

The Mother of Science

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“Nothing, in my opinion, is more deserving of our attention than the intellectual and moral associations of America. The political and industrial associations of that country strike us forcibly; but the others elude our observations, or if we discover them, we understand them imperfectly because we have hardly ever seen anything of the kind. It must be acknowledged, however, that they are as necessary to the American people as the (political and industrial) associations, and perhaps more so. In democratic countries the science of association is the mother of science; the progress of all the rest depends on the progress it has made.”

– Alexis de Tocqueville
Democracy in America

While there may not be any University Departments of Associational Science, Tocqueville still commends us to study their nature and functions because of their critical role in a democracy. Indeed, the practice of associational life is often viewed as the “school for democracy.” As we study associations, it is useful to begin by understanding the topography of the associational domain – the space not occupied by commercial, governmental or not for profit institutions.

Definition

An association can be understood as a club, group, or organization of people where the members do the work but they are not paid. They may have a paid member like a convener, organizer or pastor. However, the essential work is produced by members who act, within associations as citizens.

Associations are as varied as the human interests that lead people to create them. They include American Legion posts, book clubs, sports leagues, senior clubs, choirs, 4-H clubs, advocacy groups, etc. These organizations are the core of a democratic society because they are the means by which free people make power by acting together. This is why the first amendment of our Bill of Rights identifies our primary freedoms as free speech and free association and assembly.

Examples of Associations

In practice, associations may be informal or formal. An informal association could be a group of women who meet each Saturday morning at a diner where they have coffee. They are an association, but they have no public name.

The more formal associations are characterized by having names and, frequently, officers. A useful typology of modern associations is:

1. Addiction Prevention and Recovery Groups

- Drug Ministry/Testimonial Group for Addicts
- Campaign for a Drug Free Neighborhood
- High School Substance Abuse Committee

2. Advisory Community Support Groups

(friends of...)

- Friends of the Library
- Neighborhood Park Advisory Council
- Hospital Advisory Group

3. Animal Care Groups

- Cat Owner's Association
- Humane Society

4. Anti-Crime Groups

- Children's Safe Haven Neighborhood Group
- Police Neighborhood Watch
- Senior Safety Groups

5. Block Clubs

- Condominium Owner's Association
- Building Council
- Tenant Club

6. Business Organizations/ Support Groups

- Jaycees
- Local Chamber of Commerce
- Economic Development Council
- Local Restaurant Association

7. Charitable Groups and Drives

- Local Hospital Auxiliary
- Local United Way
- United Negro College Fund Drive

8. Civic Events Groups

- Local Parade Planning Committee
- Arts and Crafts Fair
- July 4th Carnival Committee
- Health Fair Committee

9. Cultural Groups

- Community Choir
- Drama Club
- Dance Organization
- High School Band

10. Disability/Special Needs Groups

- Special Olympics Planning Committee
- Local American Lung Association
- Local Americans with Disabilities Association
- Local Muscular Dystrophy Association

11. Education Groups

- Local School Council
- Local Book Clubs
- Parent Teacher Association
- Literacy Council
- Tutoring Groups

12. Elderly Groups

- Hospital Seniors Clubs
- Westside Seniors Clubs
- Church Seniors Clubs
- Senior Craft Club

13. Environmental Groups

- Neighborhood Recycling Club
- Sierra Club
- Adopt-a-Stream
- Bike Path Committee
- Clean Air Committee
- Pollution Council
- Save the Park Committee

14. Family Support Groups

- Teen Parent Organization
- Foster Parents' Support Group
- Parent Alliance Group

15. Health Advocacy and Fitness Groups

- Weight Watchers
- YMCA/YWCA Fitness Groups
- Neighborhood Health Council
- Traffic Safety Organization
- Child Injury Prevention Group
- Yoga Club

16. Heritage Groups

- Black Empowerment Group
- Norwegian Society
- Neighborhood Historical Society
- African American Heritage Association

17. Hobby and Collectors Group

- Coin Collector Association
- Stamp Collector Association
- Arts and Crafts Club
- Garden Club of Neighbors
- Sewing Club
- Antique Collectors

18. Men's Groups

- Fraternal Orders
- Church Men's Organizations
- Men's Sports Organizations
- Fraternities

19. Mentoring Groups

- After School Mentors
- Peer Mentoring Groups
- Church Mentoring Groups
- Big Brothers, Big Sisters
- Rights of Passage Organizations

20. Mutual Support Groups

- La Leche League
- Disease Support Groups (cancer, etc.)
- Parent-to-Parent Groups
- Family-to-Family Groups

21. Neighborhood Improvement Groups

- The Neighborhood Garden Club
- Council of Block Clubs
- Neighborhood Anti-Crime Council
- Neighborhood Clean-up Campaign

22. Political Organizations

- Democratic Club
- Republican Club

23. Recreation Groups

- Kite-flying Club
- Bowling Leagues
- Basketball Leagues
- Body Builders Club
- Little League

24. Religious Groups

- Churches
- Mosques
- Synagogues
- Men's Religious Groups
- Women's Religious Groups
- Youth Religious Groups

25. Service Clubs

- Zonta
- Optimist
- Rotary Clubs
- Lions Clubs
- Kiwanis Clubs

26. Social Groups

- Bingo Club
- Card Playing Club
- Social Activity Club
- Dance Clubs

27. Social Cause/ Advocacy/ Issue Groups

- Get Out the Vote Council
- Peace Club
- Hunger Organizations
- Vigil Against Violence
- Community Action Council
- Social Outreach Ministry
- Soup Kitchen Group

28. Union Groups

- Industrial (UAW)
- Crafts Unions (Plumbing Council)

29. Veteran's Groups

- Veterans of Foreign Wars
- Women's Veterans Organizations

30. Women's Groups

- Sororal Organizations
- Women's Sports Groups
- Women's Auxiliary
- Mother's Board
- Eastern Star

31. Youth Groups

- After School Group
- 4-H
- Girl and Boy Scouts
- Junior Achievement
- Campfire Girls

Associational Functions

The functions of associations are numerous and diverse. Primarily they serve the self-interests of the members. People associate because they care about each other and/or they care about the same things. The "glue" that holds them together is mutual care rather than money which is the "glue" which holds institutions together.

