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INDICATORS INITIATIVE

Multi-Sector Collaboration: Part IV

Overcoming Barriers in the Key National Indicators Initiative

Kristi Laguzza-Boosman

Walden University, MMPA 6210-01

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to design a multi-sector collaboration project that can move the Key National Indicators Initiative (KNII) to the next level of success. KNII is a project currently under the auspices of The National Academies. The primary barriers I have uncovered in my research are: Funding, indicator selections and dissemination of KNII information. These were the topics most frequently cited as areas of concern by members of KNII's Steering Committee and National Coordinating Committee, when being interviewed for this project. Each barrier has its own chapter that will include key collaborators, their roles, motivations, and the specific processes used.

Note: Although the organizations and individuals I will be describing are all real and involved in KNII, this paper is a purely academic exercise on how I would *like* KNII to proceed; not a description of what is or will be happening with this initiative. I have undertaken this project as I consider KNII extremely important to the restoration of fairness and democracy to our nation. I hope it may be of some use.

NOTE: Since first writing this paper, the Key National Indicators Initiative has been renamed, The State of the USA (SOUSA). The interactive SOUSA web site is tentatively scheduled to launch in early/mid 2009. It can be located at <http://www.stateoftheusa.org> .

Brief Background

As I describe in MSCP Part I (see Appendix A), our nation measures well-being primarily using a large set of economic indicators. The assumption is that a strong economy (generally defined as generating a large amount of wealth with low unemployment and a growing GDP) equals strong social well-being for the general population. However this assumption is incorrect, as the wealth created is not being distributed widely throughout our society, and is concentrating more and more at the very top of the social strata. Our economic indicators, as most commonly reported, are not properly measuring the declining social status of a growing segment of our population, nor the increasing social problems accompanying this shift. I describe the consequences of this miss-measurement of our national well-being in MSCP Part II (see Appendix B), along with the need for a more accurate measuring system of our indicators of well-being. The Key National Indicators Initiative (KNII) is a possible solution.

KNII was developed as an outcome to a large forum in February of 2003, organized by the Government Accountability Office (GAO), in cooperation with the National Academies of Science, Engineering and Medicine, entitled *Forum on Key National Indicators: Assessing the Nation's Position and Progress*. Participants agreed that it was critical to begin accurately assessing the nation's well-being in an unbiased, scientifically sound fashion. Committees were formed and action was taken to begin developing the nation's first centralized system of monitoring economic, social and environmental indicators that could be accessed and reviewed by anyone. Following is a description of how I propose overcoming the three main barriers I have identified in my

research, and how the various sectors could collaborate in order to advance KNII to the next level.

Funding

The main barrier I found currently facing KNII is sustainable funding. In a discussion with Dr. Jane Ross, Director of KNII and a member of the National Academies (see Appendix C), she explained that KNII envisions a public/private partnership that includes government funding, investors and foundations. Ideally, the government would fund the project up to the 50% level so as to insure its ongoing success. This could give KNII the financial backing it needs to attract ongoing investment and foundation support, while maintaining its independence and freedom from political interference. Foundations are often willing to contribute up to half a million dollars or so at a time. However, such an endeavor as KNII will require many millions of dollars to launch, and then considerable ongoing funding to maintain. (J. Ross, personal communication, November 1, 2006).

Currently, KNII's funding has come from private investments and philanthropic grants. At least one business has invested approximately \$1 million dollars to help launch the project, in the hope that KNII may have some commercial value down the road. In my conversation with John Kamensky (see Appendix C), he agreed that partial funding from the federal government would be important to the sustainability of the KNII effort, but that the dollar amount would be very minor by government standards, perhaps amounting to a few million dollars a year. We discussed a possible process for securing these needed funds.

Funding Process

KNII's funding barrier could be overcome by a collaborative process involving Congress, philanthropic organizations and investors. Mr. Kamensky and I agreed that such an effort could use a champion in Congress. In Appendix C, I suggest approaching Senator Patty Murray (Democrat, Washington State) for this role and outline why.

In a phone meeting on January 25th, I spoke with Senator Murray's Legislative Director, Evan Schatz. He seemed interested in KNII's potential. He suggested approaching progressive think tanks to seek their input. "We rely on their analysis of initiatives and issues," he said, "as we don't always have time to investigate these things ourselves." He also suggested putting together a coalition of environmental and child advocate interest groups such as the Sierra Club, the Children's Defense Fund and the Children's Alliance (to name a few), and encouraging them to lobby the Senator and other members of Congress in support of KNII. "We tend to listen to them as well," (E. Schatz, personal communication, January 25, 2007).

Mr. Schatz agreed to bring the issue of KNII to Senator Murray's attention. However he said the funding issue right now was very difficult as many programs were being cut. We discussed the possibility of a modest annual \$3 million appropriation that could be included in a specific appropriations bill to a specific agency; the Census Bureau, for example. Evan said he would also bring this to the Senator's attention in their next meeting.

Possible Outcome

If Congress established an annual appropriation for KNII, their ability to raise matching funds from private foundations and investments would be significantly

enhanced. Backing from the federal government would make KNII a good investment risk from the other sectors. On the foundation side, KNII would then be deemed as a project with a high probability of success, allowing foundation money to be seen as a good investment. On the business side, government backing of KNII would provide the longevity needed to test any possible economic opportunities such an initiative might allow.

Indicator Selection

As I explain in my interviews with Mr. Kamensky and Dr. Ross (see Appendix C), the selection of which indicators to monitor nationally is another key challenge. There could be potential controversy around which indicators the nation should monitor, as those are likely to be the issues that generate the most attention (J. Kamenskay, personal communication, January 10, 2007). The indicator selection process would need to be very broad and inclusive, requiring intensive cross-sector and intra-sector collaborations. Lead players would be KNII's Steering Committee and National Coordinating Committee (see http://www.keyindicators.org/KNII_Steering_Committee.html and http://www.keyindicators.org/KNII_NCC.pdf Retrieved November 5, 2006), members of Congress, and members of the Community Indicator's Consortium (or CIC). In addition, Mr. Kamensky described the need to get buy in from local citizens and community groups as critical to the legitimacy of KNII (J. Kamensky, personal communication, January 10, 2007).

Indicator Selection Process

Involving Congress in the indicator selection process could provide significant benefit to both individual members of Congress and to the American people. In his book, *Hope*

Unraveled: The People's Retreat and Our Way Back, Richard Harwood describes a disenchanted public that feels increasingly excluded from the political process (2005). He notes a growing sentiment, "that the public arena has utterly failed to reflect the reality of their {average people's} lives," (Harwood, 2005, p. 24). And that, "The common belief throughout the land is that public officials actively pursue their own interests at the expense of the common interest" (p. 25). This disgust, registered across a broad spectrum of the American public, was reflected in the last election, with democratic candidates for Congress, sweeping out many Republicans and regaining both the House and Senate for the first time in 12 years.

In a Luntz, Maslansky Strategic Research Paper entitled, *Lessons From the 2006 Election*, they state:

The American people asked collectively why so much had gone wrong: immigration, energy, and, of course, the war. The response {from Republicans}: silence...When they didn't get an answer, they communicated their anger at the ballot box. Some people tried to warn you a year ago. The question is, are you listening now?" (Retrieved February 10, 2007 from www.usnews.com/usnews/politics/washingtonwhispers/061212/postelection.pdf)

Evidence suggests that members of Congress are, in fact, listening now. Or, at least, attempting to. They have seen that their success and very survival may depend upon it. Already the 2008 Presidential Campaigns are addressing this increased sensitivity to the needs of average Americans. Senator and Presidential Candidate, Hilary Clinton, on her web site, <http://www.hillaryclinton.com/video> is attempting to start a dialogue with the American people through a series of online video chats entitled, "Let the Conversation Begin." A similar theme of inclusion is sought on Senator and Presidential candidate, Barack Obama's web site at <http://www.barackobama.com> when he addresses the issue of public cynicism in politics: "Sometimes it seems as if the game is fixed and it only

works for the few and powerful,” (Retrieved February 10, 2007 from <http://www.barackobama.com/tv>).

