

7 *Social justice and community service have strong traditions in higher education. In this chapter, the authors describe ways in which positive psychology and appreciative inquiry inform the pursuit of social justice through community service activities.*

Promoting Social Justice Through Appreciative Community Service

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Much of the positive psychology scholarship to date has focused on enhancing our understanding of how to achieve a sense of well-being, but considerably less guidance exists on how to disseminate well-being (Thin, 2011). In addition, little research and writing on positive psychology has focused on translating the wealth of positive psychology research to populations in high-poverty communities.

While positive psychology has not, in large part, attended to people in poverty, there is a growing body of literature attending to these concerns (Diener and Oishi, 2000; Linley, Bhaduri, Sen Sharma, and Govindji, 2011; Schwartz and Melech, 2000). Because of positive psychology's focus on enriching lives, and due to higher education's interest in dealing with injustice and inequality (Johnson and O'Grady, 2006; Osei-Kofi, Shahjahan, and Patton, 2010), it is appropriate to consider ways in which positive psychology principles can be applied to higher education's efforts to improve conditions for historically oppressed individuals and communities.

Higher education's work with oppressed groups is generally framed as social justice. Social justice is directed toward "bringing about a more equitable distribution of society's wealth" (Hoppe, 2004, p. 139). Social justice approaches to community service and service-learning aim to awaken participants to injustice and to catalyze action (Exley, 2004, p. 87). These community service activities are wide ranging, from gaining exposure to injustice by performing service work in high-poverty communities to engaging in political protests.

In this chapter, we present an appreciative orientation approach to promoting social justice in high-poverty communities: The appreciative framework of community service is informed by emerging scholarship from

positive psychology and appreciative inquiry (AI), and both models have shown evidence of success in improving the quality of life in high-poverty communities (Biswas-Diener and Patterson, 2011; Gawande, 2008; Kretzmann and McKnight, 2003; Linley and others, 2011).

It should be noted that some of the prominent positive psychology findings pertinent to community service corresponds more directly to a *charity* approach than to social justice. Consonant with the charity approach, there is considerable positive psychology research that focuses on bolstering personal fulfillment and happiness through performing acts of kindness (Lyubomirsky, 2008). Lyubomirsky's considerable research on charitable behavior confirms the positive influence that engaging in service activities—including even the simplest of gestures—has on the giver's well-being.

While positive psychology research informs the charity models of service, there is also a growing body of social justice-oriented research focused on improving lives of oppressed and marginalized persons and communities (Biswas-Diener and Patterson, 2011; Linley, Bhaduri, Sen Sharma, and Govindji, 2011; and Thin, 2011). One of the primary appreciative models of practice is asset-based community development (ABCD) (Kretzmann and McKnight, 2003). The asset-based model emphasizes identifying, nurturing, and capitalizing on individual and collective strengths that exist within poor communities. According to Kretzmann and McKnight, meaningful and significant community development only occurs when the community itself is invested in the effort. This stands in contrast to the charity model, which emphasizes help from outside agents over action from community members.

While the appreciative framework resonates with social justice's focus on structural barriers to equity, it offers a unique lens on poverty-related problems. For instance, Thin (2011) has argued that positive psychology may influence considerations of the meanings and sources of "justice," moving people to consider justice as "being about the distribution and sharing of *well-being*, not only about access to resources" (p. 47). This orientation is supported by research findings suggesting that economic realities are often overemphasized and matters such as family and health are underemphasized in considerations of well-being (Graham, 2009). Thus, while economic realities are not ignored in asset-based models, the appreciative framework gives them less emphasis than do dominant social justice models. Diener and Diener (2011) recommend psychosocial prosperity as a development goal; prosperity in this vein includes social characteristics such as supportive social relationships, competence and mastery, and subjective well-being.

Both social justice and appreciative community frameworks are based on the notion that effective and positive changes require fundamental, systemic adjustments at both a cultural and an individual level. Thin (2011) points out that numerous social pathologies stand in the way of living a full

life. Materialism is certainly among the barriers to well-being, as are oppressive phenomena such as sexism and racism. These barriers to well-being are evident in communities ranging from upper economic class to high poverty, and each type of community has much to learn from the other.

While cultural barriers to well-being are evident, seldom will effective change occur through direct confrontation of these pathologies, especially from outsiders (Thin, 2011). Thus, appreciative development approaches often emphasize change *within* individuals and communities. According to Thin, positive psychology approaches generally center on engaging communities positively, and using the emerging wholeness of people to lead to systemic change.

