

Asset-Based Community Development

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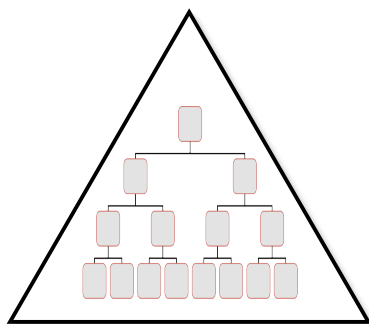
The work of the Asset-Based Community Development Institute (ABCD) originated in the 1960s with a focus on institutional change as the necessary element in creating communities where residents could thrive. That is, the work emphasized how improving modern systems and methods—in schools, the criminal justice system, health care, and government, for example—could improve people's well-being—particularly those with lower incomes or those who had been marginalized in some way from the mainstream. But this focus quickly changed when staff realized that the "institutional assumption," or the idea that hospitals produced health, schools produced wisdom, legal systems created justice, and social service systems produced well-being, etc., was simply incorrect. Instead, the focus shifted to identifying the positive conditions of a good life, and an examination of the critical determinants of health, wisdom, justice, community, knowledge, and economic well-being. The evidence supported the proposition that these determinants could be found in individual behavior, social relationships, the physical environment, and economic status. Thus, the typical "map" of a community as a list of possible institutional interventions targeting the various deficiencies and pathologies characterizing a particular place seemed irrelevant, and a new sort of community map emerged. This new map—the asset map—focused on people, their collective relationships, and the contexts in which they live their lives, and emphasized people as the primary agents in the production of their own well being. Community assets of six types were ultimately identified:

- Individuals and their skills, abilities, interests, and experiences.
- Associations, where individuals come together for a common purpose.
- Institutions, where resources and expertise are concentrated.
- Physical infrastructure, that provides the environmental context in which people live.
- Local economy, that generates the financial resources to support community members.
- Local culture, the ways people do things and the meanings they attach to their world.

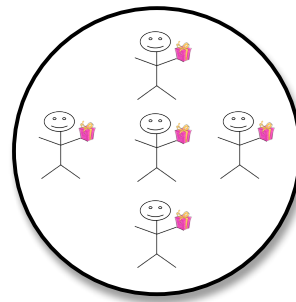
In shifting to this new focus, two things happened. First, it became necessary to reorient people's thinking, to retrain them to *see* community assets rather than community needs and deficiencies. The ABCD metaphor—the glass half full rather than the glass half empty—clearly represents this perspective. Rather than looking at what is problematic in the empty part of the glass, the asset map intentionally focuses on what is present in the full part of the glass—the assets in all six categories. And the process of asset mapping *is* intentional; in order to overcome our training to see only needs and deficits, we need to go through the discovery process to locate and understand the gifts and assets present in every individual and every community. Second, it became important to distinguish between two worthwhile types of community tools, (a) the institutional/systems tool, and (b) the associational/community tool. From the ABCD perspective, institutions are important assets, but have, over time, taken on community roles for which they are fundamentally unsuited. In other words, the institutional "tool" is being used for jobs in which the associational "tool" of the community would be a better fit.

The difference between these tools is important. Institutions and systems are structured in a hierarchical fashion that concentrates authority and decision-making in just a few people at the top of the structure. The control and efficiency this allows is useful and appropriate in some contexts, for example, we all want the automobile industry to produce lots of vehicles of uniform quality; we all want competent air traffic controllers making decisions in a highly structured environment. But

these efficiencies tend to produce systems that encroach on community space in their quest for more consumers of the institutional product. Associations are structured very differently. Associations are comprised of people who come together in self-appointed groups for recreational purposes, mutual support, or community problem solving. Because these groups are not structured for authority, control, and efficient production, associations represent a much better "tool" for accomplishing objectives in community space. Associations can be responsive to community needs and provide the venue for each member to offer his or her "gifts" in the resolution of community issues. Associations are a context in which *care* is manifested and shared, one person to another, contrary to institutional space, in which products and services are delivered by the system to the customer or client. Asset-based community development reclaims the associational space that drives healthy communities and uses the power of civic engagement to define a new way of producing health and well being.



Institutional/Systems Structure



Associational/Community Structure

Applying these ideas to the question of the health and well being of young people sets up some interesting questions. First, are institutional/system tools or associational/community tools better able to deliver the supports and care that are necessary for young people to thrive? Second, are institutions/systems or associations/communities better able to provide the context in which young people are recognized for their gifts and talents, and where they can contribute to their own well being and to that of the community? It seems clear that this is a case where the institutional tool is the wrong choice for creating well being, and one in which the community tool can be more appropriately deployed. The most important reason the institutional tool cannot be used to build strong youth is that institutions are programmed to see and respond to deficiencies, needs, and problems, and when youth are approached in this manner, they may well become exactly what is expected of them. Instead, what youth require is support, care, and opportunities for meaningful participation that reflect their community's expectation that they grow into strong, contributing adults.

Asset-based community development is not a rigid model or a set of specific steps that guarantee success. Instead it is a set of principles (asset-based, resident centered, locally focused), and practices (intentional mapping and mobilizing of local assets) that help reshape how communities function and redistribute community roles to the appropriate entities. As such, it is adaptable to different cultures, geographic regions, and political contexts with thoughtful consideration of how it complements local ways of being. Additionally, it has implications for policymaking, in that the primary objective of social welfare policies should be the removal of barriers to participation in all aspects of life, and the enhancement of opportunities for individuals and associations to launch their own enterprises and build their own economic and social well being.