Working again, through Senator Murray’s office, (or another Congressional champion’s) I would encourage the Senator to help make the case to her colleagues that KNII could offer members of Congress an effective way to re-engage with the American electorate by supporting a project that would show Congressional commitment to attend to the needs of average Americans. Members of Congress would be encouraged to set up town hall meetings in their congressional districts during recess, and explain that they plan to begin monitoring our national economic, environmental and social well-being in order to gather the information they need to create sound public policies for the American people. They could ask for voter input on what areas to monitor; what issues are important to them. Asking for citizen input could show that they are listening and committed to attending to their constituents’ concerns.

Indicator Survey

A survey would need to be developed for input purposes. A Key partner in the survey development process could be the Community Indicator’s Consortium (see <http://www.communityindicators.net>) whose purpose is “To promote communication among and help integrate the efforts of various networks, organizations and individuals involved in community indicators work in the U.S. and around the world” (Retrieved January 14, 2007 from <http://www.communityindicators.net>). CIC represents a broad array of community, nonprofit, local and regional government indicator initiatives, and would be ideal candidates to develop a survey that could reflect local, regional and national concerns. They would be a natural liaison between individual citizens, the

broader Key National Indicator Initiative, and Congress. Bringing CIC in as a critical part of the indicator selection process could also help alleviate some of this organization's concerns about the KNII, as they appear to be a key ally.

In a phone meeting on January 30, 2007, Allen Lomax, a Senior Analyst with the Government Accountability Office, discussed KNII and CIC. Mr. Lomax was one of the major contributors to the GAO report on the state of the practice on comprehensive key indicator systems entitled, *Informing Our Nation: Improving How to Understand and Assess the USA's Position and Progress*. (GAO-05-1, November 2004). On his personal time, he is a member of CIC's Board. He described some interest on the part of CIC members to get clarification on the development of a Key National Indicator Initiative's possible impacts on existing community indicator efforts and how they might work together to build relationships and linkages. Inviting CIC to help develop the indicator survey could help insure that local issues will be considered.

The value of an indicator selection survey is that it could be used as a tool for both providing and receiving information on indicator possibilities. Americans are not used to seeing indicator measurements outside of the economic sphere, and would need some basic education in order to fully understand the broader usage of these tools. CIC is in a good position to help develop the necessary public education component that could help explain the KNII effort and its potential to individual citizens, communities and the nation at large, as many CIC members have gone through this process in their local communities. They have (in many cases) already developed the lay-language needed to explain the use and importance of individual indicators when measuring progress in a

particular area, plus they have already established relationships and networks within their own communities that could be used for survey dissemination purposes.

On the Congressional side, members of Congress could carry hard copies of these survey's to pass out at their town hall meetings, and explain that people can also take the survey online at KNII's web site. There should be a place on KNII's web site (separate from the survey) where individuals could elect to receive email updates on KNII's progress and key findings as the initiative evolves. KNII could then collect the survey information online (or enter the hard copy data), tabulate it and get a list of the indicators of most interest to the public. This democratic process could take much of the politics out of the indicator selection process, help citizens feel like a part of the process, provide a look at the issues of highest concern to Americans *and* allow Congress an opportunity to invite their constituents to become a part of the process of selecting what key areas we as a nation should monitor and measure.

Cross-sector and Intra-sector Collaboration

During the indicator selection process, special attention should be paid to bringing both the broader nonprofit (environmental, academic, social services), government and business sectors into the collaboration fold by ensuring that they are included in the indicator selection process as well. This task could be undertaken by the members of KNII's National Coordinating Committee, which includes a large number of high-level members representative of all sectors and their sub-sectors communities. Each of these groups could help spread the word to their various communities about the need for input on the indicator selection process. It would provide an opportunity to begin educating the various sectors about the KNII project, and to get their early buy-in and support by

eliciting their input in the planning stage. Using members of KNII's National Coordinating Committee to help spread information and elicit input through the use of individual member organization's existing communication networks, could not only help create broad buy-in across sectors, but could also help insure a wide diversity of input.

A basic communications template with agreed upon talking points would need to be developed by KNII's Communications Committee in conjunction with the Steering Committee. This would ensure that information being presented about KNII is accurately and consistently portrayed across all sectors.

The talking points could then be adapted for use within each sector and sub-sector by stressing the specific values and issues most important to each. For example, when speaking to the business sector, my conversation with John Kamensky revealed that the business community has a large stake in the health and well being of the communities they do business in. "It is in their best interest that these communities be stable, safe and have educated and healthy work forces" (J. Kamensky, personal communication, January 10, 2007).

Dr. Marion Angelica's extended study notes for this course outlined the key values of business sector as: Return on investment, efficiency, freedom of choice, competition, risk, and growth (Angelica, 2002). Stressing how KNII could support these various conditions and values, could lead more business people to support KNII and provide input into the indicator selection process. In addition, this process could also encourage some financial investment in KNII as business leaders begin to be educated by their peers within the National Coordinating Committee, of the project's importance.

A final point of interest to the business community may be stressing the government accountability aspect of KNII. An example of this is explained in my conversation with John Kamensky around the *Virginia Performs* indicator system developed by the State of Virginia (see Appendix C). The government accountability argument in support of KNII is particularly well placed to appeal to the business sector.

Process

In an effort to tailor KNII's talking points, members of the National Coordinating Committee could break into short-term advisory committees based on sectors and sub-sectors (the philanthropic sector, for example, would need to divide up into environmental, academic and social services committees), and then adapt the basic KNII communications template based on the needs and values of their individual communities. They could then brainstorm the communication venues to which they each have access (list serves, web sites, newsletters, conferences, forums, email lists, professional organizations and publications), and then start using those to begin educating their sector communities about KNII and inviting their input into the indicator selection process.

Attempts should be made to disseminate information on KNII and invite indicator selection input as broadly as possible within each sector and sub-sector. A timeframe should be established as to how long input will be received. The survey should have an introductory page that asks demographic information from each participant so as to insure that an adequate sampling from a broad range of stakeholders has been received. Input could even be weighted based on the sector an individual participant came from to ensure that the sector itself has a large voice in deciding which indicator's get selected to represent it. Individuals from the environmental sub-sector, for example, might have

better information on which indicators should be used to adequately measure well-being in their area, then members of the business community, and visa versa. The media is a special category, which I will discuss below. However, their input into the indicator selection process is very much encouraged as well.

After all input is collected and tabulated, the final indicator selection process should be overseen by KNII's Steering Committee, who could look at public priorities, political and economic realities, as well as information availability of a potential indicator, when deciding on the final indicators to be used in each of the topical areas. Though here it would be hoped that the democratic process used above, would prevail in the final selection of indicators whenever possible.

Dissemination

Once the problem of funding has been resolved in Congress, and the indicator selection process is underway, the next issue to undertake is the dissemination of KNII's collected indicator data. For this, it will be extremely important to establish a strong and early relationship with members of the media. In doing so, it will be important to keep in mind the impediments to good reporting currently taking place in the media.