In addition to the practical barriers associated with attempting to create change by direct confrontation, there are also philosophical and ethical arguments against such approaches. Block (2008) points out that dissent and rebellion, common features of the social justice paradigm are sometimes antithetical to meaningful change. He states:

On the surface, rebellion claims to be against monarchy, dominion, or oppression. Too often it turns out to be a vote for monarchy, dominion, or patriarchy. Rebellion is most often not a call for transformation or a new context, but simply a complaint that others control the monarchy and not us. . . . Any time we act in reaction, even to evil, we are giving power to what we are in reaction to. . . . The real problem with rebellion is that it is such fun. It avoids taking responsibility, operates on the high ground, is fueled by righteousness, gives legitimacy to blame, and is a delightful escape from the unbearable burden of being accountable. (p. 134)

An appreciative approach entails taking responsibility for change rather than relinquishing power to outside parties. Resting the power for change within the community is indicative of a belief in the strengths and assets of poor communities. Focusing on assets possessed by the community allays the complications resulting from overdependence on outside benefactors.

In this chapter, we present two community service practices that were developed out of an appreciative framework. Both of these approaches focus on leveraging the strengths that exist within communities in order to foster a more just society. The first approach, asset mapping, is closely aligned with positive psychology's strengths movement. The second model presented is based on an adaptation of AI's 4-D model of institutional improvement (Bloom, Hutson, and He, 2008).

Asset Mapping

Every single person has capacities, abilities and gifts. Living a good life depends on whether those capacities can be used, abilities expressed and gifts given. If they are, the person will be valued, feel powerful and

well-connected to the people around them. And the community around the person will be more powerful because of the contribution the person is making. (Kretzmann and McKnight, 2003, p. 13)

The practice of asset mapping begins with identifying the community's and community members' strengths. There is a plethora of research attesting to the benefits derived from focusing on strengths for both organizations and individuals (Govindji and Linley, 2007; Harter, Schmidt, and Hayes, 2002; Seligman, Steen, Park, and Peterson, 2005). Linley and colleagues (2011) described a strengths-based initiative in a slum community in India. The conditions of this community were described in stark terms, for example, one toilet serving 2,500 people; homes are made of patched together materials such as billboard remnants, corrugated iron, concrete pipes, and so on; and floors are made compacted dirt. Despite these difficult material conditions, the researchers described strong social connections among the community members, as demonstrated through strong conversational behaviors, children finding happiness through play, and so on.

In order to uncover the strengths in this seemingly desperate community, Linley and colleagues (2011) conducted interpreter-mediated interviews designed to identify community members' strengths. Interviewers attempted to elicit the naming of strengths by asking about daily and periodic activities, with a focus on what activities participants enjoyed doing and what it was about the activities they enjoyed. They also asked about visions for the future, what they do best, what they would like to do but do not have the opportunity, and who in the community supports and encourages them. These interviews led to the development of interest groups, such as a sewing club that served as a collective, bonding activity, and a source of income.

In inner-city Indianapolis, Broadway United Methodist Church conducts strengths interviews with members of the community, and has found through this process that interviews are most productive when people are asked about their neighbors' and family members' strengths rather than their own (Mike Mather, personal communication, April 11, 2013). They have found this approach to be more effective than soliciting strengths directly from individuals due to the reality that individuals often do not recognize their own strengths (Linley, 2008).

Another effective asset-based strategy, a supplement to strengths interviews, involves the telling of community stories. Block (2008) and McKnight and Block (2012) provided guidance for soliciting stories that are restorative. They assert that it is important to encourage stories about "talents, properties, and gifts" (McKnight and Block, 2012, p. 95), rather than about deficiencies.

Students involved in community service programs can solicit these stories by asking general questions about community strengths or questions based on specific observations:

- “Tell me the story of how this community center came to be.”
- “I notice there is a lot of laughter when people get together; tell me about what coming together means to you.”
- “What goals and dreams do you have for the children of the community?”

