, David Mathews encouraged the group to think of engagement not so much in terms of public outreach as *public-making*. The Public Policy Institutes represent “a new species in higher education,” he said, “because they have given new meaning to the term *public*. Without denying that there are many instances where the public is merely a consumer of information or a recipient of services, the institutes understand that the public, in its most basic form, consists of citizens interacting with one another in the process of making decisions and acting collectively on a common problem. From this perspective, citizens are *producers*, not consumers. They are *doers*, not clients. That is a very different assumption than the traditional one — that your institution is *servicing* a variety of constituents, such as business folk,

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-David Mathews
Kettering Foundation



farmers, lawyers, doctors, even communities. The current enthusiasm with the ‘engaged university’ usually means a university engaged *to*, not *with*, its various constituents. The Public Policy Institutes have the potential to take American higher education a step farther.”

“But,” he added, “let’s not be naïve about what that requires. We’re not putting ourselves up against any short-term goal. If we are going to do this, we have to *demonstrate* the effects of deliberative forums in a way that is persuasive to people.” If the Public Policy Institutes can rise to the challenge, he concluded, “I think we’ve got a chance of writing a new chapter in American higher education.”

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