According to journalist and author, Bill Kovach, the largest barrier to effective reporting on issues critical to the nation is the current economic pressures on news organizations to turn a profit for their shareholders, which he describes in the book he co-authored with journalist, Tom Rosenstiel, entitled, [*The Elements of Journalism: What Newspapers Should Know and the Public Should Expect*](#) (Crown, 2001). On the other hand, Mr. Kovach said that, in a sampling of attitudes expressed by more than 3,000 journalists during forums held by the *Committee of Concerned Journalists*, he found that

nearly 95% agreed that their main purpose is to keep the nation informed, and that this is a central tenant of democracy (B. Kovach, personal communication, January 15, 2007).

In working with the media, it will be important to stress how reporting on KNII data on the state of the nation, could help satisfy a journalist's mandate and responsibility to keep the public informed. Mr. Kovach thinks KNII could be a very useful tool to journalists in this regard, "if they (KNII) can develop a good product." Finding out how to structure KNII data and its web site to facilitate media engagement will be important to this outcome. Mr. Kovach suggested the possibility of working with the Pew Charitable Trust to poll journalists and get suggestions on how KNII could present their indicator data in a way that would encourage journalists to report upon it. He also mentioned that, as the Director of the Committee of Concerned Journalists, he has a network of 9,000 journalists that he could work with to help disseminate KNII information to the nation through the media once KNII was launched (B. Kovach, personal communication, January 15, 2007).

KNII should also approach a wide array of professional journalism organizations to start educating their members about the reporting potential of KNII. Possible groups to contact can be found at: http://www.journalism.org/resources/journalism_websites and <http://www.freep.com/legacy/jobspage/toolkit/proforg.htm> as well as <http://www.pressfellowships.org/links.html> among others. Sending out educational information on KNII, setting up personal meetings, doing media conference presentations, writing articles for media journals and seeking both indicator selection and presentation input on KNII from members of the media, should all be undertaken in an attempt to fully educate and engage the media early on. Explaining KNII's potential to

help the media do their jobs, and informing them of KNII's intention to have a searchable database of indicators with national, local and even international data, could further encourage the media's interest.

Composites

Another tool Mr. Kovach and I discussed was the idea of creating an indicator composite in each topical area. The purpose of this would be to create an easy mechanism for fitting KNII indicator data into the current structure of reporting on our nation's economic indicators. *The Institute for Innovation in Social Policy* (a social indicators research group) has been using this tool effectively for three decades (see <http://iisp.vassar.edu/ish.html>) and could help KNII develop composites of their own. These composite numbers could be easily reported by the media monitoring increases or decreases in the nation's social and environmental indicators at the same time as typical reporting on the Dow Jones Industrial Average and the Consumer Price Index. A tag could be added at the end of the report saying, "For more information see www.keyindicators.org." In this way, KNII could then become the "one stop shop" for all indicator information on the nation: Economic, environmental and social. If KNII does not carry some particular indicator data, they could link to the (reliable) source that does, further cementing KNII's role as the primary go-to source of information on the state of the nation.

KNII should also disseminate information via the networks they established across all sectors during the indicator survey input phase (described above). Members of KNII's National Coordinating Committee could continue to send out information updates of particular interest to their sectors and sub sector for a certain period. People, who

indicated an interest in receiving KNII information and updates via the web site during the survey process, should continue to do so. This outflow of information should continue until KNII receives an adequate number of web site hits over a long enough period of time to determine that the initiative has become a regular part of the nation's consciousness.

Conclusion

By working with Congress to establish a small annual appropriation, KNII could secure its financial future and continue successfully raising funds from private investments and foundations. Developing and using an indicator selection survey could ensure participation and input from across all sectors including a large and diverse group of stakeholders, while also ensuring a fair and democratic process for settling which indicators KNII should monitor. Development and implementation of the indicator survey process will be very important in establishing trust across the sectors by encouraging input – trust being a critical element of any successful collaboration as explained in our texts (Austin, 2000, Kamensky, 2004, Schorr, 1997).

Proper dissemination of information will take considerable up front effort on the part of KNII to establish strong relations with the media and listen to their reporting needs. A possible Pew Trust survey of journalist's interests and needs, media outreach, plus the development of an indicator composite for each topical area, are additional tools that could facilitate this ongoing relationship. Continued communication with KNII's growing list of stakeholders, by emailing out regular updates on KNII's data information, and maintaining a searchable, user friendly web site, should help establish KNII as a primary source of reliable, scientifically sound, unbiased data on the state of the nation.

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APPENDIX A
MSCP PART I
Kristi Laguzza-Boosman
MMPA 6210

Issue: Monitoring the nation's social and economic indicators to determine our national well-being.

The United States has the most intensive and detailed system of monitoring our economic indicators of any country in the world. This is due, in part, because of the The Employment Act of 1946 (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Employment_Act Retrieved November 2, 2006), "whose main purpose was to lay the responsibility of economic stability onto the federal government" (p. 1). As an outcome of this federal law, we now have an enormous amount of economic indicator data generated to help the federal government monitor and direct the state of our economy. These indicators include the Gross Domestic Product, the Dow Jones Industrial Average, the Consumer Price Index, the Index of Leading Economic Indicators and the Index of Consumer Confidence. We monitor the sale of homes, increase and decreases in production, cost of living increases, inflation, recession, job creation and unemployment. So extensive is our system of economic reporting that we can measure our economic conditions on a year-by-year, quarter by quarter, month by month, week by week, day by day, and even minute by minute basis. When a problem arises, we have organizations in place, like the Federal Reserve and the Council of Economic Advisors, ready to respond to negative changes in

the economy and make recommendations on policy changes needed to bring it back into balance (Miringoff, Miringoff & Opdycke, 1995).

By contrast, we have had no such federal policy mandating that we monitor the state of our social well-being, and, as a result, no comprehensive system in place for monitoring social trends. In addition, we have no major institutions ready to react to any negative changes in our social landscape (Miringoff, Miringoff & Opdycke, 1995). As a result, “policy making about social issues is far more likely to be shaped by the passions of the day and the politics of the moment than by rational analysis based on accurate, timely information” (p.20).

The need for reliable, unbiased, scientifically sound data on the state of the nation is a growing concern. On February 27, 2003, the Government Accountability Office (GAO), in cooperation with the National Academies of Science, Engineering and Medicine, convened the *Forum on Key National Indicators: Assessing the Nation’s Position and Progress*. The premise of the Forum was that, “The nation’s leaders and concerned citizens require better knowledge of what is happening and where we are going to support improved public choices....The purpose of the forum was to have a rich and meaningful dialogue on whether and how to develop a set of key national indicators for the United States” (GAO Report – 03-672SP, May, 2003, cover page).

The outcome of this forum was the creation of the *Key National Indicators Initiative* (KNII), a broad coalition of experts under the auspices of the National Academies, charged with creating a pilot comprehensive key indicator system for the United States. It would be a “unique public source of objective, independent, scientifically grounded, and widely shared quality information so that we know where the United States stands and how we are treading, on both an absolute and relative basis...” (GAO-05-01, November 2004, p. 2).

In order for KNII to succeed, they will need to form successful coalitions and partnerships. They will need to secure reliable funding from investors, foundations and the federal government. Stakeholders in this venture will likely be: Business, government, the media, foundations and nonprofits, policy makers, advocacy groups, the general public, in addition to the scientific, statistical and educational communities; in other words, “both the users and producers of public information” (GAO Report – 03-672sp, May, 2003, p.1).

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APPENDIX B
MSCP PART II
Monitoring Social & Economic Indicators
Kristi Laguzza-Boosman
MMPA 6210-01

The United States has the most intensive and detailed system of monitoring its economic indicators of any country in the world. This is due, in part, because of the the Employment Act of 1946 (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Employment_Act Retrieved November 2, 2006), “whose main purpose was to lay the responsibility of economic stability onto the federal government” (p. 1).

