



# THE FOUR- LEGGED STOOL

JOHN L. MCKNIGHT

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A STUDY FOR THE KETTERING FOUNDATION

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## **About the Author**

John McKnight initially worked as a community organizer for America's first governmental civil rights organization—The Chicago Commission on Human Relations. Then, as executive director of the Illinois Division, American Civil Liberties Union, he continued his organizing activities, creating chapters throughout the state. Subsequently he joined the newly elected Kennedy administration in a new department that designed and introduced the affirmative action program. He next directed the Midwest Office of the United States Civil Rights Commission, organizing state citizen groups providing federal help to the Civil Rights Movement. In 1969, he joined the faculty of Northwestern University as Professor of Communications Studies and Urban Affairs. There, his principle role was the creation of a new Center for Urban Affairs, later the Institute for Policy Research. Then, together with his long-time associate, Jody Kretzman, he created the Asset-Based Community Development institute (ABCD). This institute conducted research on the determinants of effective neighborhood and community organizations. From this research, the “asset-based” approach to community development emerged and has evolved into a worldwide movement that provides an alternative to a “needs-based” approach.

McKnight is currently professor emeritus and codirector of the Asset-Based Community Institute at Northwestern University.

**Editor:** Randall Nielsen

**Copy Editor:** Lisa Boone-Berry

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**C**IVIL SOCIETY HAS RECENTLY become the central focus of the debates regarding the perceived decline of American society. It is argued that civil society must be strong for democracy to prevail, the economy to grow, and social problems to be resolved. The current social disarray is primarily seen as the result of the weakening of civil society.

To examine this premise, a definition of civil society and its elements is necessary. And yet, the traditional definition is curiously ambiguous. Civil society is usually defined by what it is not. It is not the market and its institutions. It is not the government and its manifestations. It is the remaining social space not occupied by commerce or the state.

Pressed for more detail regarding the occupants of the space of civil society, Americans first point toward the associations described by Tocqueville in *Democracy in America*—those small local citizen organizations that appeared so central to the newly forming democracy that he observed.

Today, however, we usually add not-for-profit organizations to the space of civil society, recognizing that some associations created or became *not-for-profit* institutions. And because these new institutions were not-for-profit, we couldn't assign them to the world of business or the market.

So it is that we now say that civil society is at least the space occupied by associations and not-for-profit corporations. The two are increasingly spoken of as the same phenomena and collapsed into categories, such as not-for-profit groups or associations. They have recently been further solidified by their joint designation as the single “leg” of the societal three-legged stool.

This conception grows from the popular premise that all of society is a “three-legged stool.”

The first leg is business, the second is government, and the third is civil society. Like a milking stool, society becomes dysfunctional if any leg is short or weak. The current argument is that civil society is the short, or weak, leg and thus our societal disarray.

The cure proposed is to revitalize civil society’s associations and not-for-profit corporations. However, before undertaking this remedy, we should be clear about the nature of each of these members so that the treatment will be appropriate to their form.

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When Tocqueville wrote about local associational life, he was generally describing groups of local people who came together to achieve a variety of ends. He wrote:

Americans of all ages, all conditions, and all dispositions constantly form associations. They have not only commercial and manufacturing companies, in which all take part, but associations of a thousand other kinds of religious, moral, serious, futile, general or restricted, enormous or diminutive. The Americans make associations to give entertainments, to found seminaries, to build inns, to construct churches, to diffuse books, to send missionaries to the antipodes, in this manner they found hospitals, prisons, and schools. If it is proposed to inculcate some truth or to foster some feeling by the encouragement of a great example, they form a society.

Alexis de Tocqueville  
*Democracy in America*

Several characteristics distinguished these groups:

1. They were generally small with face-to-face knowledge of the capacities of each member.
2. They were performing their functions without pay, although they may have a paid person, such as a pastor or clerk. However, the key was that the essential work of the group was performed by unpaid members.

3. They were taking on the power to *define* problems or goals.
4. They were taking on powers to create *solutions* or define actions to achieve goals.
5. They often took on the function of implementing the proposed solution or action so that they were the *producers* of the outcomes of their own planning.

