

# Eleven Signs a City Will Succeed

From *The Atlantic* by James Fallows

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BY THE TIME we had been to half a dozen cities, we had developed an informal checklist of the traits that distinguished a place where things seemed to work. These items are obviously different in nature, most of them are subjective, and some of them overlap. But if you tell us how a town measures up based on these standards, we can guess a lot of other things about it. In our experiences, these things were true of the cities, large or small, that were working best:

**1. Divisive national politics seem a distant concern.** We first traveled during the run-up to the bitter midterm elections of 2014, then while the Supreme Court was ruling on same-sex marriage and Obamacare, and then as the 2016 presidential campaign was gathering steam. Given the places we were visiting, I imagine that many of the people we interviewed were Donald Trump supporters. But the presidential race just didn’t come up. Cable TV was often playing in the background, most frequently Fox News; if people had stopped to talk about what was on, they might have disagreed with one another and with us. But overwhelmingly the focus in successful towns was not on national divisions but on practical problems that a community could address. The more often national politics came into local discussions, the worse shape the town was in.

**2. You can pick out the local patriots.** A standard question we’d ask soon after arrival was “Who makes this town go?” The answers varied widely. Sometimes it was a mayor or a city-council member. Sometimes it was a local business titan or real-estate developer. Sometimes a university president or professor, a civic activist, an artist, a saloon-keeper, a historian, or a radio personality. In one city in West Virginia, we asked a newspaper editor this question, and the answer turned out to be a folk musician who was also a civic organizer. What mattered was that the question *had* an answer, and the more quickly it was provided, the better shape the town was in.

**3. “Public-private partnerships” are real.** Through the years I had assumed this term was just another slogan, or a euphemism for sweetheart deals between Big Government and Big Business. But in successful towns, people can point to something specific and say, *This* is what a partnership means. In Greenville, South Carolina, the public-school system includes an elementary school for engineering in a poor neighborhood. The city runs the school; local companies like GE send in engineers to teach and supervise science fairs, at their own expense. In Holland, Michigan, the family-owned Padnos scrap-recycling company works with a local ministry called 70x7 Life Recovery to hire ex-prisoners who would otherwise have trouble reentering the workforce. In Fresno, California, a collaboration among the city, county, and state governments; local universities; and several tech start-ups trains high-school dropouts

and other unemployed people in computer skills. The more specifically a community can explain what their public-private partnerships mean, the better off the city is.

**4. People know the civic story.** America has a “story,” which everyone understands even if only to say it’s a myth or a lie. A few states have their guiding stories—California as either the ever-promising or the sadly spoiled frontier, Vermont as its own separate Eden. Successful cities have their stories too. For Sioux Falls, South Dakota, that it’s just the right size: big enough so that people who have come from the smaller-town prairie can find challenge, stimulation, opportunity; small enough to be livable and comfortable. For Columbus, Ohio, which is several times larger than Sioux Falls, that it’s big enough to make anything possible; small enough to actually get things done. For Bend, Oregon; or Duluth, Minnesota; or Winters, California, that they are in uniquely attractive locations. For Pittsburgh, that it has set an example of successful turnaround. For Eastport, Maine, or Allentown or Fresno or Detroit, that they are in the process of turning around. As with guiding national myths, the question is not whether these assessments seem precisely accurate to outsiders. Their value is in giving citizens a sense of how today’s efforts are connected to what happened yesterday and what they hope for tomorrow.

**5. They have a downtown.** This seems obvious, but it is probably the quickest single marker of the condition of a town. For a “young” country like the United States, surprisingly many cities still have “good bones,” the classic Main Street–style structures built from the late 1800s through World War II. In the mall-and-freeway decades after the war, some of these buildings were razed and many more were abandoned or disfigured with cheap aluminum fronts. Most of the cities we visited were pouring attention, resources, and creativity into their downtown. The Main Street America project, from the National Trust for Historic Preservation, has coordinated downtown-revival projects in some 2,000 communities. Of the downtowns we saw, Greenville’s and Burlington’s were the most advanced, studied by planners around the world. But downtown ambitions of any sort are a positive sign, and second- and third-floor apartments and condos over restaurants and stores with lights on at night suggest that the downtown has crossed a decisive threshold and will survive.

