SECTION TWO

Models of Positive Development in Adolescence and Young Adulthood

CHAPTER TWO

Developmental Assets: An Overview of Theory, Research, and Practice

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Three theoretical constructs guide an applied research initiative aimed at transforming communities to promote positive human development. First, *developmental assets* represent a theoretical construct identifying a wide range of environmental and interpersonal strengths known to enhance educational and health outcomes for children and adolescents (Benson, 1990, 1997, 1998; Benson, Leffert, Scales, & Blyth, 1998; Benson, Scales, Leffert, & Roehlkepartain, 1999). The 40 elements in this framework represent a synthesis of multiple research literatures and are purposefully positioned as health-enhancing resources over which communities have considerable control. Second, *asset-building community* is an evolving conceptual model describing the nature and dynamics of places and settings that provide a constant and equitable flow of asset-building energy to all children and adolescents (Benson, 1997; Benson & Leffert, 2001). This vision of developmentally attentive communities describes multiple arenas of asset-building capacity, including individual-level actions by community residents in informal relationships with children and adolescents, socializing system actions (e.g., families, neighborhoods, schools, congregations, youth organizations), and community-building actions that can be triggered directly or indirectly by the economic and governmental infrastructures of a community.

Finally, *asset-building society* represents an emerging line of conceptualization and inquiry regarding the roles of social norms, public policy, rituals, and media in advancing the asset-building capacity of individuals, systems, and communities (Benson, Scales, & Mannes, 2003). One initial foray into this work is a poll of a nationally representative sample of adult to identify the social norms that advance or hinder adult engagement in the lives of children and adolescents (Scales et al., 2004). In our model, we assume that these three constructs (assets, community, and society) are interrelated dynamically and originally. The third is *asset-building society*, a construct that informs our work in local, state, and national policy arenas.

The work is essentially focused on generating both knowledge and applied strategies for strengthening the developmental infrastructure within communities. The human

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development infrastructure has to do with the patterns, rhythms, and flow of community attentiveness to essential developmental needs and milestones. In essence, we are speaking here of access to core developmental experiences, such as support, engagement, empowerment, belonging, affirmation, boundary setting, structure, and connectedness, all of which are grounded less in program and policy and more in how citizens and socializing systems identify and use their inherent, relational capacities (Benson & Saito, 2001).

There is mounting evidence that this human development infrastructure is particularly fragile in American communities. Take, for example, three types of support and connection that are known to be predictive of significant adolescent health outcomes: sustained relationships with nonrelated adults (i.e., embeddedness in intergenerational community), embeddedness in neighborhoods in which adults know and interact with children and adolescents, and engagement in schools that students perceive as caring and supportive. These three forms of support, each of which is essentially about adult attentiveness and connection, are 3 of 40 developmental assets discussed in the next section. In survey-based profiles of hundreds of urban, suburban, and rural communities, we have discovered that these kinds of support mechanisms are relatively uncommon (Benson et al., 1999). To be precise, an aggregated sample of 99,462 middle school and high school students in 213 cities yields these percentages of youth who experience these three developmental nutrients: intergenerational relationships, 41%; caring neighborhood, 40%; and caring school climate, 25%. In addition, further analyses of these 213 suggest that the fragility of these support systems, and that of parallel systems of empowerment, structure, and engagement, generalizes across geography and community size. Also, subgroup analyses of student reports reveal that this these patterns hold across gender, grade, parental education, and race/ethnicity (Benson, 2003a; Benson et al., 1999).

This research and applied interest in understanding and promoting developmental assets is propelled, in part, by the coalescence of three issues emerging in the latter part of the 20th century. First is a series of social changes that alter youth access to developmental resources. In this extensive literature, social changes hypothesized to undermine the capacity of family and community to generate developmental resources include increasing parental absence because of changes in the nature of work and the dramatic increase in out-of-home employment of mothers; the loss of shared ideals about the goals of development; the growing privatization of recreation; increases in age segregation; the decrease in neighborhood cohesion; the disconnect by teenagers from structured programming; the prevalence of negative stereotypes about youth; and the explosion in media access by youth (see, for example, Benson, 1997; Benson et al., 1998; Damon, 1997; Dryfoos, 1990; Furstenberg, 2000; Garbarino, 1995; Lerner, 1995; Mortimer & Larson, 2002; Scales, 1991, 2001). In a particularly cogent analysis of these trends, Bronfenbrenner and Morris (1998) offered this summary:

> The research findings here presented reveal growing chaos in the lives of families, in child care settings, schools, peer groups, youth program, neighborhoods, workplaces, and other every day environments in which human beings live

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> their lives. Such chaos, in turn, interrupts and undermines the formation and stability of relationships and activities that are necessary for psychological growth. (p. 1022)

A second issue, closely aligned with the range of social changes discussed earlier, is a much debated dynamic of community life. In Putnam's words, this is "the disappearance of social capital and civic engagement in America" (Putnam, 1996). A healthy society, at least in Western terms, requires the mobilization of social networks and social norms to support the pursuit of shared goals (social capital) and the meaningful participation of citizens in building and being community (civic engagement). In the fields of political science and public affairs, the suppression of social capital and civic engagement is widely documented and discussed as a possible explanation for historical downturns in voting behavior and as consequences of rising social mistrust, isolation, and individualism (Benson, 1997).

If we can extrapolate from this literature, the concept of civic engagement also is useful for analyzing processes of child and adolescent development within a community context. We take it as axiomatic that such core developmental processes as the transmission of values and standards, the provision of support, the establishment of checks and balances in behavior, and the promotion of belonging and empowerment depend to a large extent on consistent adult presence and voice. Further, we suggest that these kinds of core developmental processes are best promoted when adult presence and voice are redundant, holding across many of the contexts of child and adolescent development (e.g., family, neighborhood, public gathering places, schools, congregations). This kind of vibrant developmental infrastructure requires considerable civic engagement in the lives of children and adolescents, which in turn requires social norms favoring engagement and a kind of self-selection by most community residents to connect and engage.

