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Beyond Needs Assessments: Identifying a Community's Resources and Hopes

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This fact sheet discusses the importance of and ways of determining what a community has, wants, and hopes before conducting a service-learning project.

Fifteen young people in the service-learning program at the Somerset Hills YMCA in Basking Ridge, New Jersey, used mapping software and training to identify the assets or resources of their community. They visited local businesses, restaurants, and community organizations to survey business owners using an asset-based instrument.

Out of their mapping, the young people developed a map of "hot spots" for teens, and then developed a presentation to educate businesses and organizations on how to be teen friendly and provide positive experiences for the community's youth. "The asset approach gives backbone in giving youth a voice to affect change in a community," says Carolyn Vasquez, YMCA Community Outreach Director. "The youth are more aware of their community as a whole, and they're becoming more involved little by little to create change" (Benson, 2006).

Two important dynamics were at work in the Somerset Hills YMCA. First, they went into the community to decide what to do; they didn't sit in a classroom coming up with how they could help others; rather, they went out into the community to ask people about their own priorities. Second, the young people paid attention to—and highlighted—the strengths and resources already present in their community. Instead of engaging in service from the outside, they became active partners helping the community discover and highlight its own strengths.

Each of these emphases has the potential to strengthen service-learning practice as captured in the Standards and Indicators for Effective Service-Learning Practice (RMC Research, 2008). First is the emphasis on investigating issues in the community as a foundation for service-learning. The second is the focus on mutually beneficial partnership that involves service that is meaningful both to young people and their communities. This fact sheet examines these two emphases and offers tools and examples for implementing strength-based community assessments as a foundation for effective service-learning projects and programs.

The importance of listening before serving

Service-learning leaders appropriately advocate for recognizing young people as resources in their communities and society. They focus on building young people's assets and strengths, rather than dwelling on limitations or weaknesses. They work hard to ensure that service-learning projects authentically engage young people and reflect their interests, passions, and priorities.

That same attitude is critical to how service-learning programs engage with the individuals, organizations, and communities that benefit from the service. Paying attention to community members' voices, identifying their strengths and priorities, and finding ways to partner with them - to work *with* not just *for* them - has enormous

potential for enriching service-learning. It increases the probability that service-learning efforts will not only strengthen the communities they serve, but also help young people recognize all types of communities as unique, vibrant, and resilient, each having its own strengths and resources to offer the world.

Too many service projects develop without meaningfully engaging the broader community in the planning and shaping of the project. The result is often that people providing the service "impose their ideas on another group, with little or no consideration [for] that group's traditions, beliefs, and needs" (Simmons & Toole, 2003; also see Honnet & Poulsen, 1989). When this happens the value of young people's service is lessened, and in worst-case scenarios community residents interpret the service as both intrusive and exploitive.

Community assessments provide a structured way to listen before taking action. A structured listening process has a number of benefits:

- It helps ensure that service-learning projects address community priorities and engage the broader community as partners, not just recipients.
- It introduces young people to basic research skills and techniques.
- Youth and adults become invested in their projects when they truly understand the issues at stake in their own community, come to know the people benefiting from their efforts, and have confidence that their work will meet genuine needs.
- Agencies and sponsoring organizations benefit from being seen as true resources and collaborators in meeting community needs.
- In the long term, people who develop the practices of listening and learning will become more effective citizens, leaders, and agents of meaningful change.

Why use strength-based approaches to listen to the community?

There are, of course, different approaches to assessing and listening. The typical service-learning program starts by identifying problems or needs; "needs assessments" are generally cited as the tool of choice for this approach. However, a growing number of community development leaders argue that the focus on "needs" may itself be problematic. They suggest that needs-focused assessments risk defining an organization, neighborhood, or community by its problems—problems that generally require outside expertise and resources to "fix." Thus, needs assessments can have an unintended effect on the relationship between the servers and those being served, as well as a negative long-term impact on the community's own capacity to grow and develop (Roehlkepartain, 2005).

As an alternative, these community leaders recommend shifting the focus from identifying needs to identifying resources, hopes, and dreams. Instead of asking, "What problems do you have that we can fix for you," a strength-based assessment asks, "What are your strengths, priorities, and hopes, and how can we partner with you in working toward the kind of future you seek for your community?"

Often when people first hear about strength-based assessments, they find it counterintuitive. After all, we assume that "service" should meet "needs," so you should focus on identifying those needs in the assessment process. However, by focusing on what is present (not missing) in a community young people have the potential to identify constructive service opportunities that can add value to a community, building on latent potential, without merely focusing on what is lacking. In this way the focus of the project is positively defined instead of being characterized by what may be perceived as a community weakness.

This shift changes the power dynamic between those "being served" and those "providing service." Instead of the neighborhood, organization, or community having needs that young people meet through service-learning, both the service-learners and the "recipients" of service offer resources, capacities, hopes, and priorities in a mutually reciprocal partnership.

John L. McKnight and his colleagues at Northwestern University were pioneers in shifting the focus of community assessment or mapping to emphasize strengths (McKnight & Kretzmann, 1996; Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993). For example, a needs assessment might document patterns of crime, unemployment, pollution, and economic blight within a neighborhood (all of which are present). In contrast, a strengths map of the same neighborhood might identify individual gifts and interests, available untapped resources, as well as the capacities of local organizations and associations (all of which are also present).