As an outcome of this federal law, we now have an enormous amount of economic indicator data generated to help the federal government monitor and direct the state of our economy. These indicators include the Gross Domestic Product, the Dow Jones Industrial Average, the Consumer Price Index, the Index of Leading Economic Indicators and the Index of Consumer Confidence. We monitor the sale of homes, increase and decreases in production, cost of living increases, inflation, recession, job creation and unemployment. So extensive is our system of economic reporting that we can measure our economic conditions on a year-by-year, quarter by quarter, month by month, week by week, day by day, and even minute by minute basis. When a problem arises, we have organizations in place, like the Federal Reserve and the Council of Economic Advisors, ready to respond to negative changes in the economy and make recommendations on policy changes needed to bring it back into balance (Miringoff, Miringoff & Opdycke, 1995).

By contrast, we have had no such federal policy mandating that we monitor the state of our social well-being, and, as a result, no comprehensive system in place for monitoring social trends. In addition, we have no major institutions ready to react to any negative changes in our social landscape (Miringoff, Miringoff & Opdycke, 1995). As a result, “policy making about social issues is far more likely to be shaped by the passions of the day and the politics of the moment than by rational analysis based on accurate, timely information” (p.20).

The problem with our over reliance on economic indicators as a measure of well-being, is that “the economy” has become, for all intents and purpose, a measurement of the creation or loss of wealth for the wealthy. It does not adequately measure the disbursement of this wealth throughout society, nor the well-being of the majority of people in it. Using economic indicators to monitor social well-being has resulted in a significant misreporting on the social state of our nation.

For example, there is a generally held perception in the U.S. that a good economy equals good social well-being, when, in fact, this is not necessarily the case. Our economic indicators have primarily been on the increase for most of the last three decades. The GDP has been on a steady increase having risen 158% from the years 1970 to 2000 (Miringoff, et. al. 2003, p. 30). The Dow Jones Industrial just hit the 12,000 mark for the first time in October and unemployment is at an all time low. However, these figures are misleading in terms of social health. Unemployment may be low, but when the jobs being created do not pay a living wage, this economic indicator only masks what is really going on in daily life, i.e., a general decline in living standards and an increase in poverty for a growing segment of our population.

In his journal article, *The Moral Consequences of Economic Growth* (2006), Harvard political economist, Benjamin Friedman, warns of the growing disparity between the rich and the rest of the nation.

...most of the fruits of the last three decades of economic growth in the United States have accrued to only a small slice of American population...the average worker in American business in 2004 made 16 percent *less* each week than thirty-plus years earlier...For most Americans, the reward for work today is well below what it use to be (B. Friedman, 2006, p. 16).

The result of this economic disparity has a profound impact on the health of our nation and the state of our democracy. According to Friedman, unequal distribution of wealth and a decreasing standard of living for so many Americans have resulted in “...a fraying of the U.S. social fabric” (Friedman, 2006, p. 17). It is not an accident, Friedman argues, in this current economic climate, that we are seeing an increased antipathy towards immigrants, the roll back of affirmative action programs, a cutting of social welfare programs while blaming the poor for their plight, increases in anti government militias, church burnings, domestic terrorist attacks, armed stand offs with law enforcement, a steady erosion of our civil discourse and a weakening of our political institutions, personal freedoms, protections and rights (Friedman, 2006).

In order for Americans to increase their understanding of economic and social realities, they need to have access to objective facts. If, what they are continually offered is positive news on an economy that does not benefit them, and a standard of living that continues to fall, social stress will rise. Under these circumstances people become increasingly pessimistic, intolerant and uncivil (Friedman, 2006). The social fabric of the nation will continue to decline.

It is, therefore, critical that our nation begin monitoring and reporting on both our social and economic problems, in a clear and objective fashion, so that we can begin proactively addressing them. Publicly and systematically monitoring our social indicators, and fully explaining our economic indicators, is an important first step. “If we understand more clearly the conditions that face us, we can vote more wisely, address our problems more effectively, and plan for our future more constructively” (Miringoff, et al, 2003 p. 65).

One possible solution to this national dilemma is the recent creation of the *Key National Indicators Initiative* (KNII), a broad coalition of experts under the auspices of the National Academies, charged with creating a pilot comprehensive key indicator system for the United States. KNII would gather indicator data in three main topical areas: The economy, the environment and society/culture. It would be a “unique public source of objective, independent, scientifically grounded, and widely shared quality information so that we know where the United States stands and how we are treading, on both an absolute and relative basis...” (GAO-05-01, November 2004, p. 2).

Indicator information gathered and assembled by KNII would be widely disseminated to all audiences including policy makers, advocacy groups, the media and the general public. The information would be made easily accessible to anyone who wanted it. It could help the nation, and our policy makers, understand where we are, in order to better chart where we want to be.

I consider KNII extremely important to the restoration of fairness and democracy to our nation. Without it, I am concerned that we will continue on our current path of widening the divide between the wealthy and the rest of the nation, which, I believe, is slowly undermining our civil society. My contribution to this effort is a somewhat specialized set of skills. In an area (indicator research), dominated by scientists, researchers and statisticians, I bring a set of communication and outreach skills that can help translate this work to the nation. I bring to the table my training (as an outreach consultant), and my ability to look at this issue as an outsider divorced from the usual spheres of influence (government, business, academic, nonprofit). This separation will help me to suspend judgment and rely upon the facts as they evolve – not the facts or direction some influential group may wish to bring forth. My hope is to make a contribution to this effort that will increase its value to the nation. My goals are to encourage the National Academies (and KNII) to add data interpretation to their mandate (something they have currently chosen to side-step), to encourage Congress to fund KNII up to 50% of their budget as part of a public/private partnership, and to figure out a strategy for working with the press that can later be used in the design of a national outreach campaign.

SECTORS

Nonprofit/Government/Academic

Organization: Key National Indicators Initiative

Description: The Key National Indicators Initiative (KNII), launched in 2003 and currently housed at [The National Academies](#) in Washington, D.C., has begun work on a comprehensive indicator set that will allow individual citizens, organizations, and elected officials to answer the question, “How are we doing as a nation?”. *State of the USA™* will gather in one place credible, up-to-date information about the nation’s environmental, economic, and social performance. They are governed by an Executive Committee, a Steering Committee (http://www.keyindicators.org/KNII_Steering_Committee.html) and a National Coordinating Committee (http://www.keyindicators.org/KNII_NCC.pdf). The members of these various committees are very high-level managers in each of their sectors. They will contribute much to disseminating information and educating the nation on the need for, and the success of, KNII.

Contact: Dr. Jane Ross

Affiliation: Director, Center for Economic , Governance and International Studies, The National Academies (ex officio)

Director, Key National Indicators Initiative

KNII Steering Committee Member

Contact Info:

The National Academies

500 Fifth Street, NW

Washington, DC 20001

Ph: 202.334.2092

Fax: 202.334.3829

Email: jross@nas.edu

Web: <http://www.keyindicators.org>

Nonprofit/Academic

Organization: Institute for Innovation in Social Policy (IISP)

Description: The Institute for Innovation in Social Policy devotes its full capacity to the analysis and publication of social indicators. Established in 1985, the Institute has worked on social indicators at the national, state, and international levels as a way to improve the reporting and understanding of social conditions. The Institute’s work has had significant impact on public policy, public education, and the academic community. They have created a scientifically sound social indicators model worthy of duplication. Their expertise could be very useful as KNII moves forward.