In a rather pointed critique, McKnight (1995) has described an unintended consequence of suppressing community social capital and engagement. In his words:

> The most significant development transforming America since World War II has been the growth of a powerful service economy and its pervasive serving institutions. Those institutions have [commodified] the care of community and called the substitution a service. As citizens have seen the professionalized service commodity invade their communities, they have grown doubtful of their common capacity to care, and so it is that we have become a careless society, populated by impotent citizens and ineffectual communities dependent on the counterfeit of care called human services. (pp. ix–x)

The third issue is the contemporary dominance of what is often called the deficit reduction paradigm. In this paradigm, research and practice are steered toward naming, counting, and reducing the incidence of environmental risks (e.g., family violence, poverty, family disintegration) and health-compromising behavior

(e.g., substance use, adolescent pregnancy, interpersonal violence, school dropout). This paradigm, it has been argued, dominates the policy and funding strategies chosen to enhance child and adolescent health (Benson, 2003b; Lerner, 2004). The point here is not that deficit reduction as a way of thinking and mobilizing action is misguided; however, as a dominating paradigm, it may unintentionally enhance both the overprofessionalization of care and civic disengagement. These processes may well be symbiotic. That is, civic disengagement and professionalized forms of addressing child and adolescent health may feed each other.

As argued in a series of publications, the United States is a nation dominated by deficit and risk thinking, by pathology and its symptoms (Benson, 1997, 2003a; Benson et al., 1998). In one particularly important analysis, Larson (2000) suggests that developmental psychology has spawned a much stronger tradition for understanding and treating psychopathology than for understanding and promoting pathways to developmental success. This deficit lens shapes our research, our policy, and our practice. It fuels the creation of elaborate and expensive service and program delivery infrastructures, creates a dependence on experts, encourages a public mistrust of youth, and, by consequence, derogates, ignores, and interferes with the natural and inherent capacity of human collectives (e.g., cities) to be community.

The theory and research undergirding developmental assets and asset-building community are designed, in part, to reframe the targets and pathways of human development around images of strength and potential. We posit that this shift is crucial for mobilizing both personal and collective efficacy on behalf of child and adolescent development. By so doing, we ultimately seek to balance paradigms so that communities pursue deficit reduction and asset building with equal vigor.

The research tradition we began at Search Institute in 1990 is focused on understanding the processes and dynamics for strengthening the human development infrastructure in American communities. More specifically, my work and that of my colleagues at Search Institute is focused on an action research agenda designed both to understand the role of community in human development and to position communities as colearners with Search Institute in creating sustainable strategies for unleashing their human development capacity.

The Concept of Developmental Assets

The concept of developmental assets, first posited in 1990 (Benson, 1990), is grounded in the large metatheory known as developmental systems theory (Ford & Lerner, 1992; Gottlieb, 1997). This metatheory includes several crucial assumptions and components that, in combination, position human development in relational and contextual space, and in contrast to earlier developmental theories that split development into such polarities as nature–nurture, biology–culture and individual–society (Lerner, 1998; Overton, 1998).

Central to the theory of developmental assets are conceptions of the developing person, the contexts in which the person is embedded, and the dynamic interaction

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between the two. Following Lerner's lead (1984, 1998, 2002, 2003), all of the multiple levels of organizations engaged in human development—from biology and disposition to relationships, social institutions, culture and history—are fused into an integrated system. Development has to do with changes in the relations among and between these multiple levels of organizations. Consonant with systems thinking in biology, persons—through their dynamic interaction with developmental contexts—experience pattern and order via the process of self-organizing. This key dynamic of self-organization means that "…pattern and order emerge from the interactions of the components of a complex system without explicit instructions, either in the organization itself or from the environment. Self-organization—processes that by their own activities change themselves—is a fundamental property of living things" (Thelen & Smith, 1998, p. 564). At one level, this proposed dynamic interaction of nature and nurture is a dramatic departure from earlier models of human development that created a split between the two (Lorenz, 1965; Sheldon, 1940; Skinner, 1938). At another level, however, the concept of self-organization introduces, as Lerner (1976, 2003) suggested, a "third source" of development: the organism itself.

Developmental asset theory includes another dynamic feature of the organism that is consonant with the process of self-organization but not readily inferred from it: the concept of how persons act on their contexts. Indeed, one of the core tenets in developmental systems theory is the bidirectional nature of influence. That is, the "individual is both the active producer and the product of his or her ontogeny…" (Brandtstädter, 1998, p. 800). Action theories of human development seek to explain these dual developmental regulation processes of the action of contexts on individuals and the action of individuals on their contexts. This process by which organisms engage, interact with, and alter their developmental contexts (e.g., peer group, family, school, and neighborhood) is not only a pivotal theoretical notion for positive youth development, but is also "the essential intellectual challenge for developmental science" (Lerner, 2003, p. 228).

What processes guide how youth engage and act on their contexts? There are, of course, a series of developmental processes particularly salient during adolescence. Among these are identity formation and allied issues around self-appraisal, meaning making, and autonomy. Because of the centrality of these issues during adolescence, the developmental asset theory argues that adolescents bring particular energy to their relational and social world. Their activity—as "coproducers" of their development—is guided by three intertwined processes, each of which is rooted in theoretical traditions from within the broader "family" of developmental systems theories. Indeed, we think of these three as prime features of the "engine" of development. In combination, the three make possible a purposeful search for positive (that is developmentally rich) contexts. Brandtstädter's (1998, 1999) action theory of development emphasizes the role of *intentionality* in guiding and regulating one's engagement with social and symbolic environments. His assumption is that persons reflect on, learn from, and use feedback from their social engagements, creating behavioral intentions that guide subsequent behavior. While this proposed dynamic has currency across the life span, it is a hallmark of adolescence. There are, of course, a range of possible constraints on

how the person self-regulates internal engagements with her or his social and symbolic worlds. As Brandtstädter suggests, "these constraints lie partly or even completely outsides one's span of control, but they decisively structure the range of behavioral and developmental options" (1998, p. 808).

In addition to *intentionality*, there are *selection* and *optimization* processes that also inform how persons interact with their environments. Aligned with Baltes and colleagues (Baltes, 1997; Baltes & Baltes, 1990; Baltes, Dittmann-Kohli, & Dixon, 1984), our theory posits that youth select (from a range of developmental supports and opportunities) a subset that has psychological and social advantage for prioritized personal goals. Selection, then, has to with both one's preferences (e.g., to learn to play the flute, to find friends, to experiment with drama) and the ecologies one chooses to be the primary crucibles for development. Optimization is "the process of acquiring, refining, coordinating, and applying goal-relevant means or resources" toward the selected targets (Lerner, 2002, p. 224). These dynamics help frame several strategies and tactical issues germane to community life. These include how well communities provide meaningful opportunities for optimization and how well communities makes it possible for youth to create optimization opportunities (e.g., to begin a new sports or arts program or to attach oneself to an appropriate mentor).