Tocqueville saw this process of defining the problem, creating the solution, and implementing it as a political process of power making. So he labeled the people in associations with a political term—*citizen*. An *association* was a collective term for a “group of citizens.” They were taking power by making power through community action.

Among the varied goals of some associations were, and are, the creation of new institutions. Some created hospitals, others created universities, and still others created social-welfare institutions. However, as the institutions emerged from the associational nest, they took on distinctive forms that were in contra-distinction to their associational progenitors:

1. Their scale was large enough and their purposes technical enough that their members could not create effective outcomes. Managers were necessary for the institution to function and technical skills beyond citizen capacities dominated.
2. The institutions’ participants became employees rather than members and their work was rewarded with pay.
3. The powers of problem definition and problem solving were placed in the hands of managers, executives, planners, technicians, and professionals.
4. Paid workers became producers of solutions defined by managers.

In this transformation, a distinctive institutional form emerged from associational space. We now call this form the not-for-profit corporation. However, the new form is radically different from associations in structure, sources of authority, incentives, and knowledge base.

Associations tend to be informal and horizontal. Not-for-profit corporations are usually formal and hierarchical.

Not-for-profits are legally controlled by a few. Associations are activated by the consent of each participant.

Associational participants are motivated by diverse incentives other than pay. Not-for-profit employees are provided paid incentives.

Associations generally use the experience and knowledge of member citizens to perform their functions. Not-for-profits use the special knowledge of professionals and experts to perform their functions.

This definitional difference can be seen in our time by attempting to compare not-for-profit corporations and associations. Consider a not-for-profit hospital and a local weight-reduction association or club. Both purport to assist us to be healthful but the not-for-profit hospital has a 3 million dollar budget, 200 employees, a chief executive officer, and 7 vice presidents. The weight-reduction group has 12 members, a revolving chair, and no budget.

It is difficult to understand how one could categorize these two forms as being similar. In fact, their only similarity is their purpose—good health. But in this purpose, they are both the same as government and market institutions. Governments at all levels seek to improve health. Businesses do the same. So why are associations and not-for-profit institutions classed together?

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When we compare four forms of health-giving institutions, we can begin to see an important clarification emerging. We know there are governmental hospitals—veteran's, county, municipal, etc. We know there are hospitals that are businesses—Humana and Health Corporation of America. We know there are not-for-profit hospitals of varying religious and

charitable groups. And we know there is a weight-reduction association in the neighborhood. Which of these four are alike? Which are unlike?

Obviously, the government, business, and not-for-profit institutions have much more in common than the weight-reduction club has with any of them. This is because the not-for-profit institutions, whether hospital, university, or child-welfare agency, have taken on the basic form of institutions of industrial production or public bureaucracies with presidents, chief executives, deputies, department heads, bureau chiefs on down to front-line producers.

The not-for-profit institution does, however, have two residual spaces for citizens. The first is a governance role. Many not-for-profit systems have board members whose community identity is a valued asset. They sit at the institutional table as citizens with the potential power

to define problems and shape solutions (although paid people will usually implement the decisions). In reality, the technical complexity of the institution often neutralizes the citizen's capacity.

Consider the hospital again. A community resident on the board of directors is likely to be overwhelmed by the issues of occupancy rate, reimbursement systems, new technological acquisitions, etc. This is why most citizen members of boards actually serve mainly as legitimizers of institutional activities or fundraisers. The critical policy and practice decisions remain in the hands of professionals or technically proficient board members.

The second residual citizen role in not-for-profit institutions is as a volunteer. Here, the citizen usually takes on the function of a paid employee but is not paid. The "candy striper," religious counselor, or assistant to a technician is fulfilling the program goals of managers. They have neither the power to decide the problem or the solution. Their function is to fit into an institutional role.

Whether a board member or a volunteer, the powerful political role of a citizen is greatly diminished by the power of the high-scale not-for-profit institution and its managers and technicians. This fact is poignantly portrayed by the sale of many religious hospitals to for-profit corporations because the citizen religious leaders can no longer assert their community purposes within the structural constraints of their not-for-profit institutions. The fact that businesses are able to purchase and immediately manage these institutions indicates how little difference there is between the for-profit and not-for-profit systems.