Contact: Dr. Sandra Opdycke

Affiliation: Associate Director

Contact Info:

Institute for Innovation in Social Policy

Vassar College, Box 529

Poughkeepsie, NY 12609

Phone and fax: 845-452-7332
Email: opdycke@earthlink.net
Web: <http://iisp.vassar.edu/index.html>

Government

Organization: United States Senate

Description: For detailed description see

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_States_Senate . Congress will play a vital role in the long-term sustainability of the KNII project through funding of this proposed public/private partnership. So far, KNII has only secured foundation and private investment. In order for it to succeed, it will need a sustainable form of funding from the government. The amount is likely modest by government standards (some small millions of dollars per year), but will allow KNII the security it needs to attract other investment. My goal through the MSCP is to encourage congress to provide these funds.

Contact: Senator Patty Murray

Affiliation: U.S. Senator, Washington State, Ranking member of the Senate Appropriations Committee, Secretary of the Senate Democratic Caucus

Contact Info:

173 Russell Senate Bldg.
Washington, D.C. 20510
Phone: (202) 224-2621
Fax: (202) 224-0238
Email: <http://murray.senate.gov/email/index.cfm>
Web: <http://murray.senate.gov>

Government

Organization: Science Committee of the United States House of Representatives

Description: The Science Committee has jurisdiction over all non-defense federal scientific research and development (R&D). Federal agencies that fall under the Committee's jurisdiction (either completely or partially) include: National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), Department of Homeland Security (DHS), Department of Energy (DOE), Department of Transportation (DOT), Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), National Science Foundation (NSF), Federal Aviation Administration (FAA), National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST), U.S. Geological Survey (USGS), and the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy (OSTP). This committee is whom the National Academies, the GAO and KNII report to on progress with this project. My contact below, is a professional staff member of the Science Committee and a member of KNII's National Coordinating Committee. My hope is that he can help me navigate the funding process through Congress.

Contact: Marty Spitzer

Affiliation: Professional Staff member, Science Committee
U.S. House of Representatives
KNII National Coordinating Committee Member

Contact Info:

Science Committee

House of Representatives
 2320 Rayburn House Office Building
 Washington, DC 20515
 Ph: 202.225.8844
 Fax: 202.225.4438
 Email: Mart.Spitzer@mail.house.gov
 Web: <http://www.house.gov/science/welcome.htm>

Government

Organization: Government Accounting Office

Description: The Government Accountability Office (GAO) is the non-partisan [audit](#), [evaluation](#), and [investigative](#) arm of [Congress](#), and an agency in the Legislative Branch of the [United States Government](#). The GAO was established by the Budget and Accounting Act, 1921 (Public Law 67-13, 42 Stat. 20-27, June 10, 1921). This Act required the head of GAO to "investigate, at the seat of government or elsewhere, all matters relating to the receipt, disbursement, and application of public funds, and shall make to the President...and to Congress...reports (and) recommendations looking to greater economy or efficiency in public expenditures" (Sec. 312(a), 42 Stat. 25-26). According to GAO's current mission statement, the agency exists to support the Congress in meeting its [Constitutional](#) responsibilities and to help improve the [performance](#) and ensure the [accountability](#) of the [federal government](#) for the benefit of the American people.

(Retrieved December 28, 2006 from

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Government_Accountability_Office). It was the GAO along with the National Academies that organized the first meeting of diverse national leaders and experts that resulted in the creating of KNII as a national resource See GAO Report – 03-672sp, May, 2003). Their (and the National Academies) involvement and support provides legitimacy to the KNII project and may be useful to securing federal funding for this project.

Contact: Bernice Steinhardt

Affiliation: Director, Strategic Issues, GAO

KNII Steering Committee Member

Contact Info:

Government Accounting Office

441 G. St. NW

Washington, DC 20001

Ph: 202.334.1519

Email: sweidman@nas.edu

Business Sector – The Press

The press has a critical role to play as disseminator of information to the nation on the content generated through the KNII project. Understanding how to approach the press to insure a successful outcome will be critical to the success of KNII. To do this, I will attempt to contact the individuals and organizations below – both of whom are members of the KNII Steering Committee and National Coordinating Committee (respectively), and are strategically placed for the purpose of understanding how best to approach the press around this issue.

Press/Academic/Government

Organization: The Annenberg School for Communication

Description: Founded in 1959 through the generosity and vision of diplomat and philanthropist Walter Annenberg, the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania is devoted to furthering our understanding of the role of communication in public life through research, education and service. (Retrieved December 28, 2006 from <http://www.asc.upenn.edu/about>).

Contact: Dr. Michael X. Delli Carpini,

Affiliation: Dean, The Annenberg School for Communication
University of Pennsylvania

KNII Steering Committee Member

Area of Expertise: The extent, sources and impact of public deliberation. The causes and consequences of the blurring between news and entertainment. Generational differences in political and civic participation. The impact of the media on political knowledge and democratic engagement.

Contact Info: mxd@asc.upenn.edu

Bio:

<http://www.asc.upenn.edu/ascfaculty/facultyBioDetails.asp?txtUserID=mdellicarpini>

Press

Organization: Committee of Concerned Journalists

Description: The Committee of Concerned Journalists is a consortium of journalists, publishers, owners and academics worried about the future of their profession. To secure journalism's future, the group believes that journalists from all media, geography, rank and generation must be clear about what sets their profession apart from other endeavors. To accomplish this, the group is creating a national conversation among journalists about principles (Retrieved December 28, 2006 from http://www.concernedjournalists.org/about_ccj/about_us).

Contact: Bill Kovach

Affiliation: Journalist, Chairman, Committee of Concerned Journalists
KNII National Coordinating Committee Member

Contact Info:

1900 M Street, NW, Suite 210

Washington, DC 20036

Ph: 202.293.7394

Email: bkovach@journalism.org

Web: <http://www.concernedjournalists.org>

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2006, from EBSCO database.

Miringoff, M., Miringoff, M-L., & Opdycke, S. (2003) *The social report 2003*, Tarrytown, NY: Fordham Institute for Innovation in Social Reporting.

Forum on key national indicators: Assessing the nation's position and progress. (May 2003). *GAO Report 03-672sp*. Retrieved November 5, 2006 from <http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d03672sp.pdf>

Informing our nation: Improving how to understand and assess the USA's position and progress. (November 2004). *GAO Report 05-01*. Retrieved November 5, 2006 from <http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d051.pdf>

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APPENDIX C

Multi-sector Collaboration Project, Part III

Kristi Laguzza-Boosman

MMPA 6210-01

Assignment: Name the barriers, opportunities, risks, and benefits they (interviewees) foresee in working on the issue you have identified. Discuss their previous experiences with multi-sector collaborations and how that might inform your plans to work across sectors to address the issue at hand.

INTERVIEWS:

Name: John Kamensky

Title: Senior Fellow, IBM Center for the Business of Government, and Editor of the course text, *Collaboration Using Networks and Partnerships*

Contact Information: Ph: 202.515.4102

Date Interviewed: January 10, 2007

Bio: Mr. Kamensky is an Associate Partner with IBM Global Business Services and a Senior Research Fellow for the IBM Center for The Business of Government. During 24 years of public service, he had a significant role in helping pioneer the federal government's performance and results orientation. He is passionate about creating a

government that is results-oriented, performance-based, and customer-driven.

Prior to February 2001, Mr. Kamensky served for eight years as deputy director of Vice President Gore's National Partnership for Reinventing Government. Before that, he worked at the General Accounting Office for 16 years where he played a key role in the development and passage of the Government Performance and Results Act. Mr. Kamensky is a fellow of the National Academy of Public Administration and received a Masters in Public Affairs from the Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs, in Austin, Texas. He is a member of the National Coordinating Committee for the Key National Indicators Initiative (Retrieved January 18, 2007 from http://www.businessofgovernment.org/main/about/leadership/john_kamensky.asp).