Positive development, then, occurs in the fusion of an active, engaged, and competent person with receptive, supportive, and nurturing ecologies. In our terms, this is the fusion of external (i.e., ecological) assets and internal assets. The consequences of these balanced interactions, particularly when they are frequent and sustained, can be seen at both individual and social levels. Among these hypotheses are the advancement of individual thriving and the reduction of health-compromising behaviors (Benson, 1997; Benson et al., 1998; Scales, Leffert, & Vraa, 2003; Lerner, 2004; Lerner & Benson, 2003a; Scales, Benson, et al., 2000).

Out of these theoretical formulations emerge a series of hypotheses that guide our research, as well as a number of "social experiments" aimed at mobilizing community capacity. Three are briefly discussed here. The first has to do with the fusion of ecological and individual-level assets and translates into the idea that developmental success is dynamically related to the presence of a full complement of both external and internal assets. We think of this as the "more assets, the better" hypothesis. The National Research Council Report, *Community Programs to Promote Positive Youth Development* (Eccles & Gootman, 2002), frames it this way: "…adolescents with more personal and social assets… have a greater chance of both current wellbeing and future success" (2002, p. 42).

Benson and colleagues (Benson, 2003a; Benson et al., 1998, 2003) refer to this as the principle of the "vertical pile up" of assets. Both streams of thinking also suggest that this principle of accumulated assets generalizes to multiple forms of behavior—from prevention of high-risk behavior to the enhancement of positive outcomes such as school success (Benson et al., 2003; Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Scales & Roehlkepartain, 2004).

More work is needed to explain the mechanisms that account for the additive impact of assets on developmental outcomes. It is likely that empirical support for

this idea is because of two interlocking dynamics. One is that the fusion of ecological supports and individual strengths becomes more complete as assets increase. A second is that increases in assets signal the integration of multiple developmental ecologies in a young person's life, a principle well articulated by Bronfenbrenner (1979).

A second hypothesis is that both external and internal assets are applicable universally, although they are expressed or experienced differently across diversities. Among youth development scholars it is commonly assumed that elements in the conceptual models of nutrients/resources/assets have currency for youth in all social locations. This claim is particularly clear in both the National Research Council report and the research undergirding the developmental asset model. At the same time, however, both models testify to the diversity of methods and procedures for promoting assets and to the importance of creating strategies of asset building that are crafted with deep sensitivity to the experience, wisdom, and capacity of people within particular racial, ethnic, religious, and economic groups (Hamilton, Hamilton, & Pittman, 2004).

A third hypothesis is one that arguably is the strongest point of theoretical consensus across scholars, research programs, and practitioners within the positive youth development field. And that is the belief that assets are enhanced when contexts and settings are configured and organized in specific ways. Context matters and contexts can be changed.

Not surprisingly, there is a considerable research tradition on how, and under what conditions, contexts and ecologies promote positive development. This body of work shifts the unit of analysis from the person to contexts, environments, and communities. Accordingly, it draws us into a number of fields beyond developmental psychology in which such inquiry is more at home. Here, we suggest that the theory of person, context, and their intersection presented heretofore is a necessary but not sufficient set of ideas for delineating the territory, scope, and uniqueness of positive youth development. And this idea has to do with intentional change. At the heart of developmental asset thinking and research is the question of how the healthy/balanced/adaptive fusion of person and context can be enhanced.

Intentional change in our view is the purposeful effort to enhance the fusion of person and context, and because of the dynamic, bidirectionality of this interaction, these are three major points of potential intervention. The three of these, in combination, generate developmental assets, thereby increasing the probability of adaptive developmental regulation. These are:

1. Increasing the developmental attentiveness of contexts (to increase their capacity to nurture, support, and constructively challenge the developing person).
2. Enhancing the skills and competencies of youth (to further enable their "natural" capacity to engage with, connect, change, and learn from their social contexts).
3. Creating processes and opportunities to invite youth to actively exercise and utilize their capacity to engage with and change their social contexts. In practice and research, this form of intentional change travels under such concepts as youth leadership, service learning, youth empowerment, and youth engagement.

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Some of the recent research addressing each of these three hypotheses are described later in this chapter.

Development Assets: Definition and Measurement

As described in a series of publications (Benson, 1997, 2002; Benson et al., 1998; Scales & Leffert, 1999, 2004) the asset framework establishes a set of developmental experiences and supports hypothesized to have import for all young people during the second decade of life. Recent work is taking a broader life span perspective, positing that developmental assets reflect developmental processes that have age-related parallels in infancy and childhood (Leffert, Benson, & Roehlkepartain, 1997; Mannes, Benson, Kretzmann, & Norris, 2003; Scales, Sesma, & Bolstrom, 2004).

The framework synthesizes research in a number of fields with the goal of selecting for inclusion those developmental nutrients that (a) have been demonstrated to prevent high-risk behavior (e.g., substance use, violence, dropping out of school), enhance thriving, or build resilience; (b) have evidence of generalizability across social location; (c) contribute balance to the overall framework (i.e., of ecological and individual-level factors); (d) are within the capacity of communities to effect their acquisition; and (e) are within the capacity of youth to proactively procure.

Because the developmental asset framework was designed not only to inform theory and research, but also to have practical significance for the mobilization of communities, the 40 assets are placed in categories that have conceptual integrity and can be described easily to the residents of a community. As seen in Tables 2.1 and 2.2, they are grouped into 20 external assets (i.e., environmental, contextual, and relational features of socializing systems) and 20 internal assets (i.e., skills, competencies, and commitments). The external assets include four categories: (a) support, (b) empowerment, (c) boundaries and expectations, and (d) constructive use of time. The internal assets are also placed into four categories: (a) commitment to learning, (b) positive values, (c) social competencies, and (d) positive identity. The scientific foundations for the eight categories and each of the 40 assets are described in more detail in Scales and Leffert (1999, 2004).