It seems quite clear, then, that our society has three forms of hierarchical, managed institutions—governmental, for-profit, and not-for-profit. It also has a unique fourth form—popular citizen associations.

Once we recognize that not-for-profit institutions are of the same order as our business and governmental institutions, we can see that we actually have a three-legged *institutional* stool. But this leaves no functional place for the associations.

It should be noted here that the development of our major not-for-profit institutions has not only created a form distinctive from associations, they have also had the often unintended side effect of diminishing the power of many associations or even replacing the groups that spawned them. To not recognize the radical difference between the two forms is to ignore this displacement effect.

Those who decry the loss of associational power and function should first look at the displacement effects of not-for-profit institutions. For example, to the degree that we believe health is produced by hospitals, knowledge and wisdom by universities, social welfare by agencies, and culture by museums and symphonies, we have implicitly accepted the “institutional assumption.” We have failed to recognize the place of associational community life in our healthfulness, knowledge, social well-being, and culture. This is especially paradoxical when we hear from the leaders of not-for-profit institutions that their principal problems are the lack of effective communities and citizens. The medical community says the principal health problems are caused by negative community environments. The educational institutions report that their leading problems are the result of family and community deficiencies. The social-service groups cry out that their good work is overwhelmed by local citizen, family, and associational failure. And the leaders of cultural institutions decry the prevalence of vulgar popular culture that diminishes the institutions.

It is curious, however, that these institutional leaders rarely seem to recognize that their powerful hegemony is a major cause of the community weakness. In their claim to “produce” all well-being, they have often persuaded citizens and their associations that they are impotent or negligible factors in shaping society.

This is why it is critical that we understand that associations and not-for-profit institutions are not of the same order. For if we do not, in focusing on the need for heightened powers for the not-for-profit institutions in civil society, we will actually be diminishing the vital roles of citizen associations. Thus, the current definition of civil society that defines an associational and not-for-profit unit is both factually incorrect and actually counterproductive.

The fact is that society is now a four-legged stool with associations being the fourth support. However, our focus on the three institutional legs has obscured the presence and vitality of the fourth.

This is not a new problem. Indeed, in 1833, Tocqueville wrote in *Democracy in America*:

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 former, and perhaps more so. In democratic countries the science of association is the mother of science; the progress of all the rest depends upon the progress it has made.

He saw too that the large, visible institutions of the society led associations to “elude our observations.” The definition of civil society as the domain of not-for-profit institutions and associations serves to heighten the obscurity of the associational center of citizen society.

Tocqueville concludes that understanding associational life is critical, indeed central, to the future of democratic societies. He even suggests that the “science of association is the mother of science.”

No university has yet created a Department of Associational Science. Nor are there many current systematic studies of American associational life. Nonetheless, our historical experience allows us to recognize many of the unique and vital non-institutional functions of associations.

First, we should recognize some definitional characteristics of associations. While they are primarily groups of people whose unpaid members do the primary work of the organization, within that boundary there are many significant differences.

Associations vary greatly in scale. Some are a handful of people while others may have thousands of members. Some associations are very formal while others may not even have a name. Some are well connected in natural networks and organizations while others are autonomous. And associations have even greater diversity of purposes that still reflect Tocqueville’s amazed report on groups so variously formed as to “create entertainments, ... diffuse books ... or to inculcate some truth”—attributes that help us recognize their distinction from government, business, and not-for-profit institutions.

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However varied and diverse the associations might appear to be, they have at least a dozen common characteristics that distinguish them from government, business, and not-for-profit institutions. It is these distinctions that define the fourth leg of the stool. And without this leg, the other three will not support a viable society.

First, associations are groups of citizens pulled together by common consent. This consent is based upon a mutual concern or interest. In this consenting mutuality is the genesis of care—the personal commitment of one to another. The members care about a goal, and

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each other. It is this care that manifests itself as the mutual support described as community. It is especially vivid in the mutual care within self-help groups, such as Alcoholics Anonymous.

