

CONNECTIONS

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A Question of Culture

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Experiments in **ORGANIZATIONAL INNOVATION**



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.

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Editors

Melinda Gilmore
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Laura Carlson

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Cooperative Extension: Experiments in Community

By Brad Rourke and Alice Diebel



The Cooperative Extension system can be considered one of the great national experiments in cultivating strong communities. Extension, established in 1914, is an outreach arm of the land-grant university system, “extending” the university’s resources to every county in the United States. This set of organizations holds great potential as a model for how professionals in institutions understand the work of citizens. But, as with any institution, actually “seeing” citizens as active participants in shaping the future of their communities can get lost in expertise and organizational structures.

Kettering Foundation Press recently published a book titled, *Jumping into Civic Life: Stories*

of Public Work from Extension Professionals. Coeditor Tim Shaffer writes that Cooperative Extension was meant to provide resources from university research in the arts and sciences, as well as from the humanities. Throughout its history, Extension outreach has disseminated the technical skills of home economics and agriculture. It has also been a resource for citizens trying to learn more effective ways to deal with perennial challenges that require public choices in situations of moral disagreement and fundamental uncertainty.

This creative tension between providing technical support and acting as an integral part of community is of interest to Kettering. How can these institutions negotiate it?

Often technical support and expertise stifle the civic role of members of the community, especially when it comes to problems that require creative, place-based solutions. What is the role for citizens if experts provide the answers?

An arresting question.

In early 2014, a number of Extension professionals joined in a study of ways they might work to spark more widespread collaboration on issues of shared, local concern. The ongoing effort has generated a number of insights into the ways professionals can work in complementary ways with other people in communities, as well as ways professionals act within their own institutions.



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Cooperative Extension is well positioned to use democratic practices in a way that will encourage citizens to organize as individuals and associations to address issues of community development. Thus the initiative drew on other local networks, especially the arts community. At Kettering, we wondered what effect Extension would have on community development when using democratic practices in this way. We also wondered to what extent the approach would affect how Extension educators understand their roles in community.

THE INITIATIVES

Participants from the Extension land-grant system in 13 states worked in their surrounding neighborhoods and communities to encourage citizens to find ways to shape their future using democratic practice. They created two common deliberative frameworks that community members in each state used. One was focused on rural community questions (2014-2017), and the other on urban community questions (2016-2018). In different ways, each framework was meant to spark people to deliberate about what kind of community they want to live in.

Developing materials to usefully support public deliberation requires those who do so to talk to commu-

nity members in unaccustomed ways. Finding the “public name” for a difficult issue, one that people will universally see as resonant, can’t be done in isolation or by a technical committee. Extension professionals had to talk to everyday people about their concerns, about what they hold most valuable, about what they see as threatened amidst the change that their communities are facing.

This deep level of contact was, in some ways, daunting. Extension professionals Eric Giordano and Sharon Gibson, who coordinated the networks of rural work, reflected on this in a report to Kettering. “Extension agents struggled with the notion of a concerns-gathering exercise and its relationship to framing an issue guide and future deliberative events. This is not surprising. Deliberative processes are new to many Extension agents. The idea of organizing a community event for the purpose of uncovering and prioritizing community needs is not foreign, but the notion of having to frame an issue so that all values are recognized, that permits people to weigh choices and consider trade-offs—and how to get to that point—is quite new to most agents. . . . [But] as the process wore on, Extension educators began to understand and embrace the nature of the work both conceptually and pragmatically.” The networks of urban Extension



experimenters, coordinated by Patrick Proden and Angela Allen, had a similar experience.

INTEGRATING THE ARTS

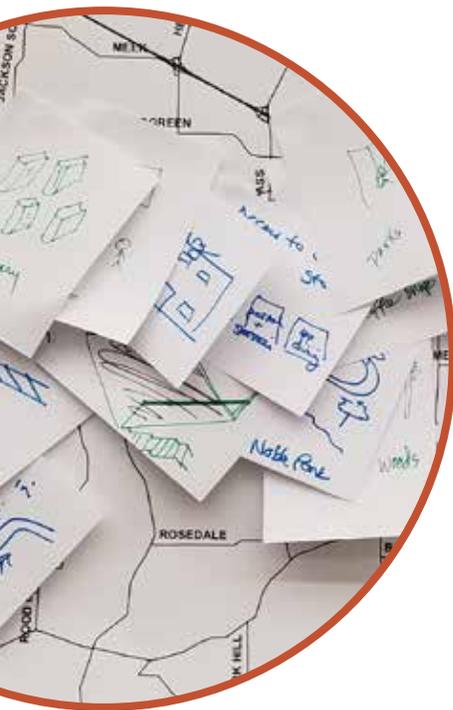
This initiative also contained a significant innovation in what was, in other respects, a straightforward effort to spark deliberation in communities. Both the rural and the urban effort sought to bring artistic and cultural approaches to bear on developing deliberative frameworks. In many cases they worked with local arts organizations. Their use of the arts went beyond simply using artistic gimmicks as ice-breakers,



ticipated in the photography project and produced well over 1,000 images of their community.” And “Oregon introduced body art maps and interactive drawing to gather their input from their youth and adult participants,” according to Patrick Proden’s report on the urban Extension efforts. Aspects of the community that touched the head, heart, gut, or hands were placed on the body maps accordingly.