Although each element in the asset taxonomy is grounded in research, the framework and its measurement and reporting processes have four applied purposes. First, the framework seeks to provide an understandable vocabulary (for both lay and professional audiences) for core elements of positive human development, with emphasis on developmental processes, experiences, and resources known to promote short-term and long-term well-being. Second, it is intended to create a unified picture of positive development capable of uniting citizens and multiple socializing systems around a shared vision. In this way, it is an attempt to create a common language that has the potential of contributing to a public consensus on what "our" children and adolescents need to succeed.

Third, it seeks to empower and mobilize residents (both adults and youth), families, neighborhoods, youth organizations, religious institutions, and other community

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Table 2.1 The Framework of Developmental Assets: External Assets

Category	Asset	Definition
Support	1. Family support	Family life provides high levels of love and support
	2. Positive family communication	Young person and her or his parent(s) communicate positively, and young person is willing to seek advice and counsel from parents
	3. Other adult relationships	Young person receives support from three or more nonparent adults
	4. Caring neighborhood	Young person experiences caring neighbors
	5. Caring school climate	School provides a caring, encouraging environment
	6. Parent involvement in schooling	Parent(s) is actively involved in helping young person succeed in school
Empowerment	7. Community values youth	Young person perceives that adults in the community value youth
	8. Youth as resources	Young people are given useful roles in the community
	9. Service to others	Young person serves in the community 1 hour or more per week
	10. Safety	Young person feels safe at home, school, and in the neighborhood
Boundaries and expectations	11. Family boundaries	Family has clear rules and consequences and monitors the young person's whereabouts
	12. School boundaries	School provides clear rules and consequences
	13. Neighborhood boundaries	Neighbors take responsibility for monitoring young people's behavior
	14. Adult role models	Parent(s) and other adults model positive, responsible behavior
	15. Positive peer influence	Young person's best friends model responsible behavior
	16. High expectations	Both parent(s) and teachers encourage the young person to do well
Constructive use of time	17. Creative activities	Young person spends 3 or more hours per week in lessons or practice in music, theater, or other arts
	18. Youth programs	Young person spends 3 or more hours per week in sports, clubs, or organizations at school and/or in the community
	19. Religious community	Young person spends 1 or more hours per week in activities in a religious institution
	20. Time at home	Young person is out with friends "with nothing special to do" 2 or fewer nights per week

Note: From Benson (2006).

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Table 2.2 The Framework of Developmental Assets: Internal Assets

Category	Asset	Definition
Commitment to learning	21. Achievement motivation	Young person is motivated to do well in school
	22. School engagement	Young person is actively engaged in learning
	23. Homework	Young person reports doing at least 1 hour of homework every school day
	24. Bonding to school	Young person cares about her or his school
	25. Reading for pleasure	Young person reads for pleasure 3 or more hours per week
Positive values	26. Caring	Young person places high value on helping other people
	27. Equality and social justice	Young person places high value on promoting equality and reducing hunger and poverty
	28. Integrity	Young person acts on convictions and stands up for her or his beliefs
	29. Honesty	Young person "tells the truth even when it is not easy"
	30. Responsibility	Young person accepts and takes personal responsibility
	31. Restraint	Young person believes it is important not to be sexually active or to use alcohol or other drugs
Social competencies	32. Planning and decision making	Young person knows how to plan ahead and make choices
	33. Interpersonal competence	Young person has empathy, sensitivity, and friendship skills
	34. Cultural competence	Young person has knowledge of and comfort with people of different cultural/racial/ethnic backgrounds
	35. Resistance skills	Young person can resist negative peer pressure and dangerous situations
	36. Peaceful conflict resolution	Young person seeks to resolve conflict nonviolently
Positive identity	37. Personal power	Young person feels he or she has control over "things that happen to me"
	38. Self-esteem	Young person reports having a high self-esteem
	39. Sense of purpose	Young person reports that "my life has a purpose"
	40. Positive view of personal future	Young person is optimistic about her or his personal future

Note: From Benson (2006).

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Table 2.3 High-Risk Behavior Patterns and Thriving Indicators

High-risk behavior patterns	Thriving indicators
1. Tobacco use	1. School success
2. Alcohol use	2. Prosocial behavior
3. Other drug use	3. Affirmation of diversity
4. Sexual activity	4. Leadership
5. Depression and/or attempted suicide	5. Health promotion
6. Violence	6. Delay of gratification
7. Antisocial problems	7. Danger resistance
8. Driving and alcohol use	8. Resilience
9. Gambling	
10. School truancy and absenteeism	

sectors to take action. Finally, through a survey and reporting process that presents a portrait of developmental assets among a community's youth, the framework and its local measurement serve as a kind of call to action to strengthen developmental processes and experiences for all youth within a community.

The developmental assets are assessed in a 156-item self-reporting survey instrument, administered anonymously in public school districts in a classroom setting and guided by standardized instructions. As shown in Table 2.3, the instrument also assesses numerous thriving indicators (e.g., school success, affirmation of diversity) and risk behaviors (e.g., violence, substance use, sexual activity). Students place completed surveys in an envelope that is then sealed and mailed to Search Institute for processing and generation of a school district report. Typically, school districts choose to survey a complete census of all 6th- through 12th-grade students attending school on the day the survey is administered.

Since 1990, approximately 2000 U.S. and Canadian communities have conducted this survey—many as an early step in launching a community-wide, asset-building initiative. There is a significant mix of urban, suburban, and rural districts included in this ongoing survey assessment process. Our recent scientific publications use an aggregated sample of 217,277 6th- through 12th-grade students from public and alternative schools in 318 cities and towns in the United States who administered the survey during the 1999–2000 academic year.

The survey is used primarily as a means of communicating aggregate data on a community's youth. A report, developed for each community or school district that uses the survey, often becomes a widely shared document and is used both to frame community-wide visioning and planning and to serve as a focal point to mobilize around raising healthy youth (Benson et al., 1998). A dichotomous form of reporting the assets, whereby each asset is simplified into a single percentage of youth who have, or do not have, each asset, is an effective method for communicating the asset profile to diverse community audiences. This also allows for a simple summation of the average number of assets youth in any given community report having.

