

Is Everything Up to Date in Kansas City? Why “Citizen Involvement” May Soon Be Obsolete

BY MATT LEIGHNINGER

Ray Daniels knew all about the key role that parents play in student achievement. Daniels was the superintendent of schools in Kansas City, Kansas (KCK), an ethnically diverse, blue-collar city of 150,000 people that sits right across the river from Kansas City, Missouri. From his experience as an educator, he had no trouble believing what the researchers claim: that the involvement of parents and other family members is one of the most critical factors in helping students succeed.

Involving KCK parents was not going to be easy, however. Many longtime residents distrusted the schools, partly because of past controversies over busing and school segregation. Teachers felt that some parents weren't adequately preparing their children for school. People who had moved to KCK more recently, including a growing number of immigrant families, needed help adjusting to a new language, a new education system, and a new set of cultural norms. All of these difficulties were apparent in the test scores of KCK students, which were well below the national average.

Daniels knew that raising those scores would require internal changes as well. The KCK schools were in the midst of “First Things First,” a systemwide reform initiative that would get teachers and administrators talking about how to improve teaching practices, the curriculum, and other aspects of how schools function. But those changes wouldn't make a difference if the role of parents stayed the same. “I was looking for a way to get more community involvement,” he says. “Not in the same way as parents traditionally get involved, with cookies and cupcakes. I was looking for ways to get the business and faith communities involved as well.”

But Daniels was facing a problem that so many other officials, organizers, and activists have to deal with today: citizen involvement efforts often fail to attract many participants. This is partly because the whole notion of “citizen involvement” centers on the needs and goals of the party doing the involving, not the citizen. It is based on the assumption that elected representatives and public employees can handle the business of governing without much help; ordinary people are needed to play only limited roles on certain occasions. Even the term itself implies that there is an existing institution, process, or meeting that citizens must be brought into—people must be brought to politics, rather than the other way round.

This makes for a recruitment message that is not compelling enough to attract many citizens. Most people are too focused on their family, their career, or just making ends meet to understand the needs and goals of all the local leaders who want some of their time and attention. So although leaders such as Daniels may start out with a narrow view of citizen involvement, they often realize the need to broaden their horizons to succeed. They begin to recognize the great variety of skills and motivations people bring to public life; they begin to help citizens address a range of issues, in numerous ways, on their own terms and their own turf. Citizen involvement, which once seemed like the wave of the future, the great leap beyond traditional public meetings, is now being treated like a well-worn stepping stone on the path to more democratic forms of governance.

Beyond “Cookies and Cupcakes” in KCK

In 1999, at the very beginning of his efforts in KCK, Ray Daniels made a couple of breakthroughs that

helped his project overcome some of these challenges. First, he realized that, because of the mistrust and the cultural barriers between citizens and educators, the schools couldn't engage parents effectively on their own. So he reached out to Terry Woodbury, the director of the local United Way, and the two men began talking about how to increase parent involvement. They won a grant from the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation, the leading philanthropic organization in the region, to help fund the project.

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Daniels and Woodbury wanted to focus their initial efforts on the northeastern side of the city, the set of neighborhoods where they felt the need was greatest. The Old Northeast, as it is known locally, has a population of eleven thousand and much higher percentages of low-income residents, people of color, and recent immigrants than the rest of the region. It has an unemployment rate that is five times higher than the regional average.

The second breakthrough was the hiring of Brandi Fisher to run the project. Fisher was uniquely qualified, having graduated from the public administration school at the University of Kansas, one of the first such schools to include democratic governance as a core part of the curriculum. She had also worked on “Americans Discuss Social Security,” an effort to connect citizen voices with national policy makers that was coordinated by a national civic organization called AmericaSpeaks. Both of those experiences had given her a sense of the national

“civic field,” the loosely connected network of people—professors, consultants, program officers at foundations, and employees of national nonprofit organizations—who think and talk about democracy, citizenship, and public life.

Referring to this set of professionals as members of a field is somewhat misleading, however. Even though they all refer to their work as being civic in some important way, there is tremendous variation in how they use that term. These practitioners, researchers, and observers—who include conflict resolution practitioners, deliberation experts, campaign finance reform advocates, democratic theorists, dialogue specialists, and representatives of many other related fields—tend to have divergent ideas about democracy and citizenship. Some of them think of citizens very narrowly; they are using stereotypes that prevent them from understanding what ordinary people want out of public life. Some of them have built their reputation around specific citizen involvement “tools” or models they have developed, trademarked, and promoted. Because they are so divided and disconnected, the members of the “civic field” are not providing a clear, consistent message to local leaders about how they might change their relationship with the public.

As a result, some of the most innovative democratic governance efforts are being pioneered by local leaders who have very little contact with the national civic field, and who may not even think of their work as civic. Ironically, most of the people who are trying to change how democracy works are disconnected from the people who write about how democracy *ought* to work.

Fisher has been one of the few to make this jump from the national civic scene to the local realities of democratic governance, from debates about citizenship to the challenge of how to recruit citizens on a rainy Tuesday night to talk about difficult issues with people they've never met before. Her intellectual background gave her a set of principles

she could use to guide her work; her interactions with the residents of the Old Northeast helped her figure out how to apply those principles in the real world.