Beyond fulfilling immediate self-interests, associations are also schools for citizenship providing space for practice in public affairs and civic life. This participation often involves the exercise of three powers:

...the power to decide what needs to be done.

...the power to create a method to do it.

...the power to implement their solution themselves or by recruiting their neighbors, other associations and institutions to join their effort.

In engaging in these three steps, they are acting powerfully, experiencing the meaning of citizenship and their own efficacy.

Self-efficacy is further enhanced by those associations that have vertical structures that allow them to express themselves at the regional, state or federal level. Examples would be the United Auto Workers, American Legion and League of Women Voters.

These tiered associations are intermediary bodies connecting individuals and their associational concerns to institutions with other capacities and forms of power. In this way, the local associations become a magnifier of each member's voice and the concerns they advocate.

The Efficacy of the Collective Work of Local Associations

While most associations provide some form of community benefit, the aggregate of their work is the infrastructure of communities. A study of the collective community benefits of local associations was supported by the Kettering Foundation in 2012 and conducted by the Asset-Based Community Development Institute. The study involved an extensive analysis of 62

associations in the small Wisconsin town of Spring Green, WI (population 1,600). The summary of this study illuminates the collective efficacy of multiple associations as they create (unintentionally) the infrastructure of community life through citizen decision making and action. The study's summary outlines the collective impacts:

Parallel Functions of Associations and Service Institutions

Reviewing the data, one is impressed by the diversity and density of the associations as well as the multitude of functions and benefits they provide. One hypothesis is that their frequency is related to the relative absence of local institutions providing social services. Spring Green is in the southwest corner of the county while the county seat and many social services are physically located in the northeast. Consequently, there are almost no social service facilities and very few resident social service professionals. The result may be that the numerous associations providing services have emerged to fill the institutional absence.

The Associational Safety Net

It is clear from these data that the associations have created a dense system of service, providing personal and social support. The study makes visible the rich infrastructure of associational production of wellbeing that is usually invisible to policy makers or service providers. This "invisibility" limits both an understanding of the community safety net or the policies that could support, enhance or expand the associational system and its productivity.

The Web of Associational Relationships

The study reveals a complex network of relationships surrounding each association. First, each association creates a context for relationships that empower each member. Second, the associations have relationships with each other when they engage in collective initiatives. Third, some associations have relationships with regional, statewide or national organizations. Fourth, many associations have relationships with local non-governmental institutions including businesses and not-for-profit groups. Finally, the associations have relationships with governments, primarily at the local level. This dense vertical and horizontal web is, in itself, a structure that provides several community benefits.

1. The structure is a network that communicates information among the community actors.
2. The information creates the basis for partnerships, coalitions and joint activities.
3. The network enhances the effectiveness of both the institutions and associations.
4. The connections between associations and institutions facilitate bridging as well as bonding.
5. The entire structure is the community generator of social capital.

The Learning Functions of Associations

Associational benefits are often classified as creating relationships that enable activity. However, it is significant that the most frequent reason given by interviewees as to why residents join their group is classified as “learning.” When asked what the major benefit residents get from their association, once again the most frequent classification is “learning.” With the exception of only one group (a book club), the learning is the result of an activity. In this sense, the associations are providing experiential learning, a powerful pedagogy distinct from most classroom learning. This learning through association is a form of adult continuing education that deserves further study and recognition as a major source of community knowledge.

Fundraising and the Culture of Care

In many communities, the major fundraising activity is the United Way. This agency gathers most of its funds through institutions that solicit their employees for contributions. In Spring Green, there is no United Way. This may be the reason that one third of the associations studied indicated that they engaged in “charitable giving and drives.” Contrasted with the United Way process, this associational giving involves the members in deciding who should receive the money as well as direct personal knowledge or engagement with the recipient. This personalization of giving supports a community culture of care that is not present with a system of annual contributions at the workplace.

Associations and Power

It is significant that only 8 of the 60 associations indicated they have engaged in advocacy with some level of government regarding an issue. In a majority of these cases, the advocacy involved the village government. There is a theory that associations are “mediating institutions,” providing a means for local individuals to gain collective power in dealing with larger, distant institutions such as the higher levels of government. These data from this study indicate that this mediating function is not prevalent. Further study could focus on the other means of advocacy that local people use to influence the state and national government. However, it may be that the local associations are understood as tools for empowerment through the production of community benefits rather than vehicles seeking outside help. While “power” is often understood as the ability to effectively advocate for change, a power of equal importance is the ability to create change with the resources of the community—principally the web of local associations.

The Future

In Yoni Appelbaum’s article titled, “Losing the Democratic Habit” (Atlantic Magazine, October 2018) he observes that:

“Like most habits democratic behavior develops slowly over time, through constant repetition. For two centuries, the United States, was distinguished by its mania for democracy. From early childhood, Americans learned to be citizen by creating, joining and participating in democratic organizations. But in recent decades, Americans have fallen out of practice, or even failed to acquire the habits of democracy in the first place.

The results have been catastrophic. As the procedures that once conferred legitimacy on organizations have grown alien to many Americans, contempt for Democratic institutions has risen.”

This dire warning urges us to develop the science of associations. We can do no less than understand and share broadly the associational habit that is the core of democratic practice and community well-being.