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A growing body of publications describes the psychometric properties of the survey instrument (Benson, 1997; Benson et al., 1998; Leffert et al., 1998; Scales, Benson, et al., 2000), demographic differences in asset profiles (Benson, 1990, 1996; Benson & Leffert, 2001; Benson et al., 1999; Leffert et al., 1998), and the predictive utility of the asset framework for explaining both risk and thriving behaviors (Benson, 1998; Benson et al., 1999; Leffert et al., 1998; Scales, Benson, et al., 2000; Sesma, Mannes, & Scales, 2006; Scales & Roehlkepartain, 2003).

In the aggregated sample of 217,277 U.S. youth, the mean number of assets is 19.3 based on a scale composed of 40 binary variables. Fifty-six percent of the aggregated sample evidence 20 or fewer developmental assets. When the sample is broken into four asset levels, we find that 15% possess a total number of assets of 10 or less, 41% possess 11–20, 35% have 21–30, and 9% attain 31 or more assets. A recent study of New York City youth echoes these findings.

Means for communities range from 16.5 to 21.6 across all 318 cities: A particularly important finding is that the mean number of assets is relatively similar when comparing students in different community sizes (communities ranging in size from 10,000 to 250,000 or more). Although there is variability across communities, it is less than expected and reinforces the idea that all communities have significant proportions of adolescents who lack key developmental assets. It should be noted here that these finding are based on youth who attend American middle schools and high schools. If out-of-school 12 to 18 year olds were also captured in this assessment, the reported percentages would likely be lower.

The Cumulative Impact of Developmental Assets

Many studies explore the cumulative or additive nature of the developmental assets in explaining risk and thriving behaviors as suggested by the first hypothesis (i.e., "more assets, the better"). As shown in Tables 2.4 and 2.5, as assets rise in number, profound reductions are seen in each of 10 risk behavior patterns (alcohol use, tobacco use, illicit drug use, antisocial behavior, violence, school failure, sexual activity, attempted suicide, driving and alcohol use, and gambling). Also, the cumulative effect is equally powerful in predicting thriving behaviors, with increases in assets associated with dramatic increases in academic achievement, leadership, prosocial behavior, the delay of gratification, and the affirmation of diversity. While many studies pinpoint subsets of assets that are particularly germane to a particular risk or thriving behavior, addressing a more comprehensive vision of child and adolescent health (i.e., protection from many types of risk behavior and the pursuit of many forms of thriving) requires attention to the full complement of developmental assets.

More sophisticated analyses document the relative power of assets. Regression analyses are used to assess the extent to which the developmental assets are useful in predicting either a reduction in risk behaviors or a promotion of thriving indicators. Those analyses have shown that demographic variables (gender, family

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Table 2.4 Developmental Assets and Risk Behavior Patterns by Asset Levels[a]

High-risk behavior pattern		Percent reporting behavior pattern			
Category	**Definition**	**0–11 assets**	**11–20 assets**	**21–30 assets**	**31–40 assets**
Alcohol	Has used alcohol three or more times in the past month or got drunk once in the past 2 weeks	49	27	11	3
Tobacco	Smokes one or more cigarettes every day or uses chewing tobacco frequently	31	14	4	1
Illicit drugs	Used illicit drugs three or more times in the past year	39	18	6	1
Sexual intercourse	Has had sexual intercourse three or more times in lifetime	32	21	11	3
Depression/ suicide	Is frequently depressed and/or has attempted suicide	42	27	14	5
Antisocial behavior	Has been involved in three or more incidents of shoplifting, trouble with police, or vandalism in the past year	48	22	7	2
Violence	Has engaged in three or more acts of fighting, hitting, injuring a person, carrying or using a weapon, or threatening physical harm in the past year	61	38	19	7
School problems	Has skipped school 2 or more days in the past month and/or has below a C average	45	24	11	4
Driving and alcohol	Has driven after drinking or ridden with a drinking driver three or more times in the past year	35	19	9	3
Gambling	Has gambled three or more times in the past year	30	19	11	4

[a]Based on studies of 6th- to 12th-grade public school students during the 1999–2000 school year. Sample includes 217,277 students in 318 cities.

income, race/ethnicity) accounted for a range of 5 to 14% of the total variance in each of the models constructed to examine risk behaviors. In each analysis, the developmental assets contributed a significant amount over and above the influence of demographic variables, accounting for 16 to 35% to the variance explained in the reduction of each of the individual risk behavior patterns and for 57% of the variance in a composite index of risk behaviors. The total regression model (assets with demographics) explained 66% of the variance in this composite index (Leffert et al., 1998).

Adolescent health is often understood as the absence of symptoms, pathology, or health-compromising behavior. This incomplete view of well-being mimics, of course, the "medical model" approach to health. The emerging field of youth development places particular emphasis on expanding the concept of health to include the kinds

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Table 2.5 Developmental Assets and Thriving Indicators by Asset Level[a]

Thriving indicators		Percent reporting behavior			
Category	**Definition**	**0–10 assets**	**11–20 assets**	**21–30 assets**	**31–40 assets**
School success	Students grades are A- or higher	8	17	30	47
Prosocial behavior	Student provides help to others 1 hour or more per week	64	80	89	96
Affirmation of diversity	Student places high value on interacting with people of other racial and ethnic backgrounds	36	57	74	88
Leadership	Student reports being a leader in a group or organization in the last 12 months	26	47	69	89
Danger avoidance	Student reports avoiding behaviors that are dangerous	50	65	77	85
Health promotion	Student reports an active interest in nutrition and exercise	8	19	31	44
Delay of gratification	Student "saves money for something special rather than spending it all right away"	27	41	54	70
Resilience	Student reports he/she "does not give up when things get difficult"	57	68	78	85

[a]Based on studies of 6th- to 12th-grade public school students during the 1999–2000 school year. Sample includes 217,277 students in 318 cities.

of skills, behaviors, and competencies needed to succeed in employment, education, and civic life. A common mantra in youth development circles is "problem-free is not prepared" (Pittman, Irby, & Ferber, 2001).