The Seven Deadly Citizens

Fisher began her work in the Old Northeast with the main goals of the school system in mind: help parents feel more comfortable with the schools, and help them understand how to help their children succeed. But the more she connected with parents and other community members, the more she understood their many motivations—and misgivings—about getting involved. By reacting to the needs and goals of well-rounded, flesh-and-blood people, Fisher was moving beyond the civic stereotypes that dominate the national debate about what citizens ought to be and do.

Citizen as voter

Perhaps the most common of seven stereotypes is the citizen as voter. Enormous amounts of money and effort are spent every year registering Americans to vote. Voting is clearly an essential public duty, our ultimate safeguard against tyranny. If electoral reform improves the quality of our leadership, even to a small extent, then it is worth pursuing. But despite all these efforts, voter turnout continues its inexorable one-step-forward, two-steps-back decline. Turnout is particularly low among young people, who are the primary targets of most campaigns to promote voting. Voting advocates haven't fully realized that citizens want more than to just pull a lever: they need the critical sense of being part of something larger than themselves, part of a community that is capable of solving its problems. Instead, they are confronted by daunting issues and sound-bite candidates. "It is possible to vote and still be disenfranchised," says sociologist Michael Schudson. By itself, voting seldom confers the feeling of unity and capacity that makes our electoral choices meaningful.

Citizen as consumer

Public officials have reinforced the second civic stereotype, the citizen as consumer, by trying to make government more efficient and entrepreneurial. To advertise this approach, many of them have borrowed terms from the private sector, referring to their constituents as "customers" or "patrons" rather than citizens. The implication is that residents are business clients, rather than allies who can help make public decisions and solve public problems. This mind-set has been characterized as the "vending machine" theory of government: residents insert their tax contributions and receive trash pickup, police protection, education for their children, and other products in return.

To the extent that this philosophy encourages public employees to be efficient and encourages citizens to demand government efficiency, it can be a positive influence. But as a remedy for citizen mistrust of government, it may not be very effective. Perhaps this is because it discourages direct communication between citizens and officials; Americans don't expect their bank or phone company to ask for their input or their help, so when government acts like a business they tend to think of citizenship in purely financial terms. The consumer stereotype also reinforces the assumption that government alone bears the responsibility for solving public problems. This burden is much more difficult and complicated than selling products, and it may create expectations that government cannot fulfill.

Citizen as socializer

Robert Putnam's book *Bowling Alone* helped define the third civic stereotype: the citizen as socializer. Putnam observed that Americans no longer join social clubs, neighborhood associations, or even bowling leagues in nearly the numbers that they used to. He claimed that this shift toward solitary behavior has undermined our culture and democracy itself. Putnam and his allies want to rebuild the "social capital" of our communities by strengthening connections between diverse residents, and finding more

organizations that can unify citizens around common goals. They argue that cities, regions, and countries with high social capital tend to be more democratic and prosperous than places with low social capital.

Putnam doesn't mean to blame citizens, but his message can come across that way. The social-capital approach is much more holistic than some of the other stereotypes, but it is such a high-level, macro analysis that it is difficult to know how to apply it to citizen involvement efforts. It may be true that social and cultural connections make communities stronger, but most people don't see the link between joining the Kiwanis Club and reshaping local politics.

Citizen as volunteer

Many of those who reject Putnam's grim view of public life tout the fourth civic stereotype as a kind of antidote: the citizen as volunteer. Most of the rhetoric used to promote this stereotype describes volunteering as altruistic and apolitical, rather than a way of solving public problems. This may be the wrong language to use, since it downplays the capacity of citizens to make an impact on big issues through their own effort and ideas. It also casts volunteering as a solitary activity with purely personal benefits: we should do it because it will make us feel good. For most people, good feelings are probably not enough; organizers must show convincingly that the volunteering opportunity is part of a larger effort that can make a real difference.

Citizen as advisor

Some public officials promote the fifth stereotype, the citizen as advisor, when they ask for their constituents' input on major public decisions. The assumption is that bringing citizens into the process will lead to better, fairer, more informed policies that have broader public support. The practice of input gathering evokes a democracy where everyone is well-informed, and everyone has a say.

But once again, the role being offered to citizens may not be meaningful enough to sustain their

involvement in the long run. Of course public officials should ask their constituents what they think, but if people don't see the broader context—if they don't understand how these policy questions affect their daily lives, or they don't feel their input is being used to solve public problems, or they don't see how they can take action themselves on the issue—then either they won't participate in the first place or their enthusiasm will wane over time. Sooner or later, the only residents to attend the meetings will be the ones who believe that their participation could have a direct effect on the decision, and this small group is already informed, educated, and passionately involved.

Citizen as disempowered person

The sixth stereotype, the citizen as a dispossessed or disempowered person, is reinforced by the kind of traditional community organizing first pioneered in Chicago in the 1940s. This approach, which is often associated with Saul Alinsky, focuses on particular sets of citizens: low-income residents, people of color, and others who have been on the short end of the political process.

Many traditional community organizing strategies are still used today, in all kinds of projects. Appealing to people on the basis of their attitude toward the system can be effective for recruiting certain sets of people. But like the other civic stereotypes, this is not usually the best way of reaching a broad base of citizens. Starting out with a predetermined cause, or an explicit focus on people who feel disempowered, tends to exclude people who disagree with the cause or do not feel part of that group.

