

Wolfensberger's "Gresham's Law" of Human Services

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EDITORS' NOTE: This manuscript was undated but based on details in the text, it may stem from the mid 1980s. We see Dr. Wolfensberger focusing readers' attention on the question of service quality, a concern that runs through his thinking on Normalization, SRV and Citizen Advocacy. He draws our attention to some of the universal problems accompanying efforts at service reform. This paper also incorporates examples of his wide reading in different fields and his capacity to adapt and incorporate historical examples into his teaching.

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There is a law in economics that is called Gresham's Law, named after the English merchant, Sir Thomas Gresham (1519-1579). It says that of two forms of currency (i.e., money) in circulation, the less valuable form tends to displace the more valuable one because people will hoard the latter. The law is simply stated as "bad money drives out good." For instance, when gold, silver and copper are all used for coins, people will hoard the gold, which will gradually disappear from circulation, and use the silver and copper more. Once gold disappears or is no longer legal tender, the same will happen with silver. Even copper pennies can disappear from circulation if people come to believe that copper is more valuable than coins of the same denomination

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made of cheaper metals, or even than coins of higher denominations but less valuable metal, or than the value of paper currency.

A distressing parallel phenomenon in human services is that the more effective or more valid practices habitually get displaced by less valid or less effective ones. Since 1986, I have called this the Wolfensberger formulation of the Gresham's Law of human services.

Below are four ways in which this law expresses itself.

1. Bad ideas drive out good (or less bad) ones in human services, and consequently, bad services drive out good (or less bad) ones. Even worse, good or decent services will almost always drive out excellent ones. Thus, in human services, the good is without doubt the worst enemy of the best.
2. Short-term purported “solutions” (actually strategies) drive out more effective long-term ones, and do so even more than bad services drive out good ones.
3. Service workers who press for desirable changes (i.e., the better alternative) are typically extruded in some form (e.g., fired, forced to resign, or put out to pasture), while service workers who ought to be extruded are kept in powerful positions, and often even get promoted.
4. Disincentives to good service far outnumber (or at least outweigh) incentives to good service. This has several corollaries.

- a. Because it is the imperial powers (e.g., the ruling classes, funders, government, regulatory bodies) that set up so many of the service incentives and disincentives, the more a service is praised and rewarded by the imperial powers, the worse such a service is apt to be.
- b. One of the disincentives is that success for individual servers means being moved into positions and functions more remote from the people served, e.g., by being promoted, and moving up the ladder into administrative or other positions with little or no client contact.
- c. Because the incentives are to maintain the status quo, if not to do things which actually decrease service quality, this means that the natural tendency of services is to define as optimal that which is only a slight variation on what they are currently doing.
- d. Because there are so many disincentives, servers and services may never get around to doing what clients really need. This is why “pre” in human services (e.g., “pre-vocational”) so commonly means “never.”
- e. Rarely are services as good later as they were during their founding period. This is because disincentives almost always dominate over incentives, and thus the “natural history” of a service is to decline from its founding period.
- f. Because human services are full of disincentives to doing the right and needed thing, nothing good happens fast in human services, nor becomes popular quickly. Instead, the good things have to struggle long and hard in an uphill battle. The obverse of this corollary is that

anything that achieves rapid popularity in human services must be a perversion.

There are also other phenomena that could be called “laws” of human services that are, at least in part, consequences of the above Wolfensberger's Gresham's Law of human services. Five examples follow.

1. Every service reform movement eventually becomes an institution that itself requires reform. Often, it becomes what it was founded to reform.
2. It is because services tend to decline in quality over time, and try to cover this up or are struggling (largely unsuccessfully) against this, that services are perpetually in a state of reorganization or “transition.” This is also one of the reasons why they hardly ever want to be subjected to a genuine evaluation “just now ... while we are in transition.”
3. By the same token, the flailing against decline, or against being found out, fuels endless yo-yo or revolving-door strategies of response. For instance, centralization of a service is bound to be followed by strategies of decentralization, which is bound to be followed by a recentralization of services, which is bound to be followed by a redcentralization of services, by a deredcentralization, and so on.
4. The more difficult and complex a service is, and therefore the less easy it is for people to understand, the more harm the service is likely to do.

5. While most people have to “see it to believe it,” the power of expectancies in human services is such that one has to believe it to see it, and in regard to bad things even more than in regard to good things.