The concept of thriving indicators has been posited to reflect this domain of positive outcomes (Benson, 1997; Scales & Benson, 2004; Scales, Blyth, et al., 2000). Multiple thriving behavior measures are embedded in the developmental assets survey instrument. Regression analyses show that the developmental assets framework is also a powerful predictor of thriving measures taken one at a time or in combination. Across each of six racial/ethnic groups (African-American, Asian-American, Latina/Latino, Native American, multiracial, white) developmental assets explained from 47 to 54% of the variance in a composite thriving index (e.g., prosocial behavior, leadership, affirmation of diversity) over and above demographic variables (Scales, Blyth, et al., 2000).

Several additional lines of research expand the exploration of the hypothesis that ecological and internal assets work in harmony to promote many forms of developmental success. Six findings are briefly noted.

1. The strong relationship between asset levels and positive developmental outcomes has been observed not only in our large aggregated samples, but also in each of

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a number of individual community studies in the United States. These replications have been reported in studies, for example, of youth in New York City, Seattle, Portland, Albuquerque, and Minneapolis, as well as in cities with smaller populations.

2. The relationship between asset levels and both risk and thriving has been replicated (ages 10–12, $N = 1294$) with a younger sample (Scales, Sesma, & Bolstrom, 2004).
3. An ongoing longitudinal study in a small Midwestern city in the United States suggests that levels of developmental assets are strongly related to positive outcomes both concurrently and 3 years later; levels of developmental assets strongly predict academic and behavioral measures embedded in students' personal records; and developmental assets are two to four times more powerful in predicting academic achievement, risk behaviors, and thriving than are such demographic factors as race/ethnicity and poverty (Roehlkepartain, Benson, & Sesma, 2003).
4. This longitudinal study also shows, as would be expected, that changes in a young person's developmental asset profile (with changes as minimal as an increase or decrease in two or three assets) have significant (and even dramatic) impact on markers of developmental success (Scales & Roehlkepartain, 2003).
5. A recent line of inquiry spearheaded by Taylor and Lerner provides supportive evidence that the link between developmental assets and thriving documented in many studies of youth can be seen also among youth in particularly challenging social contexts such as those surrounding youth in urban gangs (Taylor et al., 2002). They offer two important conclusions. First, from a developmental systems point of view, they argue that youth in any social location exhibit evidence of both ecological and internal assets, which can form a springboard for positive development. Second, they suggest that "social policies should be directed to organizing and sustaining programs that identify, expand and maintain" developmental assets (Taylor et al., 2002, p. 25).
6. Finally, Christina Theokas, a graduate student working with Richard Lerner at Tufts University, has explored the structure of the developmental assets. Her work identifies two second-order constructs that significantly parallel the concepts of *ecological* and *internal* assets. Furthermore, she documents that both individual and ecological assets account for unique variance in thriving (Theokas et al., 2005).

An extensive review of the literature on the cumulative effects of developmental assets can be found in Benson, Scales, Hamilton, and Sesma (2006).

Shared Vision, Many Pathways

As noted earlier, part of the intent of the developmental assets construct has been to provide a theoretically grounded understanding of the bidirectional interplay of context and person in propelling youth toward developmental success. As importantly, we have also sought to create, via the developmental asset taxonomy, a vision of healthy development that is capable of uniting the people of a city (or a nation, for that matter) in a common purpose. This goal comes out of emerging theory on the nature of asset-building communities. Among its core tenets, shared by colleagues working

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in the related areas of community and economic development, is the importance of shared vision in catalyzing community and social change. We also think of this as the creation of a "language of the common good" (Benson, 1997; Mannes, Benson, Kretzmann, & Norris, 2003).

Hence, we are particularly interested—on both theoretical and practical grounds—in discerning how well the developmental asset taxonomy "works" for all youth. Some qualitative research has been done to determine how well community leaders across the United States, representing many cultural traditions, see the "goodness of fit" between cultural values and the developmental asset construct (see, e.g., Lucero, 2000).

By and large, these studies have been affirming that the asset framework is respectful of culture. Indeed, it is not uncommon for the elders of immigrant populations in the United States to embrace the asset framework as a reminder of "what we once were but now are losing" (Benson, 2006). Perhaps another sign that the asset framework has a kind of "universal" resonance is the growing amount of international interest in utilizing the developmental asset concept. At this point in time, this growing community of interest connects us to leaders in Australia, Brazil, Canada, China, Chile, Indonesia, Israel, Kenya, Korea, Mexico, Norway, and Zambia.

A second line of inquiry has already been hinted at in the previous section, which is the empirical study of how well the "more assets, the better" principle holds across subgroups of young people. Additional evidence for the universality of developmental assets has been provided in the report entitled *Unique Strengths, Shared Strengths: Developmental Assets Among Youth of Color* (Sesma & Roehlkepartain, 2003), which documents that asset levels have similar risk behavior and thriving consequences for each of six groups of youth: African-American, Asian-American, American Indian, Latino/Latina, white, and multiracial. Additional analyses can be found in several publications (Leffert et al., 1998; Scales, Blyth, et al., 2000).

At the same time, of course, there are important diversities in how individual assets and categories of assets function in the lives of youth. Of particular interest is both learning about and advocating for cultural variations in how developmental assets are promoted. Indeed, there is important work to be done in identifying and disseminating cultural traditions and innovations in, for example, promoting intergenerational relationships (asset #3) or in transmitting boundaries and expectations.

Hypothesis 3: Transforming Communities

Concurrent with the research program on developmental assets is a growing area having to do with the science and practice of community change. This work addresses the third hypothesis described earlier (i.e., that is it possible to mobilize, transform, and unite many sources of asset-building energy) in order to increase the fusion of ecological and internal developmental assets. There are several aligned areas of inquiry that are beginning to build what we might call a "science of promoting developmental strengths," in contrast to what has become known as the field of prevention science.

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Some of the conceptual strands that inform a "promotion science" include resilience (Garmezy, 1985; Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000; Masten & Curtis, 2000), protective factors (Hawkins, Catalano, & Miller, 1992), and youth development (Benson & Pittman, 2001; Benson et al., 2006). Many of these efforts used to study the sources and impact of developmental strengths lead to the formation of asset-building programs and/or policy recommendations (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2000).

However, the developmental asset framework was also designed to be catalytic in advancing a science and a practice for creating and sustaining asset-building communities.