Citizen as deliberator

Finally, a number of civic foundations and academics uphold the seventh stereotype: the historic vision of citizens as deliberators, public intellectuals who read and talk about public issues. The courses, forums, salons, "deliberative polls," and other kinds of meetings organized under this philosophy put an emphasis on learning and dialogue; participants are

expected to listen rather than just talk. Sometimes public officials are invited to these events to hear what citizens have to say, and there is usually some kind of report that is circulated to decision makers. But the organizers of deliberative meetings want to do more than just gather input; they want to impress everyone with the insight and integrity of the discussions, rather than simply assembling a summary of the most common opinions.

Deliberation advocates think highly of ordinary citizens. They affirm that people are capable of discussing complex problems and finding common ground, even when a divisive issue is on the table. Supporters of this approach have also made a valuable contribution by emphasizing the importance of process: citizen meetings are more likely to be successful when organizers make available facilitators, guides, and other kinds of structures. As recruiters, however, advocates of deliberation sometimes come up short. Most deliberative processes attract a fairly exclusive crowd, perhaps because the possibility of action and change seems more distant. If they emphasize dialogue and analysis at the expense of all other activities, deliberation projects may have limited long-term appeal.

A Range of Political Opportunities

Each of the seven civic stereotypes is based on good intentions; we would all presumably like to see a future where every citizen votes and volunteers, where every government is highly efficient, where we all have a chance to socialize, deliberate, give input, and advocate for our interests. However, local organizers have learned that these are complementary, interconnected aspects of a civic whole; none of these parts of the body politic works as well on its own. When you ask citizens to deliberate on an important issue, they also want their input to affect public policy. When you ask them to supply policy input, they also want to volunteer for action efforts. When you ask them to vote, they also want to know whether candidates will back up their promises.

When you ask them to fight for causes, they also want to form productive relationships with public officials and other citizens. If you don't allow participants to explore all the ways in which they can be citizens, you cut short the larger potential of well-rounded, active citizenship, and you just might leave people frustrated.

These stereotypes are also tempting because it seems easier to focus on a narrow slice of citizenship than to give people a range of political opportunities. But in the big picture, piecemeal citizen involvement leads to redundancy and failure. As the United Way beats the bushes for volunteers, the League of Women Voters resolutely registers voters, government agencies ask for input, bowling leagues languish, neighborhood associations beg for donations, and hundreds of well-meaning public and nonprofit organizations try to involve citizens in one issue or forum or another. If these efforts don't hang together, they may all hang separately.

The Evolution of Citizenship in Greater Kansas City

To make democratic governance work, you have to move past the civic stereotypes and create environments that appeal to real citizens. As Brandi Fisher tried to do this in KCK, some of her peers across the river were facing the same challenge. In fact, the recent history of Greater Kansas City shows how numerous attempts at citizen involvement can produce a few successful adaptations. In a metro area spanning a state border, eleven counties, and 1.9 million people, many civic initiatives have been launched over the last fifteen years, reflecting many roles citizens might play in public life. Some of these efforts faltered from the beginning; others have survived by appealing to one set of residents, carving out their own niche in the political process. A few seem to be growing and diversifying, attracting larger numbers of people, giving them a variety of ways to practice active citizenship, and establishing new arenas for policy making. In the process, these projects seem to have evolved beyond traditional citizen involvement.

One of the largest civic initiatives in the region is FOCUS Kansas City, which began in 1992 as a large-scale visioning effort. The project was initiated by the city government of Kansas City, Missouri, as a vehicle for developing “a comprehensive and integrated plan to guide the future of Kansas City for the next twenty-five years.” FOCUS is funded by the city and has a staff of four. In two planning phases, one in 1992 and the other in 1994, several hundred citizens served on seven work teams to flesh out the plan. The teams held a number of forums and hearings in order to involve even more citizens; Denise Phillips, the current manager of the project, estimates that those events reached five thousand people. The FOCUS plan was adopted by the city council in 1997 as a guide for city government operations over the next twenty-five years.

After 1997, FOCUS shifted to implementation of the plan. The organizers had researched the fate of visioning efforts in other cities and concluded that they must involve citizens in this stage as well. “We realized that, five years out, few of those visions were still alive and kicking,” says Phillips. “When you ask thousands of people to help create a plan, you’d better make sure it doesn’t just sit on a shelf.” The FOCUS plan included six hundred proposed initiatives, grouped into twelve categories. Phillips estimates that “about 90 percent of them are being done by the community,” and that another five thousand people have been involved in this process, though these numbers are difficult to track. In each neighborhood, FOCUS staff helped residents conduct a Neighborhood Assessment, which identified action ideas for both citizens and public employees to work on.

In 1998, the city won a federal grant for improving and streamlining public services, which was one of the central ideas in the FOCUS plan. The money came from the federal “Hassle-Free Community Initiative,” which takes the language of the citizen-as-consumer stereotype to an extreme. The goal is to create hassle-free communities where people can

access “seamless,” “customer-driven” public services from local, state, and federal agencies. Each community receiving this funding was urged to reach a “90 percent customer satisfaction rate” among the citizens who use the services.

FOCUS Kansas City was initiated by local government. Another major civic initiative, the Kansas City Church/Community Organization (KCCO), is rooted in the faith community. As an heir to the faith-based community organizing tradition, KCCO’s mission is to help people “participate in and influence our political system and democratic institutions. Those who were previously ignored, excluded, or apathetic become involved.” The group is affiliated with the Pacific Institute for Community Organizing (PICO), a national network of faith-based community organizations. The strength of KCCO is its member congregations. Each congregation has an organizing committee that selects issues and priorities on the basis of dozens of one-on-one conversations with congregants and other community members. Congregations sometimes mobilize around an issue facing a particular neighborhood; one recent example is an effort to reduce housing blight in the Ruskin neighborhood, which led to massive neighborhood cleanups and formation of the Ruskin Neighborhoods Community Development Corporation. Sometimes all the KCCO congregations work together on an issue of citywide concern. They will often hold an “action” on that issue, usually a rally or an event where residents ask questions and make demands of public officials.