Incorporating artistic practice was a conceptual challenge. How could cultural artifacts that took other forms be considered alongside written and verbal content? Would approaching the work in this way have a substantive effect on the resulting issue frameworks? How about on the effort overall? How would it affect the resulting relationship between Extension professionals and community members?

We found that using different forms of expression in issue framing and in deliberative forums provided a useful and creative way to engage the community in the difficult work of imagining community change. For example, one poignant creative piece was initiated by Angela Allen, involving the use of spoken word poetry that engaged young people of color. Their poetry described what their community looks like to them and what they saw as valuable.



having people tell stories, and then getting down to business. Instead, they tried to use artistic approaches substantively in gathering concerns or in stimulating deliberation. For example, in Perry, Iowa (near Des Moines), Extension agent Jennifer Drinkwater worked with local fifth-graders. “Students would each receive a disposable camera to capture aspects of their community that they valued, as well as things that they believed would entice them to return to Perry as adults,” she wrote in a report. “These photos would be publicly displayed and would ideally provide fodder for a public deliberation following the installation. . . . Over 100 students from Perry par-

While facilitating *talking* sessions with community members might be a skill Extension agents already have, translating photography, poetry, art, or storytelling into a deliberative framework was new. However, the teams were able to pull it off.

SEEING THEIR WORK IN NEW WAYS

All professionals have challenges finding the space in their work to try something creative or different. Institutions by their nature are intended to create a sense of consistent practice to accomplish clear and measurable goals and objectives. Cooperative Extension is no exception. Extension agents tend to create annual “plans of work” that guide them in ways that ensure they are using well-researched approaches. However, problems such as working toward a new vision of community may require a different way of working. Therein lies a tension for any professional trying to change how they work, as they did in this initiative: how to be accountable to the institution while at the same time supporting creative civic change and community development.

Eric Giordano and Sharon Gibson report on this tension in the rural-focused efforts: “When deliberative work is perceived as an add-on, without adequate work plan legiti-

mization, the incentives do not line up and the work is likely to fall by the wayside.” In this respect, Extension professionals are no different than any other group. But taking part in this work spurred them to see their own work in new ways and to see ways that they might alter their approach and thus deepen the significance of what they are already doing.

The Extension professionals in this set of communities began to recognize that they were able to do this kind of work even though their administrative structures seemed to them rigid at times. Because



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shaping a community's future requires networks of interaction by its very nature, the administrators saw the value of linking to new partners. One said they are in, but not of, the institution, recognizing the freedom to practice in new ways. By finding that important connection to what the administration needs, the Extension agents can help bridge the institution and the community through fresh approaches.

These initiatives were never intended to be one-off projects. The question on our minds was, what capacity for democratic practice would be left behind? What was changed, and how might a particular set of professionals—Cooperative Extension agents—come to see their relationship with community differently?

In both of those registers, these experiments appeared to be particularly useful. The researchers found the practices adaptable to new contexts. According to Patrick Proden, “Five or six state teams will adapt some aspect of this research . . . to their local communities’ ongoing processes of community education and engagement.”

Angela Allen wrote a final note to her colleagues as the urban initiative came to a close: “I hope that everyone who participated in the project found value in the journey that the integration of [the arts with] public

deliberation took us on. I hope our efforts have been useful. I have been most amazed and excited by how my Milwaukee and statewide Wisconsin partners have adapted the process as their own.” Agrees Proden: “[This] will continue to resonate with me.”

Connecting with community in these new ways seemed to energize a latent sense of the agents’ civic roots, touching on why they went into Extension in the first place. They talked energetically about the work in a way that was focused and creative. Rather than seeming discouraged by the institutional restrictions they all face, they began to see ways they might approach communities differently. The idea of engaging a community in development work was more than part of a plan of work. Rather, they could draw on people and organizations they had not used before—especially among youth groups or art communities.

Indeed, this democratic approach to community engagement work seems to be resonant with these professionals. Both the urban and rural initiatives have presented their work at conferences. Our hope is that the ideas lead to even more creative approaches to democratic practice in community. ■

Brad Rourke is a program officer at the Kettering Foundation. He can be reached at brouke@kettering.org. Alice Diebel is a Kettering Foundation senior associate. She can be reached at alice.diebel.kf@gmail.com.