Interview Details: The purpose of my discussion with Mr. Kamensky was to better understand the concerns of the business sector towards the creation of the Key National Indicators Initiative (KNII), and what it would take to make this project a success. KNII is a pilot collaborative project currently under the auspices of the National Academies to provide a set of scientifically based indicators in the areas of the economy, society and the environment, meant to measure our nation's performance and well-being.

In the course of our phone conversation I queried Mr. Kamensky about the barriers to success in terms of the development of KNII. Mr. Kamensky is on the National Coordinating Committee for KNII, and has been a strong supporter of the need to develop a system of social indicators since his early days in government. He described the process of selecting which indicators would be monitored nationally, as a challenge. Potentially there could be controversy and debate about which indicators the nation should monitor (likely as those are the issues that will get most attention). Right now definition and selection of indicators is drafted by a rather small group of elite professionals and researchers, who may or may not necessarily be connected to what is really happening on the ground in local communities.

Mr. Kamensky described the need to get buy in from local citizens and community groups as critical to the legitimacy of KNII. Already local, state and regional indicator initiatives were coming together to insure that their indicator interests would be addressed. They have formed the Community Indicator's Consortium (or CIC) whose purpose is "To promote communication among and help integrate the efforts of various networks, organizations and individuals involved in community indicators work in the U.S. and around the world" (Retrieved January 14, 2007 from <http://www.communityindicators.net>). Mr. Kamensky described working with this group as important to the future success of KNII. But he also stressed that local citizens must somehow also be involved in the indicator selection process.

Mr. Kamensky agreed that involvement and support from the federal government, particularly in the area of funding, was key. On this issue, we had a lengthy conversation about the process of involving Congress. I explained to him that I intended to lobby key members of Congress to gain their support for KNII, and that I had started with my own Senior Senator, Senator Patty Murray from Washington State. I mentioned that I had

recently sent the Senator a cover letter, a copy of a pertinent research paper I wrote, plus the most recent *Progress and Plans* report for KNII, and that I was asking for an opportunity to discuss this initiative with her (or a member of her staff) by phone.

Mr. Kamensky agreed that KNII could use a champion and that the Senate was a likely place. He was not familiar with Senator Murray's potential interest in KNII. I also explained that she was a compassionate person who came from a working class background, and that she understood the problems facing American families today. He thought it was worthwhile to try and bring Senator Murray on board if she expressed an interest. He agreed that the amount of appropriations needed would be very modest by federal government standards (a few millions of dollars a year, maybe). The money alone shouldn't be an enormous obstacle. It would need to be included in a specific appropriations bill to a specific agency that would have a logical link such as Census Bureau.

Mr. Kamensky and I had a more implicit rather than direct conversation on possible concerns of the federal government around the development of KNII. It came about due to my query on the need of KNII to interpret the data they gather so as to fully explain it to the nation and policymakers – an area which I hit upon fairly hard in my research around this issue. KNII has taken the official position that they will “assemble statistical information, not collect new data...disseminate information, not interpret it” (*The State of the USA: Progress and Plans 2003-2006* p. 4). The web site for KNII also states, under guiding principals, that “KNII will...disseminate data, not draw conclusions from them” (<http://www.keyindicators.org> Retrieved, November 5, 2006).

I argued that the failure to fully and properly interpret the data KNII gathered could undermine the value of the project to create needed social and policy changes. Mr. Kamensky agreed that interpretation was important to understanding, and that he, personally, would like to see KNII interpret their data. He was cautionary, however, about the potential threat this could pose to policy makers who might fear what this data had to reveal. “I just don't want to see this thing killed before it even begins,” he said. Weighing all issues, I can see his point, and have decided back off from the issue of asking leaders at KNII to interpret their data – at least until the project is more secure.

Mr. Kamensky had mentioned in a previous email, that he thought the business sector would be supportive of KNII. I asked him what the motivations of the business sector would be; why they should care about social and environmental indicators such as poverty rates, access to healthcare, levels and quality of education, clean air and clean water? Mr. Kamensky responded by saying that, in order for business to thrive, they need good infrastructure, safe streets, a healthy, well-educated work force and a clean environment in which to work. “These are conditions important for a successful business venture,” he said. So he was not overly concerned about whether business would support the development of KNII. He cited the case of *Virginia Performs*, a comprehensive, statewide indicators system in the state of Virginia, originally called for by the Council on Virginia's Future (CVF). CVF is a coalition of legislative, business and community interests that want to improve government performance, accountability and transparency

with the hope of creating better public policies and more efficient use of taxpayer dollars (see <http://www.vaperforms.virginia.gov/index.php> and <http://www.future.virginia.gov>).

The result of this initiative was the development of *Virginia Performs*, a web site that tracks government and state performance in the key indicator areas of economy, education, healthcare, public safety, natural resources, transportation, government and citizens. In the “Scorecard at a Glance” section, not only are each of the major indicator areas described in detail, but they are rated in terms of performance including what the government’s role is in terms of influencing outcomes (significant or limited). Mr. Kamensky described this as an excellent model. He described engaging the business sector by describing these benefits to them that could flow from the KNII – that they need the stability and well being of the other sectors of society in order to thrive; that the context in which they operate matters. He described the concern of the business sector as whether they would be asked (or told) to do something in order to make these conditions a reality.

A couple days after our interview, I asked Mr. Kamensky if *Virginia Performs* was a model that could be duplicated at a national level as a possible model on which to base KNII? His response was, “I’m hoping to write a column on this in the next couple weeks (I do a column on performance management every other month for PATimes), so I’ll use this as an opportunity to figure out an answer to your question about scalability” (personal email communication dated January 15, 2007). This information will be very useful.

I also followed up with Mr. Kamensky via email to ask him about why he thought KNII was important, and what were the potential risks if the initiative fails. He response was as follows:

Our nation faces serious choices economically, socially, and environmentally that national political leaders have left unresolved for more than a decade. This lack of action stems from a number of sources. For example, the close political balance between the two parties over the past decade has created incentives for them to continue political campaigns beyond elections so there is no room to compromise on solutions. Also, Americans have not demanded change, in part because they lack common knowledge of the urgency of the challenges facing our country. Because they perceive politicians as being ideological, they tend to discount what they hear from them about looming challenges.

Supporters of the Key National Indicators Initiative believe that providing a trusted, non-partisan source of information on how well our country is doing economically, socially, and environmentally can help reframe debates about the future challenges facing our country. The hope is that by providing credible facts, public pressure would encourage political leaders to come together to resolve some of the long-term challenges facing our country.

If the KNII fails, the risk is more political stalemate on addressing key issues. Success would be more substantive articles in the weekly "Parade" magazine (see Sunday Jan 14, 07). Stories like this generate more buzz around kitchen tables than one might think! (Personal communication, January 15, 2007).

Conclusion:

John Kamensky is the consummate “cross-sector” man. Besides being very intelligent, informed and good humored, his high level work in the government, nonprofit and business sectors, made him an ideal interview candidate for this project. His input helped me understand the needs and concerns, as well as the benefits and risks, for both the business and government sectors, not to mention, local and regional nonprofit indicator groups, should KNII become a reality. My increased understanding will help me work with greater sensitivity around these concerns as I attempt to draft an effective multi-sector collaboration for KNII involving all sectors. My goal is to use this as a precursor to the eventual development of an effective outreach campaign that will help bring KNII to the nation. We are in ongoing discussions, with a growing number of stakeholders, on how to achieve this.