In the last ten years, KCCO has changed its tactics. Instead of expecting public officials to solve problems single-handedly, and using the so-called actions to sway them, the KCCO congregations are more likely to see themselves as part of the problem-solving process. “Our actions are less likely to be stand-alone meetings, focused on a single subject,” says KCCO director Warren Adams-Leavitt, “and more likely to be one point in a series of meetings and actions taken to resolve a problem. In that

sense, we are no longer simply coming to public officials, presenting them with a problem, and asking them to solve it. We are more likely to be presenting them with some possible strategies or solutions, and bringing other necessary partners as well.”

One of the newest civic experiments, the Kansas City Forums, recruits participants from across the metro region. Begun in 2003, this effort was inspired by publication of a major report on the state of the Kansas City region by Curtis Johnson and Neil Peirce, two national observers of regional issues. The process is modeled after the National Issues Forums (NIF) promoted by the Kettering Foundation of Dayton, Ohio. A “deliberative forum” is held each month on an issue of national and local concern; issues have included healthy neighborhoods, regionalism, economic development, race relations, transportation, and children and youth.

Jennifer Wilding, who coordinates the forums, says that she does most of the recruiting via e-mail. “People participate because they’re interested either in the process or in the issue we’re deliberating about,” she says. “We tend to get people who want to create change—for example, people who want to reduce growth and sprawl—but we don’t usually get radicals from either political extreme.” More than five hundred people participated, roughly fifty per forum, in the first year of the project.

At the beginning of each forum, participants are handed a guide that presents some background on the issue and lays out three overarching choices. For example, on the topic of transportation, the choices presented were to (1) develop new modes of travel, (2) improve the current system, and (3) expand the roadway system. The crowd breaks into small groups to discuss these choices, one at a time, before coming back together to share their summary conclusions at the end of the evening.

Participants are then invited to join a task force that will work on the main action ideas emerging at the

forum. The organizers of the KC Forums are particularly proud of the way they are helping citizens move from deliberation to a more active role in the community. According to Wilding, “Most NIF programs use discussion guides published by the Kettering Foundation, which conclude with a ballot where people can vote for their favorite choice; these ballots are designed to be mailed to Members of Congress. We are the only NIF program in the country that creates task forces where citizens can help implement their ideas, and the groups have already made great strides.” One task force is producing an economic development guide, another has created a tourism pamphlet highlighting the city’s downtown, and a third is producing a play on the school district’s desegregation case.

The KC Forums also helped furnish facilitators for another civic initiative, a forum on foreign affairs hosted by the local public television station in January 2004. Kansas City was one of several cities to participate in this national PBS initiative, called “By the People,” which used the “deliberative polling” approach pioneered by political scientist James Fishkin. In each city, organizers selected a set of one hundred people who perfectly mirrored the demographic characteristics of their city and had them discuss three potential priorities for American foreign policy. The selected citizens were paid a stipend of \$75 to take part, though in Kansas City at least, this inducement wasn’t enough: only fifty-two of the selected one hundred actually turned out for the forum. The goal of most deliberative polls is to produce citizen input that is so demographically representative, and so thoroughly discussed and refined, that it carries weight with public officials.

Meanwhile, at the neighborhood level, Kansas City’s Community Development Corporations (CDCs) have been involving residents in decisions about housing and economic development. In fact, citizen engagement is a major component of the CD2000 plan that guides all of the community development in the region. The plan requires each CDC to meet

specific goals for resident involvement in order to ensure their continued funding. Citizens are invited to serve on the CDC advisory boards and to take part in periodic “listening sessions” where they talk about their concerns and priorities for their neighborhood. As the connections between the CDCs and the neighborhoods become stronger, citizens begin taking on more active roles; they now monitor the performance of the CDCs in their efforts to meet the financial, construction, and citizen engagement goals in CD2000, and they sometimes work closely with developers and architects on specific construction projects. CDC staffers have also realized the need to go beyond the decisions concerning the “built environment,” to help citizens address social issues such as crime. “We try to assess the needs of the neighborhood,” says Leslie MacLendon, an organizer for a CDC called Swope Community Builders. “We’re here not only to build houses, but to assist residents and make sure that they know we are not taking over the neighborhood they’ve lived in for twenty years.” The CDCs may have started out with a simple desire to gather resident input, but they now seem to be helping citizens take on a variety of civic roles on a whole range of issues.

Many other Kansas City civic initiatives have come and gone in the last ten years. Some have survived as small-scale efforts, such as the “Dialogue Dinners” organized by a nonprofit called Kansas City Harmony. The dinners are informal gatherings of seven to nine people, meant to build “social capital” by fostering new relationships among various groups. Others couldn’t be sustained, such as the “Community Conversations” on race and neighborhood issues that were initiated by Kansas City Harmony and several other organizations in 2001. Inspired by President Clinton’s “One America” initiative, two city council members organized a set of “One Kansas City” forums on race relations in 2000, but these events too were discontinued.

During the same period, organizations such as the League of Women Voters and the United Way have

been trying to cast Kansas City residents in the traditional civic roles of voter and volunteer. Efforts of this kind aren’t usually considered citizen involvement, but they do reflect a desire to pull people further into public life.