Historically, it was the network of local associations that provided the daily personal care and support for youth, the elderly, and the vulnerable.

This citizen care is not a service. A service is the commodified product of an institution. This kind of service is of a different order than the care of friend, neighbor, club, group, or association at the local level.

Institutions provide service as a scarce commodity for a price. Associational communities can provide abundant care without money. It is this distinction that is critical to understanding the value of citizen care. We will never have enough money to pay for service substitutes for care. But if we did, we would find that service can never substitute for care. We are already recognizing this fact in the lives of youth. Most neighborhood people now understand that we can never hire enough youth workers to “correct” our young people. We see more clearly that there is no substitute for caring citizens and their associations. Indeed, it is growing common knowledge that we cannot create a community where people care for each other if our approach is to surround the citizens with social-service institutions that push citizens and

their associations aside. The result of this strategy has been to create institutionally dependent individuals rather than interdependent associations of care.

Second, local associations can not only provide daily caring support, but they also have unique capacities to respond in times of great stress and crisis. Whether, flood, fire, or family crisis, associations are known for their quick response in mobilizing the caring capacities of local citizens. They are not burdened with the institutional weight of planning committees, administrative staffs, case-worker schedules, etc. And at their best they are able to mobilize many more people than paid systems can achieve.

Third, in a mass society we recognize the critical need for individual responses to individual dilemmas. Our not-for-profit service institutions have great difficulty developing programs that recognize the unique characteristics and needs of each person. Indeed, their strength is in their ability to mass produce because they are modeled after commercial systems of mass production. They can create minimum or uniform standards. But unique individuals are not their natural constituents.

Associations, on the other hand, are groups of people with names and unique characteristics known to their members. Individualization is necessary for their successful functioning. They must recognize the unique talents of each member and respond to their unique needs, often with the talents of other members. Because associations are so practiced in individualization, they can provide critical personalized responses to members and non-members.

Fourth, associations provide a collective form of problem solving. They usually recognize and synthesize the unique ideas of each member. If they do not, they will atrophy or die because their association is voluntary and unrecognized members will leave. Through this synthesis, the ideas of individuals become the basis for transforming citizens into producers rather than consumers or clients.

The inverse is the institutional problem-solving process, based upon the work of managed professionals who see citizens as consumers, clients, and sometimes advisors. At its base, the association is the place where citizens work and their problem definitions and solutions prevail. No institution can serve this function nor “produce” these solutions.

The fifth attribute flows from the fourth. We are clearly members of a technological society—the realm of experts, technicians, and professionals. Each has a trained, specific, proprietary *knowledge base*. This knowledge is based upon a set of assumptions that necessarily lead to what

Jacques Ellul would call a “technological society.” Essentially, this is a solution that is produced by an institution. If it can’t be institutionally produced, the expert has no other way. His or her only tool is a hammer.

Associations of citizens provide the other way, filling the vast space where institutional solutions cannot reach or fail. The critical difference is that the knowledge base of citizens is personal experience and common sense. This knowledge usually leads to distinctive problem definitions and solutions. And it is these solutions that provide a valuable counterbalance or alternative to the narrow world of technical answers. The American Revolution was the result of citizens called to action based upon *Common Sense*.

Sixth, associations provide citizens one of the two means by which they can use their political power in a democracy. Tocqueville recognized the fact that the citizen’s power to vote was a necessary but limited power. It is, after all, the power to give your power away—if you are in the majority.

In “discovering” American associations he recognized that he had identified a second powerful citizen role in a democracy, the power of association. In association he saw Americans making power. In voting he saw them delegating power. “Democracy in America,” he understood, was a new form because it was not just voting, as in Europe. Rather it was a much more potent democracy because citizens had power to *act* through association. This action also manifested their sense of responsibility.

We hear a great deal today of the feeling of frustration and powerlessness of many citizens. Our unique form for their empowerment is associations. Our not-for-profit institutions cannot fulfill this function and in many cases they *are* the institutions toward which people feel powerless.