Name: Bill Kovach

Title: Journalist

Contact Information: Email, bkovach@journalism.org , ph: 202.419.3651

Date Interviewed: Monday, January 15, 2007

Bio: Bill Kovach is the founding chairman of the Committee of Concerned Journalists and its programs. He has been a journalist and writer for almost 50 years. In that time he was chief of the New York Times Washington Bureau, and served as executive editor of the Atlanta Journal-Constitution and curator of the Nieman Fellowships at Harvard University. He served two years as Ombudsman for Brill’s Content magazine and in 2005 was named a Fellow of the Society of Professional Journalists.

Kovach is co-author with Tom Rosenstiel of [The Elements of Journalism: What Newspeople Should Know and the Public Should Expect](#) (Crown, 2001), which was awarded Harvard University’s Goldsmith Book Prize (2002), the Sigma Delta Chi award for research in journalism, and the Bart Richards Award for Media Criticism (Retrieved January 18, 2007 from <http://www.concernedjournalists.org/node/403>).

Mr. Kovach is committed to returning journalism to its core principals, including:

- Journalism is a public service central to self-government.
- News organizations must cover matters vital to the well being of our increasingly diverse communities and foster the debate upon which democracy depends.

Mr. Kovach is also a member of the National Coordinating Committee for the Key National Indicators Initiative.

Interview Details:

The purpose of my interview with Mr. Kovach was to understand how best to work with the media in a way that would encourage them to broadcast information on the state of the nation that would be made available through the Key National Indicators Initiative. Mr. Kovach described the largest barrier to effective reporting on issues critical to the nation is the current economic pressures on news organizations to turn a profit for their shareholders, which he describes in the book he co-authored with ABC News Director, Tom Rosenstiel of [The Elements of Journalism: What Newspeople Should Know and the Public Should Expect](#) (Crown, 2001).

As an example, Mr. Kovach cited, in our conversation, the fact that, shareholders got nervous when the New York Times announced it was increasing investment in the newsroom. He cites as typical that a media organizations stock goes down whenever they make a commitment to real journalism.

On the other-hand, Mr. Kovach said that, in a sampling of attitudes expressed by more than 3,000 journalists during forums held by the Committee of Concerned Journalists, he found that nearly 95% agreed that their main purpose is to keep the nation informed, and that this is a central tenant of democracy. His group (the Committee of Concerned Journalists – see <http://www.concernedjournalists.org>) is trying to support and encourage journalists to do just that. “The real danger,” he says, “is that the nation will eventually surrender government to the wealthy oligarchy (who own most of the media outlets and control politicians) through lack of information.” In other words, we will only learn what those in power want us to learn. He is committed to reversing this course, and getting journalists back to the job of reporting on the nation by strengthening their relationship to the public.

Mr. Kovach thinks KNII could be a very useful tool to journalists in this regard, “if they (KNII) can develop a good product.” I emailed him a link to the *Virginia Performs* web site (see <http://vaperforms.virginia.gov>) and asked what he thought of that as a possible model. He plans to seek input from some journalist friends in Virginia. I also explained my idea of using an indicator composite in each category in order to help this new indicator information fit into the current system of reporting on economic indicators. He thought it was an excellent idea.

In terms of opportunities, Mr. Kovach said he has a network of 9,000 journalists that he could work with to help disseminate KNII information to the nation through the media. He would be working with the Pew Charitable Trust, to poll journalists on how KNII could present this information in a way that would encourage and help them to report on it. He said he would keep me posted about this research.

Mr. Kovach thought one of the biggest barriers to the success of KNII was sustained funding over the long term. He was pleased to hear that I would be pushing Congress to fund KNII up to 50% of their budget. He agreed it was important to keep KNII a public/private venture free from government intrusion. A 50% funding allotment, plus a strong list of independent funders and foundations, should help KNII maintain its independence.

Conclusion: Mr. Kovach was very helpful in understanding the forces influencing the media and what they report upon today. He agreed that it was important to create a “product” at KNII that would be attractive and easily accessible to the press, in order to carry this information out to the nation. He was pleased that I was trying to figure out how best to do that during this development stage. He offered to help as a point of contact to his large network of journalists, and to initiate some polling to find out how best to present to them. He would be continuing his work stressing core values to journalists to help get them back to their jobs of reporting on the nation. He thinks KNII will be an important resource once it is up and running. We are in ongoing discussions about these issues.

Name: Dr. Sandra Opdyke

Title: Associate Director for the Institute for Innovation in Social Policy

Contact Information: Email: opdyke@earthlink.net
Web: <http://iisp.vassar.edu/index.html>

Date Interviewed: Ongoing discussions from 10/11/06 to present

Bio: Adjunct Visiting Professor, Department of Urban Studies at Vassar College; Associate Director of the Institution in Social Policy, Fordham University. Co-author of several books and publications including: “The Social Health of the Nation (1999), “No One Was Turned Away: The Role of Public Hospitals in NY City Since 1900” (1999), “The Social Report 2003: Assessing the Progress of America by Monitoring the Well-Being of its People” [*earlier edition: 2001*]. For a complete list see: <http://iisp.vassar.edu/pubs.html>

Interview Details:

I began my unofficial interviews with Dr. Opdyke in October of last year, in an attempt to better understand the social indicators arena; the possibilities and barriers to success. In response to my question of why the US has yet to set up a national indicators system to monitor and report upon our social progress, Ms. Opdyke responded as follows:

One major factor, I'd say, is that we're not used to thinking of the social sphere of our national life as a single entity, in the way that we think of the economy as a

single entity, tying together the millions of economic events that happen every day. We don't even have a word for that social sphere of our national life. So we tend to talk about social trends in a fragmented way--focusing on separate problems, separate groups, separate needs, but rarely looking at how they relate to each other, and even more rarely looking at what these trends, taken together, tell us about the country's overall social health. Economic indicators are valued because they INDICATE what's going on in the nation's economy. But we haven't become accustomed yet to even wondering what's going on in terms of the nation's social health, so it's not surprising that we haven't yet looked for national indicators that can shed light on that question.

Another factor--actually, it's both cause and effect--is data availability. Social reporting in the United States is far less advanced than economic reporting, in terms of both timeliness and frequency. If we ever were to get serious about national social indicators, we would need to do something about the fact that social statistics rarely appear more than once a year, many of them 2 or even 3 years after the end of the time-period they cover. Part of the reason we monitor trends of any kind is because we expect to do something about the conditions we uncover. But this is obviously much less feasible if our information is two to three years old. Thus, (cause) untimely social reporting has made it harder to develop an adequate social indicator system, but (effect) the inadequacy of our social reporting is also a result of not having such a system, since there's been no systematic and pressing demand for more timely data. (Personal communication dated January 14, 2007).

In the course of my research, I have learned the following from Dr. Opdycke and her colleagues at the Institute for Innovation in Social Policy (formerly the Forhdam Institute for Innovation in Social Policy): **The benefits of a social indicators system are significant.** “If we understand more clearly the conditions that face us, we can vote more wisely, address our problems more effectively, and plan for our future more constructively” (Miringoff, et al, 2003b p. 65).

The costs of not having a social indicators system has meant that, “for many of the important topics on which social critics blithely pass judgment, and on which policies are made, there are no yardsticks to know if things are getting better or worse” (Bauer, 1966 as cited by Miringoff, et al, 2003a, p.4). And, “policy making about social issues is far more likely to be shaped by the passions of the day and the politics of the moment than by rational analysis based on accurate, timely information” (Miringoff, Miringoff & Opdycke, 1995, p.20). The results have been decades of misguided policies that have failed to address the growing social problems of the nation.

One area Ms. Opdycke has been particularly helpful is in the area of data interpretation and the role of researchers and social scientists (nonprofit sector) versus the role of policy makers (government sector). She clarified her and her colleague's position as follows:

We do believe it's possible comment on the data without expressing

bias, and we think there's an obligation to do so, because numbers presented without explanation can be daunting, confusing, or even misleading. On the other hand, we do avoid making policy recommendations. We think our job is to present the indicators and trends as clearly as possible, explain the major patterns we see, and then let others develop policies to address the patterns we've identified (S. Opdycke, personal communication, November 6, 2006).