At least one thing is clear in Greater Kansas City: this endless array of projects, programs, campaigns, and other attempts to involve citizens shows how badly our political process needs the time and attention of ordinary people. Some of these civic experiments were modeled after approaches promoted by national organizations, and sometimes the Kansas City organizers received advice and technical assistance from these groups. But in most cases, the local leaders did a great deal of adapting and innovating on their own. The success of each project seemed to depend primarily on local variables, such as the capacity of the coordinator or the level of shared commitment from the local groups supporting the effort.

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So is everything up-to-date in Kansas City? Perhaps not, but a fundamental shift in the state of democracy in the region does seem to be taking place. One challenge almost every initiative has struggled with, especially at first, is recruiting an economically and ethnically diverse array of participants. This may be because most of the projects started out by embracing a specific civic stereotype: they reached out to citizens as deliberators (KC Forums and “By the People”), as socializers (Kansas City Harmony’s Dialogue Dinners), as policy advisors (the CDCs for neighborhood-level decisions, and FOCUS Kansas City on citywide and regional decisions), or as members of the disempowered and dispossessed (KCCO). The League of Women Voters and United Way asked

citizens to serve as voters and volunteers, respectively. These recruitment messages attracted the citizens who already gravitated toward those roles.

Some local organizers recognized the danger in this lack of diversity. They knew that their projects would be more powerful, and produce outcomes more reflective of the public as a whole, if they could successfully incorporate a broader array of people.

Some of the Kansas City initiatives broadened their recruitment appeals by giving participants a wider range of political roles to play. FOCUS involved citizens in implementing the vision, the CDCs began enlisting citizens in crime prevention efforts, KCCO worked more collaboratively with public officials, and the Kansas City Forums began creating task forces. These civic experiments have gone beyond the initial citizen-involvement stereotypes and are helping participants exercise other aspects of their political personality.

A related adaptation that seems to be emerging in Kansas City is creation of new arenas for making public decisions. Instead of gathering citizen input, and treating people like outsiders to the political process, some of these projects are establishing alternative venues for decision making. This shift is apparent within the history of one organization, KCCO: instead of trying to influence public officials, they are trying to solve public problems (successfully, in many cases) by assembling all the necessary actors and asking them to work together. In their shift toward more well-rounded citizenship, FOCUS Kansas City, the KC Forums, and the CDCs all seem to embrace this approach. Their actions imply that, within the context of their meetings, power and authority is shared among citizens, government, and community organizations.

Learning and Teaching in KCK

The same shift toward well-rounded citizenship was also evident in the efforts of Brandi Fisher and her

KCK colleagues. As they struggled to achieve Ray Daniels's vision for parent education and involvement, they demonstrated how local leaders can learn from the national civic field, from local organizers in other communities, and—most important—from the citizens themselves.

As Fisher began working with KCK residents, she began to understand the depth of the divide between schools and community. Many parents felt that educators had consistently either given them orders or ignored them completely. “The residents felt that the school had taken a top-down approach in the past,” Fisher says. “Telling people what needs to be done doesn't build trust.” To create a more interactive relationship, Fisher and her allies decided to use small-group dialogues as the backbone of their effort. Each group of eight to twelve people would meet several times, with an impartial facilitator present who could help manage the discussions. In the first session, the participants would talk about their own experiences in school. At the second meeting, they would weigh various options for improving the schools, and in the final session they would develop recommendations and action plans. At the end of the small-group meetings, the KCK organizers planned to hold an “action forum” where participants shared their conclusions and formed teams to work on particular solution ideas.

Fisher and her allies were inspired by the methodology for small-group dialogue and large-group action promoted by the Study Circles Resource Center (SCRC), one of the most prominent national organizations in the civic field. The KCK organizers had sifted through a sea of models and techniques, discarding many of them because they seemed too limited, expensive, or proprietary. But instead of *adopting* the model promoted by SCRC, it would be more accurate to say that Fisher and her colleagues *adapted* it. Like most good examples of democratic governance, “KCK Study Circles” took general ideas and guidelines and customized them to fit local conditions.

One critical step was developing a recruitment message that emphasized the schools' willingness to listen. KCK parents didn't just want to be educated; they wanted to have some influence over how the schools functioned. Fisher and her allies made this part of their general outreach efforts—printing flyers, putting announcements in school newsletters and church bulletins, even using billboards—but the more difficult and significant work was in reaching out to the leaders of neighborhood associations and church congregations. Pastor Stephen Robbs, who runs the “Jesus Is the Answer” street outreach project, was one of those stakeholders. Robbs remembers having doubts at the beginning. “Would there be action at the end of our meetings? Would they lead to something? The United Way convinced us that this would be a partnership [between citizens and] the school board.”

This led the KCK Study Circles into unexpected territory. The project was not simply making parents comfortable with the schools, and teaching them how to help their children succeed; the organizers were helping participants decide what they wanted out of the project, and helping them articulate their concerns and ideas to the schools. “You can't go into this work with a narrow, preset agenda,” says Fisher. “You have to be flexible about your goals, give citizens a chance to think things through, and be open to whatever they want to achieve.”