Accordingly, there are three features embedded in the developmental assets framework that are intended to invite "experiments" by communities to mobilize adults, youth, and socializing systems in a coordinated effort to move the developmental needle. First, the model purposefully identifies building blocks of development that have a kind of universal currency, as described earlier. Again we use the term *universal* here to mean developmental resources that have significance within multiple demographic subgroups and that have face validity for the many and diverse communities of identify and interest within a city.

Second, the developmental assets framework, when used as a lens to examine the developmental journey of a community's youth, invites deep, community-wide conversation, reflection, and critique of community life. In essence, this is the process of framing how a community knows and understands its role in the development of children and adolescents. The study of developmental assets at a local level is intended to trigger several forms of reframing. One, of course, is the reframing of how a community of people and systems understands the nature of successful development. Here we would argue that our work helps communities expand their shared understanding of healthy development to encompass not only "problem free" but also "asset rich." Another reframing has to do with a community's collective understanding of the population of children and adolescents to be targeted by community interventions. Deficit reduction approaches tend to bifurcate youth into two camps, with the developmental "have nots" labeled as at risk, vulnerable, high risk, or marginalized. Our approach, supported by hundreds of community asset profiles, is to place development on a continuum that runs from "asset depleted" on the one end to "asset rich" on the other. By showing communities that a majority of their 6th- to 12th-grade students are below midpoint, we strategically and purposefully create a dissonance in the publics understanding of what the issue is. In more classic community development verbiage, this is the process of expanding citizen ownership of and engagement in the issue. In language that resonates more with community residents, we often speak of shifting the understanding from "some kids need more" to "all kinds need more."

This reframing to "all kids" is an essential strategy for motivating multiple systems within communities to pool their developmental resources in a coherent, long-term, multisystem, and citizen-engaged initiative to promote developmental strengths. It also has other significant advantages. Given the complex and long-term dimensions of community change, as well as the dearth of scientific knowledge

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about creating developmentally attentive communities, we have chosen to connect hundreds of communities together in a mutually supporting web of action and learning directed toward the comprehensive transformation of community life. The "all kids" reframing, and the underlying societal dimensions it presupposes, puts cities of many sizes and geographies on a common playing field, seeking knowledge and wisdom about similar issues (e.g., the expansion of civic engagement, the creation of developmentally attentive schools, the building of social trust within neighborhoods, and the creation of an intergenerationlal community). Positioned this way, communities across the country discover a commonality of interest and an eagerness to connect, learn, and teach. And rather than deflecting energy away from marginalized youth, the "all kids" reframing appears to reenergize and strengthen this community engagement.

Finally, embedded within the developmental asset approach is a comprehensive approach to the etiology of developmental strengths. The external assets speak directly to the role of multiple developmental ecologies, including family, neighborhood, school, youth organizations, congregation/synagogue/mosque, and programs. The internal assets invite inquiry and conversation about the multiple sources of competencies, values, identity, commitment and purpose, and the degree to which communities possess the harmony of voice and deep and sustained relationships necessary for these capacities to develop. As such, the taxonomy of developmental assets provides counterweight to approaches that are overdependent on professionalized services for their implementation.

While program and policy innovations to spread access to developmental resources—whether we call these supports, opportunities, developmental nutrients, or assets—is an important strategy, one of the strategic objectives of the theory and research on developmental assets is to make obvious their many sources. In so doing, we choose to focus our applied work on understanding the capacity of local communities to reorganize civic life around promoting developmental strengths. One way of articulating our approach to intentional change is as follows:

> …Ultimately, rebuilding and strengthening the developmental infrastructure in a community is not a program run by experts. Rather, it requires a transformation in thinking and action that informs: the daily interactions between adults and youth; the purposes, and strategies, and tactics employed by families, neighborhoods, schools, congregations and youth organizations; and the public perception of youth. The transformation triggers a community-wide sense of common purpose, places residents and their leaders on the same team moving in the same direction, and creates a normative culture in which all residents are expected, by virtue of their membership in the community, to promote the positive development of children and adolescents. (Benson, 1997, p. 236)

An asset-building community marshals and activates the strength-building capacity of its residents (both adults and youth) and sectors (families, neighborhoods, schools, youth organizations, places of work, congregations). It is also characterized by more indirect influences that support and sustain these more direct resident and sector

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influences. These include policy, financial resources, and social norms that promote adult engagement with the young (Scales, Benson, & Mannes, 2002).

These communities orchestrate the flow of positive developmental energy to achieve three targets: *vertical pileup* (in which youth develop many developmental assets), *horizontal stacking* (in which youth experience asset building in multiple contexts), and *developmental breadth* (extending, by purpose and design, the reach of asset-building energy to all children and adolescents, not only those judged to be "at risk" and served by traditional "prevention" programs).

In activating both the depth and the breadth implicit in these three targets, it is useful to posit a fuller delineation of community capacity. Hence, our conceptual model identifies five interrelated strategies for creating asset-building communities (Benson, 2002; Benson et al., 2003). These are as follow.

1. *Adult engagement:* Community adults build sustained, asset-building relationships with children and youth, both within and beyond family. The target is to mobilize and engage a critical mass of community adults.
2. *Youth engagement:* Adolescents use their asset-building capacities with peers and with younger children and in actions that help settings, places, programs, and adults undergo transformations in the direction of asset building. The target is to mobilize and engage a critical mass of adolescents.
3. *Sector engagement:* Families, neighborhoods, school, congregations, and youth organizations activate their asset-building potential. The target is for most of these places and contexts to weave asset building into their strategic and operational fabric.
4. *Programs:* A community infrastructure of quality early childhood after-school, weekend, and summer programs is available and used by children and youth. As in sector transformations, the goal is to weave asset building into their DNA.
5. *Community supports:* Financial, leadership, media, and policy resources are mobilized to support and sustain the transformations described in strategies 1–4.

This view of asset-building community links to several important intellectual currents. From the field of community organizing, it parallels Tilly's (1973) notion of collective action: that is, a community's pooled resources need to be applied to advance the common good. It reflects Damon's (1997; Damon & Gregory, 2003) understanding of the developmental necessity of communities mobilizing around a "unified consensus of core values" that begins to concretize the definition of the common good. It also begins to operationalize Bronfenbrenner's (1979) pioneering ecological model of human development articulating both the independent and the synergistic roles community residents and sectors play in constructing an optimal environment for positive child and youth development.