Seventh, community associations proliferate to incorporate people of all conditions, capacities, and interests. In their diversity they can create places for all, fulfilling the democratic ideal of universal participation. In this proliferation, they are reminiscent of another democratic bulwark, freedom of speech. Just as the answer to bad speech is more speech, so negative or exclusive associations are met by the creation of positive and inclusive ones.

In their diversity they empower the greatest number of people to be productive. Our three institutions, however, each ration power for the few at the top of the hierarchy and generally

claim that their rewards go to those of greatest excellence. In this sense, most institutional participants in hierarchies are necessarily losers in the reach for power.

In associations, however, strength is in their ability to maximize the power of every member.

The eighth unique associational attribute flows from the seventh. As associations proliferate, the space for leadership multiplies. And as leadership of each association rotates, the experience proliferates. In this way, America's great space for leadership development is in associational life.

The contrasting leadership opportunities in institutional hierarchies are limited by their very pyramidal structure. In institutions the common experience is competition to be a leader. In associational space the common experience is an offering to be a leader.

Ninth, associations provide a vital mediating function in societies dominated by institutions. As mega systems grow in power, individuals are increasingly overwhelmed and overpowered in pursuit of their purposes. However, as members of associations they gain power as their associations negotiate a citizen's place for their members. This advocacy role of associations greatly magnifies the capacity of citizens to influence the policies and practices of institutions in ways that can never be replaced by institutional creations, such as citizen advisory boards or consumer representatives.

Tenth, recent research suggests that a rich network of local associations is the nest from which enterprises grow. These studies indicate that rather than institutional enterprise programs, we may be better advised to support the growth and connectedness of associations if we are to enhance our local economies. This support would include policies leading not-for-profit institutions to reduce those activities and programs that replace or repress associational functions and connections.

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Eleventh, associations provide the basic context for the formation and expression of citizen opinions and values. This is true whether the association is intentionally focused on issues, i.e. League of Women Voters, or is a gathering of people whose affinity is gardening or bowling. It is in these consenting affinity groups that the shift of opinion and value is most common.

Associations are the *forum* for democracy that is based upon the debate and dialogue of citizens. A democracy of isolated citizens who only vote is a weak form of democracy that is an assembly of opinion rather than the collective wisdom generated by a citizen marketplace.

Twelfth, associations are historically the seedbed from which the more formalized systems grow. They have nurtured enterprises, educational institutions, medical initiatives, charities, cultural and religious institutions. This is an ongoing function that is vital to our national renewal.

Today we are facing the limits of many of our aging traditional institutions. Large city schools seem unable to educate effectively. Criminal-justice systems fail to reform. Welfare systems fail to support people to become productive citizens. Medical systems contribute very little to the public health. In the face of these limits we are investing incredible technical and financial resources in institutional reform that has had quite limited effect.

At the same time, our associations are hard at work inventing alternative and effective forms that still “elude the observations” of policymakers. We see a multitude of local community initiatives to create new educational forms or appropriate new schools. Associational efforts to provide alternatives for youth have proliferated across the nation. Church and other associational initiatives are creating new approaches to introducing and supporting marginalized people as productive citizens. Local “healthy community” initiatives are creating effective new means of actually improving health status.

What has most clearly “eluded” many institutional reformers is the fact that the old systems may now be inappropriate. In many cases, the ability to “observe” the associational inventions may suggest the form of new institutions rather than the reform of outdated structures.

In the current economic crisis, the need for these 12 associational capacities has become vivid. Each of our three major institutions is pulling back from local community space. As governments cut budgets, not-for-profits reduce programs, and businesses contract, the need for an alternative source of production becomes clear. Therefore, the future of our well-being depends on our making visible and supporting the fourth leg of the American stool—associational life.





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200 Commons Road, Dayton, Ohio 45459-2799; (937) 434-7300; (800) 221-3657  
444 North Capitol Street, NW, Washington, DC 20001; (202) 393-4478  
6 East 39th Street, New York, New York 10016; (212) 686-7016