As they talked with the stakeholders, Fisher and her allies also realized they would have to adapt some aspects of their process to make it more appropriate for particular cultures. One example was the Hmong community, recent immigrants from the mountainous areas of Southeast Asia. Daniels says that for years, the school board had been trying (and failing) to attract Hmong parents to meetings. The KCK organizers met with a Hmong pastor to talk about the divide. “He told us it would only work if it was a full-day event after a Sunday service,” said former United Way director Terry Woodbury. “We adapted our efforts to meet

their needs.” Unlike most meetings that deal with education issues, many of the KCK Study Circles were held at places other than schools. By convening the groups at churches, community centers, and other locations, they were able to attract parents and other citizens who were simply not comfortable coming to school.

Another adjustment made by the KCK organizers was how they involved local officials. Some participants were intimidated by the presence of a school administrator, police official, or city council member. The planners began keeping decision makers out of the first session or two and then introducing them into the discussions after the participants had built some confidence and begun to clarify their ideas. Fisher recalls that “it was only after the participants had talked for a session or two that they began to trust each other, and began to feel like the educators respected them and took them seriously.”

Fisher and her allies tried to eliminate every possible barrier to participation. They furnished food, child care, and transportation. They arranged for translators. They recruited churches, neighborhood associations, and other organizations to serve as “host sites” for the meetings. These efforts seem to have paid off: over the last five years, 1,676 KCK residents have taken part in more than one hundred multiple-session, small-group meetings. In other words, more than 10 percent of the people living in Northeast Kansas City have participated in the project so far. “I was disappointed that only seventy people turned out for our first big kickoff event,” says Fisher. “But the educators and school board members had had so much difficulty connecting with citizens in the past that they were absolutely shocked.”

As it turned out, school issues were only one aspect of what the participants wanted to talk about. In the sessions, people brought up such challenges as crime, prostitution, vandalism, and racism. In some

of the groups, the facilitator abandoned the discussion guide after the first session because it was clear that the participants had their own, more compelling agenda. Many of the meetings held today focus mainly on neighborhood issues, including land-use decisions, crime-prevention priorities, and youth concerns. In the Belrose Manor public housing project, the participants have gone on to start a tenants' association, hold a youth sports camp, and rid their neighborhood of ten drug houses.

Among the main weaknesses of most citizen involvement efforts: they focus on the goals and agenda of the organizers, rather than of the citizens; and at the local, state, and national levels, most practitioners and advocates of citizen involvement fail to see how their work intersects.

The flexibility of the KCK Study Circles points out one of the main weaknesses of most citizen involvement efforts: they focus on the goals and agenda of the organizers, rather than of the citizens. At the local, state, and national levels, most of the practitioners and advocates of citizen involvement fail to see how their work intersects. For example, the education experts who promote parent engagement in schools and the criminologists who promote neighborhood involvement in crime prevention both embrace the idea that citizens can be helpful volunteers and useful policy advisors. Issues of education and crime are interconnected, they usually attract differing sets of citizens who seldom work together but have many of the same interests, and these citizens could probably make more meaningful contributions on both fronts if they combined their energies. However, these two camps of civic professionals do not seem to be comparing notes or developing joint strategies. They continue recommending processes and meetings that focus citizens' attention solely on school issues, or solely on crime issues. Citizens must come to *them*; they will not

consider a middle ground where citizens might address both issues and accomplish many other endeavors besides.

In the KCK discussions, the participants began to paint a more complete picture of the challenges facing their neighborhoods. "You had churches, schools, community agencies, government officials—each of us was working on one piece of a bigger problem," says Wendell Maddox, who succeeded Woodbury as United Way director. "This project connected us and helped us see our services and programs as part of a larger plan, one that is being created by the community."

The picture of who is responsible for solving KCK's problems seems to have changed as well. "At our first action forum, people were pretty negative," says Fisher. "A lot of them pointed fingers at the superintendent and presented lists of changes for the schools to make. He wasn't defensive; he took the suggestions and implemented as many as he could. At the second action forum, several discussion groups had come up with their own action ideas that they wanted to work on. By the third action forum, everyone was really pumped: now they had all kinds of things to work on, and all kinds of people and groups are involved in making them happen."

Stephen Robbs has experienced this change in attitude at the school level. He and other neighborhood residents now regularly volunteer at Hawthorne Elementary School. "When we come into the building, the teachers light up. They know us by name. They say 'We're glad you're here' and thank us for our support," he says.

The citizens of KCK have found all kinds of ways to improve their community. As advisors to the school system, participants helped create school improvement plans, a school preparation program for new kindergarten students, and a concentrated system-wide effort to raise students' literacy level; in many cases, they devoted their own time to implementing

these changes. They have also volunteered to create neighborhood associations, tutoring and mentoring programs, parent support groups, neighborhood watch groups, back-to-school fairs, neighborhood clean-ups, school fundraising events, Cinco de Mayo celebrations, a youth talent show, an after-school homework help line, and a community garden. They also set up a breakfast meeting with Kansas legislators to discuss the state's budget and education issues. They developed and staffed "Black Roses," an extracurricular Afrocentric drumming and dance program, and the "Missing Link" program for tutoring, mentoring, and mediation.

Statistically, the level of active citizenship in KCK seems to be having an effect on some of the major challenges facing the community. Student test scores have risen steadily over the last five years, and the graduation rate has gone from 50 percent to 70 percent. The crime rate in KCK has dropped 24 percent since 1997. Police used to respond to twenty emergency calls per month from the Belrose Manor housing project; now they only get that many in a year. There are doubtless many other variables contributing to these statistical shifts in the Old Northeast, but few residents doubt that active citizens have played a huge role.