While the development assets framework—and the reframing principles on which it is based—is designed to create a readiness for new community action, models of asset-rich developmental ecologies are needed to give this energy focus and direction. Drawing on a range of sources, including reviews of system change research, field studies, and interviews with practitioners, a series of recent publications

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paint conceptual pictures of asset-building contexts. These include, for example, schools (Starkman, Scales, & Roberts, 1999), neighborhoods (Saito, Sullivan, & Hintz, 2000; Scales et al., 2001), congregations (Roehlkepartain, 1998), youth organizations (Pearson, Johnstad, & Conway, 2004), and whole communities (Fisher, 2003). As importantly, we also seek to personalize the work by disseminating models of asset-building adults (Benson, Galbraith, & Espeland, 1998a) and adolescents (Benson, Galbraith, & Espeland, 1998b).

Our efforts to describe the nature and dynamics of developmentally attentive people and places are fueled by one of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) insights. He admonishes American social science for its preoccupation with "describing what is" and its inattention to understanding and experimenting "with new social forms as contexts for realizing human potential" (p. 41). He calls for (a) imagining what social ecologies look like when they are developmentally rich and (b) "transforming experiments" designed to move ecologies closer to this idea.

If "transforming experiments" primarily referred to altering the flow of developmental energy within a single context, as, for example, after-school programs, we might choose to put these experiments in the hands of professional experts. Then, if a series of evaluation studies gave affirming evidence, we would disseminate this new knowledge about effective programs through traditional channels. Because the scope of change needed to enhance the developmental infrastructure is, however, demanding of multiple and coordinated ecological changes, as well as transformation promoting the engagement of adults and adolescents in the delivery of developmental assets, the classic formula for change, with its professionally led and expert-driven accents, is inadequate for the kind of comprehensive community change needed to provide depth, reach, and developmental redundancy.

Hence, we have decided to pursue another approach to change. Assuming that all communities have a reservoir of human and social capital that can be realigned (or perhaps reignited) to provide deep and sustained connections to asset-building people and places, our approach at this point tilts in the direction of inviting communities to be colearners and coexperimenters with us in creating asset-building communities.

Accordingly, we have chosen to pursue a diffusion process grounded in bringing our research and models on developmental assets and asset-building communities straight to the residents of cities. Methods of diffusion at the local level often include community meetings to premier the local portrait of developmental assets (these forums can draw up to 2000 or 3000 people); the strategic use of print, radio, and television media partners; a speaker's bureau that fans out across a community and addresses, potentially, most service clubs, employers, congregations, and neighborhood groups; and the dissemination of print and video resources throughout the community. We also equip local community organizations by building dissemination alliances with their national offices (e.g., youth-serving systems, education associations, denominations, and Fortune 500 employers with multiple manufacturing and distribution locations). One major example is the national initiative that links the YMCA of the USA and YMCA of Canada with the

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Search Institute. Called Abundant Assets, this alliance is designed to train YMCA leaders, in hundreds of communities, to catalyze asset-building initiatives at the local level.

This grass roots diffusion process is not just about dissemination and utilization of new knowledge. It might also be understood as the diffusion of capacity and power (i.e., communities and their residents possess resources, efficacy, and capital that can be mobilized to promote developmental strengths).

The diffusion process has, by intent and design, created a network of cities seeking to pursue community transformation. Organized along the lines of a social movement, 600 American communities and several dozen emerging in Canada are linked to each other and the Search Institute through the Healthy Communities•Healthy Youth initiative launched in 1996. Inclusion in the network requires several community commitments, including a multisector focus, significant youth engagement in leadership and implementation, and a willingness to be in a teaching–learning relationship with other communities in the movement. As of 2004, statewide initiatives have been formed in 22 states to link multiple communities to provide support, technical assistance, and knowledge diffusion. All of these 22 networks emerged with little or no Search Institute support, which is precisely how a movement should work.

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Finally, this national movement provides "laboratories of discovery" for advancing a line of conceptual and empirical inquiry into the processes and dynamics of community and social change. The network of cities offers a rich diversity in size and geography and provides an array of approaches for change as well as insight to advancing both the theory and the practice of community change. An ongoing research program at Search Institute, via case studies and interviews, identifies best practices for system and personal transformation (Mannes et al., 2003).

Conclusions

As argued in a series of publications (Benson, 1997, 2003, 2004, 2006), I take it as axiomatic that the health and well-being of children and adolescents require as much attention to promoting developmental strengths as to directly combating risks, environmental threats, and social dysfunctions that obstruct human development. These two approaches ought to be complementary and in balance. Currently, it seems they are imbalanced, with the latter approach dominating public dialogue, public policy, and scientific inquiry.

The scientific exploration of a strength-based paradigm requires, however, a deeply interdisciplinary approach, integrating, at a minimum, the fields of anthropology, communications, sociology, and economics with psychology in order to understand and mobilize a full arsenal of ritual, social norms, and system and individual capacities necessary to the complicated but essential task of creating developmentally attentive communities. If communities are indeed an important context for the "production" of developmental strength, our methods of learning and discovery require approaches

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that currently are too underused and too undervalued. To a considerable extent, knowledge about crucial asset-building dynamics, such as creating an intergenerational community, promoting sustained connections with "elders," and developing rituals for moving from adolescence to adulthood, is vested in "nonexperts" and often in communities organized around race, ethnicity, or worldview. Tapping this wisdom requires a significant shift in how the academy typically works, requiring instead a knowledge-generation process that brings community residents and scholars together in the pursuit and production of knowledge (Lerner, Fisher, & Weinberg, 2000).

The production of an interdisciplinary knowledge grounded in the inherent capacity of community also requires a long-term investment in discovering the nature and sequencing of community change. This kind of comprehensive, collaborative, citizen-engaged approach also requires a patient evaluation system. The American way, when it comes to evaluation, is at best an impatient system. The demand by government agencies and foundations to show impact after a relatively short period of time fuels quick programmatic solutions and diminishes inquiry into the complex, long-term, and invigorating exploration of how this culture and its communities can and must reimagine the norms, rituals, ceremonies, relationships, ecologies, and policies needed to grow healthy, competent, whole, and caring human beings.

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