The difference, McKnight and Kretzmann (1996) contend, is that the latter map "is the map a neighborhood must rely on if it is to find the power to regenerate itself. Communities have never been built on their deficiencies. Building community has always depended upon mobilizing the capacities and assets of a people and a place" (p. 17). In other words, needs assessments create "mental maps" that define people primarily in terms of their problems and challenges, fostering a cycle of dependency on outside services and resources (Beaulieu, 2002).

Key elements of strength-based approaches to community assessment

- *Strength-based approaches focus on the capacities or gifts that are present in the community, not what is absent.* Bohach (1997) writes: "Every community, no matter how deprived or disadvantaged it may feel it is or be perceived to be, is comprised of citizens who have an endless supply of unique, positive, and valuable abilities that are their gifts.... Using their gifts, a community's citizens can focus on areas of strength (the positive) rather than only focusing on areas of need (the negative)" (p. 23).
- *Strength-based approaches stress local leadership, investment, and control* in both the planning process and the outcome. This emphasis assumes that residents are in the best position to know the community's true strengths and capacities, making them experts (not clients). This shift provides a vital foundation for unleashing and sustaining community capacity, citizen engagement, and social capital (Benson, Scales, & Mannes, 2003).
- *Strength-based approaches surface both formal, institutional resources (such as programs, facilities, and financial capital) as well as individual, associational, and informal strengths and resources.* By connecting across traditional sectors and boundaries, communities often discover previously unrecognized interests, talents, skills, and capacities that can be matched with needs or challenges in another part of the community.
- *Strength-based approaches seek to link the strengths and priorities of all partners, including the young people.* Listening to the community one seeks to serve does not take away the need to recognize young people's own priorities, talents, skills, and passions. The best service-learning projects link the priorities and resources of a community with the capacities and interests of the young people offering the service. This mutual engagement, respect, and commitment yields reciprocal benefits to everyone involved.

Strength-based community assessment tools

There are many ways to listen to a community at multiple levels with different objectives. Some approaches involve in-depth surveys, extensive interviews, GIS mapping technology, and complex processes. And, in fact, those kinds of sophisticated processes are vital for community-wide visioning and planning that lay a foundation for major, sustained public or philanthropic investments. Yet they also require significant resources and expertise—which are often not readily available to most service-learning programs; and when they are available they can be both daunting and time-consuming.

In many cases, more manageable tools provide a useful starting point for more focused efforts—like those developed for the Inspired to Serve project. Several accessible and user-friendly tools are available that guide youth-led efforts to conduct community assessments that focus on strengths and resources. Here are several examples:

- [Building Community: A Tool Kit for Youth and Adults in Charting Assets and Creating Change](#) [1] (2006), developed by the Innovation Center for Community and Youth Development. This handbook outlines a process by which youth and adults in communities can explore the strengths and gifts of people and places—past, present, and future. It offers activities and case studies for creating youth-adult partnerships, mapping assets, creating community visions and plans, and mobilizing local change. Training and technical assistance are also available.
- [Community Connections Asset Mapping Process](#) [2], developed by the Connecticut Assets network. This online geo-mapping tool focuses on identifying community resources, giving community organizers and service-learning programs a structure in which to collect, analyze, and act on the strengths and resources of the community. It offers survey templates that can be modified to reflect a community's culture, and data are entered into an interactive, web-based database that facilitates matching people to other people, programs, and resources throughout the community.
- [Community YouthMapping \(CYM\)](#) [3], from the Center for Youth Development and Policy Research, Academy for Educational Development. This widely used approach provides concrete strategies and tools for mobilizing youth and adults as they identify resources and opportunities that exist in their community. In this model, young people and adults canvass neighborhoods in search of places to go and things to do. It is not primarily used as an assessment tool for service-learning, but it is easily applied to a service-learning program model. Since 1995, Community YouthMapping has been implemented in more than 100 sites across the United States and, increasingly, internationally.
- [Exploring your community's strengths and hopes: A step-by-step guide for youth-led community listening projects](#) [4] (2009), developed by Search Institute. Developed as part of a Learn and Serve America-supported pilot program, Inspired to Serve: Youth-Led Interfaith Action, this guide offers a step-by-step guide for conducting key informant interviews in a community using an Appreciative Inquiry approach that focuses on strengths, hopes, and dreams. The guide offers a structured process design through which young people from diverse backgrounds can come together to set learning, service, and developmental goals; plan the project; learn interview skills; conduct interviews; interpret data; come to a shared action agenda through group reflection and synthesis; demonstrate what they have learned; then partner with the community to implement a project. Though written specifically for interfaith contexts, the core process and guide are adaptable to other settings.
- [YMCA Resource Mapping & Community Action Guide: Assessing & Strengthening Communities through Service-Learning](#) [5] (2006), developed by the YMCA of the USA. Developed with support from Learn and Serve America, this handbook provides background information, case studies, tools, resources, worksheets, and other information on resource mapping. It offers guidelines for implementing service-learning projects that strengthen community resources and leverage young people's participation in civic life.

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