Part of Daniels's original vision was correct: parents and other citizens had a lot to learn from educators in KCK. Likewise, the KCK organizers had a lot to learn from the national civic field, and from their counterparts in other communities. But as it turned out, the organizers and participants involved with the KCK Study Circles had a lot to teach as well. Perhaps their most important discovery is the idea of the well-rounded citizen. Diverse sets of people are more likely to get involved, and stay involved, if you give them a supportive environment that allows them to experience a variety of fulfilling civic roles. They won't necessarily respond to vending machines, bowling leagues, and hassle-free government; they need to be able to socialize, advise, advocate, deliberate, and volunteer.

Staffing, Structure, and the Problem of "Public Goods"

Despite five years of dramatic success, you probably can't point to Kansas City, Kansas, as an ideal kind of democracy. No evidence has been gathered to test whether the KCK Study Circles affected voter registration or government efficiency, and traditional community organizers might argue that it has failed to shift entrenched local power structures. Furthermore, unless the project can meet the challenges of staffing capacity and long-term structure, it might not even survive another five years.

Finding and keeping a capable staff—which in most cases means one solitary coordinator—has proved impossible for many democratic governance projects. To run a project like this effectively, you need to hire staffers who have people skills: the ability to make initial phone calls, forge partnerships, make requests without appearing greedy, nag without appearing rude, and operate comfortably in diverse cultural settings. It helps if this coordinator is already connected with a number of networks in the community. You need someone with the capacity to develop recruitment messages, write clearly, and work with the media. The coordinator needs to understand the issues that citizens will want to address, and be sensitive to the fact that there are many valid viewpoints on any topic. Good facilitation skills may be necessary, not only to manage citizen discussion but to run steering committee meetings and train other facilitators. Finally, mobilizing a large number of citizens can be such a circus that the staffer at the hub of the effort must be able to tend to all the logistical details with great care.

"This can be a very discouraging job," says Fisher. "Especially at first, recruitment is very difficult. You can spend all this time and effort to find a site, provide food and child care, arrange for a facilitator and maybe a translator—and then two people show up. You made an incredible investment, and you got nothing."

The United Way of Wyandotte County has been fortunate so far, not only with Fisher but also in hiring staffers such as Leona McIntyre, Shaun Hayes, Brenda Mortell, and Christal Watson, all of whom have kept the project moving and growing. But coordinators usually last only a few years before they burn out or simply move on to other jobs. Fisher, McIntyre, Hayes, and Mortell have all left the program for other organizations.

When you try to replace a coordinator, you roll the dice once again. It is different from hiring a police chief or a city planner; for those jobs, there are professional degrees applicants must have, and you can be reasonably sure that they have acquired certain skills in their past work experience. You can also be fairly sure that applicants have at least some understanding of the kind of job you're hiring them to do. You may still end up with a bad police chief or city planner, but you've at least eliminated some of the uncertainties. With democratic governance, you don't have such assurance and understanding. You take a shot in the dark by hiring somebody, and they take a shot in the dark by accepting the job.

Perhaps the more daunting challenge is that of establishing a stable long-term structure for the project. In fact, this is a limiting factor in KCK today: the meetings happen only when a neighborhood association or neighborhood leader appeals to the coordinator of KCK Study Circles for help in convening, recruiting, and facilitating. Residents must either be confident and committed enough to set those wheels in motion or simply wait for their next opportunity to be active citizens. In the Old Northeast, democratic meetings have become popular and common, but not routine.

The neighborhood associations that have formed because of the project could provide this kind of structure: regular opportunities for residents to bring up ideas or concerns that the coordinator or the neighborhood associations haven't considered.

However, the new groups seem to be operating in the same haphazard, semiparticipatory way as most neighborhood associations.

Why do citizen involvement efforts find it so difficult to avoid civic stereotypes, find capable coordinators, and build democratic structures? An economist or political scientist might answer by saying that challenges of this kind illustrate the difficulty of providing "public goods." What they mean is that things everyone can enjoy equally, and no one person or group can easily profit from—a public park, for example, or a reservoir, or a neighborhood council system—can be difficult to establish. Creating and maintaining them requires funding, government support, a high degree of collaboration between community groups, or all of the above. Before a public good has been identified and valued, there is a natural tendency toward specialization and narrow definitions.

So organizations start out by trying to involve citizens in a specific, limited way, on a temporary basis, with staffers who aren't sure what they've gotten themselves into. They may realize—or grow to realize—that they can recruit a broader array of citizens and give them more of a range of political opportunities by working with other organizations in a broader effort. They may wish for public administration schools or other sources of professional training that would supply them with well-prepared job candidates. If they are successful, they may decide that these opportunities for active citizenship should be made available regularly. But not everything that seems beneficial to a community will be supported, or funded, or achieved; these challenges still hover over Kansas City, Kansas, and almost every other community besides.

Keeping up with Kansas City? Evolution in the Civic Field

As communities such as KCK race ahead, setting new standards and raising new challenges for democratic

governance, the members of the national civic field are trying to catch up. Professors, program officers, and various kinds of civic practitioners are moving forward in three areas: collecting the lessons learned in local civic experiments, reconciling some of the divisions within the field, and sketching out the components and parameters of democratic governance as a profession.