She concluded with, "This question of how much or how little to add to one's statistical findings in a social indicators report is an interesting one, which many scholars have wrestled with. I look forward to talking more with you about it, and I'm eager to hear how your work progresses" (S. Odycke, personal communication, December 2, 2006).

Conclusion: Dr. Opdycke was my first point of contact in the field of social indicators. She and her colleagues at the Institute have been instrumental in helping me to understand how critical this information is to the nation. Her strong position on their role of reporting and explaining the data, versus making policy recommendations around them, has helped me understand the key roles and responsibilities of the nonprofit/academic research sector and the government sector in the KNII project. Our discussions in this area are ongoing.

Name: Dr. Jane Ross

Title: Director, Key National Indicators Initiative (KNII), Member of the National Academies

Contact Information: Ph: 202.334.2092, email: jross@nas.edu

Date Interviewed: Ongoing from November 1, 2006 to present

Interview Details:

Dr. Ross and I have also been in ongoing discussions on KNII. In a phone interview I had with her on November 1, 2006, she was very helpful in explaining some of the barriers facing KNII. Funding, to no surprise, is an issue. Foundations are willing to contribute up to half a million dollars or so at a time. However, such an endeavor as KNII will require many millions of dollars to launch, and then considerable ongoing funding to maintain. Ross explained that KNII envisions a public/private partnership that includes government funding, investors and foundations. Ideally, the government would fund the project up to the 50% level so as to insure its ongoing success. This would give KNII the financial backing it needs to attract ongoing investment and foundation support, while maintaining its independence and freedom from political interference. So far they have secured mostly foundation support, but the project is moving forward. (November 1, 2006).

Another current barrier, Dr. Ross explained, is involvement. So far the work at KNII is being done by a relatively limited group within a select specialist community. KNII's Steering Committee and National Coordinating Committee represent an impressive coalition of experts (see http://www.keyindicators.org/KNII_Steering_Committee.html and http://www.keyindicators.org/KNII_NCC.pdf Retrieved November 5, 2006) from the public, private, non profit, governmental, academic, scientific, environmental, labor, media, education, minority, research, and social services sectors. The National Coordinating Committee, in particular, is impressive and diverse. But its membership primarily represents the top tier of professionals in each of the category areas.

Ross maintains that this is one of the weaknesses of the effort to date, i.e., that it is currently working primarily with the upper tier of professionals, and that it needs to diversify and move down to the next level of involvement in order to broaden its credibility and ensure that the initiative speaks with a broad enough voice: One that "will give us a thorough look at how the nation is doing" (J. Ross, personal communication, November 1, 2006). Dr. Ross, and the members of KNII, are committed to seeing this happen.

Dr. Ross elaborated on this in a follow-up email dated December 28, 2006:

Broadly stated, we've been working on one technical question and one governance questions related to the development of a system of national indicators. The technical question is what information should be assembled, from all the available sources, to meet the needs of citizens as they attempt to engage in the solution of important problems. This question has many dimensions, such as data quality, relevance and legitimacy. As we discussed, we're currently working to answer this question with input from a broad range of the informed public.

In our conversation, I questioned Dr. Ross about congressional involvement in KNII, and why it was that the U.S. government was not taking responsibility for such an important effort? Dr. Ross expressed the belief that such an initiative, as KNII, would benefit from being part of a broad structure, including both the private and public sectors, and that increased diversity would heighten the credibility of their efforts. "KNII's credibility and legitimacy," Dr. Ross explained, "rests on providing the same objective data to everyone" (J. Ross, personal communication, November 1, 2006).

Dr. Ross elaborated on the role of the federal government in the KNII in a subsequent email:

...any system of national indicators will rely very heavily on the social, economic and environmental data that are currently being collected by the Federal government. The Census Bureau, Bureau of Labor Statistics, National Center for Health Statistics, Environmental Protection Agency and many other Executive Branch agencies collect large amounts of useful and trustworthy data. It's their

wonderful data that make a project like the Key National Indicators possible. Most of the data that we will be assembling are being collected by some agency within the Federal government. Some additional data will come from private data collection efforts, such as the General Social Survey, and some from states and localities. (J. Ross, personal communication, December 28, 2006).

Dr. Ross was also made helpful suggestions on my desire to contact members of Congress to enlist their support for KNII:

I welcome your sending information our project to members of Congress. I suggest that you urge members to learn more about the project and that you avoid financial specifics. When you send information, I hope you'll include our Progress and Plans document and suggest that people who are interested contact me for additional discussion. I'd certainly be pleased to discuss the technical, governance and financial aspects of the project with anyone who's interested. (J. Ross, personal communication, December 28, 2006).

Conclusion: Dr. Ross has helped me understand the prospects for the KNII project, and, inadvertently, the tension around the issue of KNII and the involvement of the federal government. On the one hand, sustained funding from the federal government will be important for the long-term success of this project. Keeping it at up to or just below the 50% level, should provide KNII with enough independence to maintain the integrity of this project. In addition, much of the information that will be gathered for KNII will be coming from government agencies and sources. However, Dr. Ross stresses that the integrity of this project will be dependent on working with a broad coalition of diverse funders and stakeholders, so as to best reflect and report upon the issues critical to our nation.

Name: Senator Patty Murray

Title: U.S. Senator, Democrat, Washington State

Contact Information: Ph: 202. 224.2621

Date Interviewed: First appointment with staff set for Wednesday, January 24th.

Bio: Senator Murray is the senior Senator from Washington State having served 3 terms. She is now the 4th ranking Democrat in the party caucus and a senior member of the Senate Appropriations Committee. Senator Murray is from a working-class family and was one of 7 children. She rose through the ranks beginning with her local school board, up through the state legislature and into the Senate. Originally derided as the “mom in tennis shoes,” Senator Murray has become a behind the scenes power house in support for working families, healthcare and preserving the environment. She would be an ideal champion for the Key National Indicator’s Initiative in terms of securing funding and involving Congress.

Interview Status: On January 5, 2007, I mailed Senator Murray a packet of information that included a cover letter, a copy of my research on the need to monitor social as well as economic indicators, a copy of the latest report from the Key National Indicator's Initiative (*State of the USA: Progress and Plans 2003-2006*), with a request for a phone interview. Since then I have been working my way through channels. I have finally secured a meeting with a junior member of her staff on Wednesday, January 24th, plus received a call from the scheduler for Senator Murray's Legislative Director, while I was out of town on Friday, January 19th, requesting an appointment. I will be following up with these two contacts next week, with the goal of to encouraging Senator Murray to champion KNII.

CURRENT PROJECT STATUS: I have been able to use the MSCP – Part 3 interview assignment as a way to forge important relationships with key stakeholders in the Key National Indicators Initiative. In the process, I have begun forming my own team of advisors as I work towards drafting an outreach plan for KNII. Each advisor (interviewee) has offered a different look at a critical aspect of this project: The role of government, the role of the press, the role of the business sector, the level of involvement of the nonprofit sector and community indicator groups needed to bring information in and send information out to the public, the problems associated with deciding which indicators to chose and how to go about this process effectively, and, finally, the issue of data interpretation and when and how to incorporate that. I will continue to work with these stakeholders and broaden my "team" as I attempt to help them move towards consensus on what needs to be done and how by asking them to apply their expertise to certain areas. In addition, I will continue to work towards identifying and securing a high level champion inside Congress to help provide that necessary link and support.

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