

Institutions are Social Infrastructure.

The Sinews of Small Cities and Towns.

The Need for Institutions.

Institutions embody the values of society and the processes used to promote civic behavior in a manner consistent with society's norms and conventions. Sometimes these need to be challenged and their purposes revisited, but rarely do they need to be eliminated or denigrated. As Professor Fukuyama expresses in *State-Building, Governance and the New World Order in the 21st Century*, "more or less government [and institutional systems] is not the issue; building effective governments and institutions that meet society's needs is the assignment."

In small cities and towns, institutions and governments provide structures for groups of people, businesses and all types of organizations to identify and try to remedy bad situations while promoting desirable outcomes. Institutions in combination with progressive governments in smaller communities have been particularly effective in improving the lives of the elderly, the young, the impaired and the impoverished.

The Once-Strong Institutions of Family and Religion.

The long-term disintegration of the family unit has been conscientiously observed and well documented. The reduced reliance on religious institutions to provide society with a moral compass has likewise been long-noticed. Recent disregard for educational and healthcare institutions has further advanced the intrusion of chaos.

Educational Institutions.

Compulsory secondary education was a major achievement of the early 20th century with federal action requiring secondary education for all children in America. "The High School Movement" catapulted the United States into a period of general prosperity following the have/have not Gilded Age ruled by the robber barons.

sin·ew...A piece of tough fibrous tissue uniting muscle to bone or bone to bone; a tendon or ligament.

LINK:

<https://www.google.com/>

"The High School Movement"

From 1910 to 1940, a grassroots effort commonly described as the high school movement led to a "spectacular educational transformation" in America, according to Harvard economists Claudia Goldin and Lawrence Katz. The movement raised enrollment of 18-year olds to 71 percent from 19 percent and graduation rates to more than 50 percent from 9 percent, lifting the US to the forefront of educational attainment in the world. It was a response to a "skills gap" problem—soaring demand for a supply of educated workers to staff new white-collar jobs. **LINK:**

<https://www.educationnext.org/new-high-school-movement-rises-faster-cheaper-paths-careers/>

21st century assaults on public education have eroded the benefits of education in producing a skilled workforce and an informed citizenry. Some suggest civic ignorance is a political strategy; perhaps, but a poor performance by educational institutions exacerbates the trend.

Health Institutions.

The COVID-19 pandemic has been especially destructive to national health care institutions. The politicization of mask-wearing and vaccinations has diminished the long-standing inherent authority of health care institutions such as the Center for Disease Control and Prevention and the National Institutes of Health. The “cowboy” attitude towards science has disturbed the foundations of once highly-regarded professions and institutions upon which society relied.

Like the educational institutions, the health institutes have been attacked from without and from within. In many cases their performance has warranted distrust. The archaic practices of some school boards are abhorrent tainting the many progressive and trustworthy school boards around America. Instances of poor hospital care for veteran and the general population cause concerns that existing institutions are too incaltrant to penetrate.

Social media has many good and not-so-good features. One terrific feature is that bad behavior at the institutional level can no longer be hidden. Lights are being cast on institutions; poor performance is becoming public knowledge. While knowledge is easier to come by than the remedy, it is an essential start. Perhaps the virtual world and the individualistic nature of social media is replacing the social structure provided by family, religion, education and healthcare; perhaps the internet is becoming the institution now being relied upon by more and more people for the direction of their lives and their behavior. “Disruption” is in vogue; disruption without system resolution, improvement or replacement is civically insane.

Public Safety.

“De-fund the police”; who would ever have thought that would be public utterance by once responsible citizens and public officials. Yet, social and racial justice are eluding contemporary society. Solutions need to be found without destroying the responsible public safety systems that are serving citizens in progressive communities. This is another instance of established institutions under scrutiny based on bad performance in enough jurisdictions to demand attention.

Institutions are critical players in every city and town. They provide services the government cannot or will not provide. They offer leadership opportunities to interested citizens not wanting or ready for elected office. They define the issues of interest to the city’s residents and businesses.

The Role of Social Media.

One reason for the attack on established institutions is that some have behaved badly and their performance is coming to light; a light benefitting from personal cameras that record images of bad behavior and social media that conveys the images around the world in an instant. The flashlight we are used to is becoming a flood light; light is shining on all aspects of public life and life in public. The good of it is the exposure of bad behavior, the downside is the intrusion of the world into everyone's private affairs. The clarification of domains for intrusion is a fluid process needing to be re-clarified with each generation.

An Opportunity for Community Participation and Leadership.

Institutions are organizations that depend on active memberships, hence a place for people to engage with issues of concern. Institutions also are places for people, especially the younger "up and comers", to learn leadership and public engagement skills.

The City's Institutions Define Its Vision and Values.

The names and missions of the city's institutions, NGOs and citizen committees present the issues and values of interest to the town's residents and businesses. A robust cadre of institutions reflects well on the host community.

An Opportunity for Small Cities and Towns.

Given the general deterioration of established institutions, small cities and towns have the opportunity and perhaps the responsibility to step forward to fill the void. Small communities and small places within large communities are where people are more likely to know one another. Small city residents and business owners are more likely to know their elected officials, their bankers, their doctors, their school principals, their police chief, their grocery store staff and the many essential workers that enable the town to function.

This opportunity for interpersonal relations has to be recognized, emphasized, enhanced and celebrated. Small towns can do this. Small towns can lead the resurgence of institutional trust. They can build hometown spirit and civic pride. This is the job; the job is to build honest and compassionate governance systems, to treasure family, religious, educational, public safety and healthcare institutions; to place the emphasis on the justice aspect of civil society. The financial, physical and social systems of small cities and towns can do this.

Small communities with engaged citizens and trustworthy institutions can remain or become interesting, pleasant and prosperous places for all residents, businesses and visitors.