National membership organizations are driving many of these changes. Groups such as the National League of Cities, National School Boards Association, NeighborWorks America, International City/County Managers Association, League of Women Voters, and the National School Public Relations Association occupy an intermediary position between local leaders and the foundations and nonprofit organizations of the civic field. To support their members, these groups are pushing civic thinkers and practitioners to recognize that the experiences of real communities, rather than abstract questions about deliberation or power, are at the heart of this work. Academics have increasingly turned their attention to producing case studies, both in the United States and abroad, that show the benefits, challenges, and implications of democratic governance. Many of the membership organizations have developed training programs, commissioned research, and produced guides and handbooks on democratic governance. As these groups examine the theories and practices of the civic professionals and interpret the ideas for their constituencies, they are creating a major impetus for overcoming the challenges facing the field.

Civic practitioners and observers have also had more opportunities recently to connect with one another. Two major coalitions have formed in the last five years, the Deliberative Democracy Consortium (DDC) and the National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation (NCDD). The DDC was initiated by Carolyn Lukensmeyer, the director of one of the most prominent national nonprofits in

the field, AmericaSpeaks. The NCDD was assembled by a young civic entrepreneur named Sandy Heierbacher. Both coalitions are designed to help civic professionals compare notes and decide what they have in common.

Partly as a result of these discussions, the civic field seems to be coming to the conclusion that no single civic tool is sufficient by itself, and that various activities and approaches should be considered as part of a complete democratic practice. Ten years ago, for example, it was common to hear “dialogue vs. action” debates, in which the dialogue proponents would claim that talk alone was sufficient to produce change and action proponents would claim that dialogue was merely a vehicle for co-optation and delay. Now there is some agreement that both dialogue and action are necessary, and that they complement one another.

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Similarly, the debate about the role of the Internet in public life seems to be arriving at a more reasonable middle ground. When Internet use proliferated in the 1990s, some observers claimed it would revolutionize politics and make face-to-face meetings obsolete. Face-to-face organizers expressed solemn doubts about the value of online public dialogue. More recently, it has become clear that this is not an all-or-nothing proposition; both online and face-to-face formats have unique strengths, and using them in combination seems to hold the greatest potential.

The advocates of collaboration, which has become a buzzword in public and nonprofit management circles, are also beginning to clarify how their ideas fit in the larger field. “For years, the literature on

collaborative governance didn't even mention citizens," says William Potapchuk, who has written extensively on the subject. As local leaders realized their resources were more limited than before and they faced problems that were more complex and more likely to cross jurisdictional boundaries, they began to see the need to include a broader array of people and viewpoints. Recently, collaboration advocates have moved farther away from their previous focus on cooperation between leaders of organizations—mayors and CEOs, for example—to recognition that collaboration should occur at many levels of the organizations involved, particularly between an organization and ordinary citizens. This idea, which could be called “complete collaboration,” implies that partnerships among parents, teachers, and police officers are just as important as agreements between school superintendents and police chiefs.

As tools and approaches coalesce into more comprehensive practices, a handful of public administration professors have begun to institutionalize democratic governance as a core component of the curriculum. Classes on these subjects are now offered in the public administration schools at Kansas, Harvard, Minnesota, Texas-Arlington, and other universities. Suffolk University in Boston has gone a step further by offering Community Leadership and Public Engagement as a concentration for master's students.

The ongoing professionalization of the civic field forces it to become more organized, coherent, and useful to local leaders. This is a much-needed development, but it is also ironic and somewhat dangerous: some historians argue that professionalization of public management, education, planning, public finance, law enforcement, and other fields, beginning early in the twentieth century, is precisely what caused alienation between citizens and government. Now, in their efforts to move beyond expert rule, local leaders are seeking more experts. This is one of the conundrums that public administration profes-

sors, and other civic professionals, will have to address as they try to support and advance democratic governance.

What's in It for Citizens?

Citizens are being recruited from many angles, by leaders in many fields, in communities all over the country. In this mad, short-sighted, uncoordinated rush, organizers are learning the hard way that involving citizens is a more difficult, more transformative process than they expected. Reaching out to their constituents may seem like just another organizational priority for a school district, a nonprofit, or a local government, but it often ends up changing the organization itself. Encouraging active citizenship may seem like a routine civic responsibility, an innocuous way to strengthen a community, but it often raises tough questions about how the political process should function.

What's in it for citizens? This line of inquiry leads away from two-dimensional stereotypes, and toward the hopes and concerns of real people.

When community leaders such as Ray Daniels and Brandi Fisher put themselves in the shoes of the people they are trying to recruit, they begin to realize the limitations of citizen involvement and all its synonyms (such as “public engagement” and “citizen participation”). Rather than a government of, by, and for the people, these expressions suggest a political drama in which government occupies center stage and citizens are bit players on the edges of the scene. The new civic experiments seem to be going a step further, illustrating the terms of a more meaningful, ongoing, multifaceted relationship between citizens and government.

Creating durable democratic structures for citizens may make life much easier for leaders such as Daniels. Instead of having to assemble a new set of

people for every new meeting or project, organizers will be able to bring their issues and questions to places where people are already assembled. However, establishing these new arenas will take a much higher level of collaboration, imagination, and foresight among local leaders.

No matter what the next form of democracy looks like, it will probably be shaped by our answers to one important question: What's in it for citizens? This line of inquiry leads away from two-dimensional stereotypes, and toward the hopes and concerns of real people. It suggests that new arenas for democratic governance will be built around the day-to-day interests, concerns, and talents of ordinary citizens, rather than the immediate needs of political professionals or the far-off dreams of political observers.

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