**6. They are near a research university.** Research universities have become the modern counterparts to a natural harbor or a river confluence. In the short term, they lift the economy by bringing in a student population. Over the longer term, they transform a town through the researchers and professors they attract: When you find a Chinese or German physicist in the Dakotas, or a Yale literature Ph.D. in California’s Central Valley, that person probably works for a university. Research universities have become powerful start-up incubators. For instance: Clemson and the array of automotive-tech firms that have grown up around it in South Carolina, or UC Davis and associated agro-tech ventures. Riverside and San Bernardino were similar-size cities with similar economic prospects at the end of World War II. Their paths have diverged, in part because in the 1950s Riverside was chosen as the site of a new University of California campus.

**7. They have, and care about, a community college.** Not every city can have a research university. Any ambitious one can have a community college. Just about every world-historical trend is pushing the United States (and other countries) toward a less equal, more polarized existence: labor-replacing technology, globalized trade, self-segregated residential-housing patterns, the American practice of unequal district-based funding for public schools.

Community colleges are the main exception, potentially offering a connection to high-wage technical jobs for people who might otherwise be left with no job or one at minimum wage. East Mississippi Community College has taken people who were jobless or on welfare and prepared them for work in nearby factories that pay much more than the local median household income (for instance, some \$80,000 in the steel factory, versus a local median income of about \$35,000). Fresno City College works with local tech firms and the city's Cal State campus to train the children of farm workers (among others) for high-tech agribusiness jobs.

Obviously, this does not end inequality, and badly run community colleges can make things worse by loading students with debt without improving their circumstances. Nationwide, only about 40 percent of those who start at a public community college finish within six years. But we saw a number of schools that were clearly forces in the right direction. The more often and more specifically we heard people talk about their community college, the better we ended up feeling about the direction of that town.

**8. They have unusual schools.** Early in our stay, we would ask what was the most distinctive school to visit at the K–12 level. If four or five answers came quickly to mind, that was a good sign. The examples people suggested ranged widely. Some were “normal” public schools. Some were charters. Some emphasized career and technical training, like Camden County High School, in Georgia. Some were statewide public boarding schools, like the South Carolina Governor's School for the Arts and Humanities, and the Mississippi School for Mathematics and Sciences. Some were religious or private schools. The common theme was intensity of experimentation.

**9. They make themselves open.** The anti-immigrant passion that has inflamed this election cycle was not something people expressed in most of the cities we visited. On the contrary. Politicians, educators, businesspeople, students, and retirees frequently stressed the ways their communities were trying to attract and include new people. Cities as different as Sioux Falls, Burlington, and Fresno have gone to extraordinary lengths to assimilate refugees from recent wars. The mayor of Greenville, South Carolina, asked us to listen for how many different languages we heard spoken on the street by business visitors.

Every small town in America has thought about how to offset the natural brain drain that has historically sent its brightest young people elsewhere. The same emphasis on inclusion that makes a town attractive to talented outsiders increases its draw to its own natives.

**10. They have big plans.** If I see a national politician with a blueprint for how things will be better 20 years from now, I think: “Good luck!” In fact, few national politicians even pretend to offer a long-term vision anymore. When a mayor or city-council member shows me a map of how new downtown residences will look when completed, or where the new greenway will go, I think: “I’d like to come back.” Cities still make plans, because they can do things.

**11. They have craft breweries.** One final marker, perhaps the most reliable: A city on the way back will have one or more craft breweries, and probably some small distilleries too. Until 2012, that would have been an unfair test for Mississippi, which effectively outlawed craft beers by setting maximum alcohol levels at 5 percent. Now that law has changed, and Mississippi has 10 craft breweries. Once-restrictive Utah has even more. A town that has craft breweries also has a certain kind of entrepreneur, and a critical mass of mainly young (except for me) customers. You may think I’m joking, but just try to find an exception.