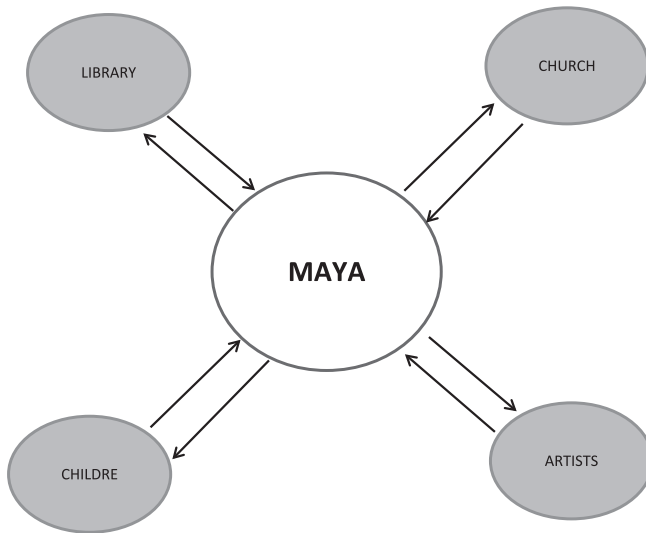
Service groups can record stories and present them, along with the results of strength assessments, to the community. Often, community members are not aware of positive features of their community. This was the case in the story told by Mike Mather (2010) about Maya, a member of a high-poverty community in Indianapolis, who tutors young people in reading and writing. Few people in the neighborhood knew of Maya’s involvement with these students. Once people became aware of her work, the community embraced her contributions and celebrated them publicly. Recognizing activities performed by Maya and others like her remind people that fundamental assets required to strengthen the communities are already present; members of the community do not need to wait for someone outside to save or fix them.

It is important to keep in mind that assets do not need to have ostensible economic value in order to have worth. So assets that may commonly be considered unimportant for community development are, in fact, valued. For instance, Kretzmann and McKnight (2003) refer to the importance of community members’ artistic talents for bolstering self-expression and self-esteem, fostering vision and creativity, acknowledging cultural assets, and developing productive personal disciplines. Thus, there are unique and important roles for people’s artistic talents in building up communities. Communities can also be enriched by cultivating a host of non-economic relational strengths, such as the ability to listen and the gift of encouraging others. Community well-being relies on strengthening social fabric as much or more than cultivating financial resources or earning potential.

The process of mapping community assets is conducted with material derived from strengths interviews, inventories of community capacities (see Kretzmann and McKnight, 2003), and from community stories. The service group should also collect a list of community associations, businesses, institutions, and other types of environmental resources that are also important assets. Individuals and groups (e.g., youth, artists, seniors, or persons with disabilities) can then be mapped to these potential community partners. As an example, many communities and institutions do not recognize the assets offered by their senior citizens.

Figure 7.1 illustrates potential connections between Maya and other neighborhood resources. For instance, Maya’s work can be enhanced by connections to the area library. In return, the library will be enriched by the participation of children who have not been patrons previously. Maya’s work directly benefits children, whose engagement with Maya gives her

Figure 7.1. Potential Connections between Maya and Other Neighborhood Resources



human connections that strengthen her life. The local church provides a venue for celebrating Maya's work, and the church benefits by its connection to the community. Local artists could engage participating children in finding alternative ways of expression, thus contributing to Maya's literacy work, and so on. Maps can also be drawn with groups in the center of the schema, rather than individuals (Kretzmann and McKnight, 2003). Thus, asset maps can be drawn for categories of people, such as community seniors, artists, or people with disabilities. Maps recognize both the realized and unrealized assets the groups bring and the resources that can enrich their lives within the community.

One of the challenges of this type of activity for community service groups is that the formal relationship between the service team and the community is often short-lived due to curricular or other scheduling constraints or due to geographic realities. In regard to short-term community service experiences, it is especially important for service teams from colleges and universities to work closely with a host nongovernmental organization (NGO) or other community partners to see whether there are possibilities for the NGO to continue the asset-based community development work following the departure of the service team. We have found that sharing the asset mapping approach with NGOs and other community partners can shape the organizations' future work with communities.

This asset-based approach can be a stand-alone exercise or part of a larger service project that service groups can conduct in a community. In a service-learning-based program in Ecuador, a class from Ohio University

augments the asset identification and mapping activity with other initiatives, including construction work and educational play with children. These activities, when conducted side-by-side with community members, can provide additional opportunities to build relationships with community members and to recognize community strengths.

The following appreciative education model for practice provides a way of conceiving of an overall approach a service team might take with a community. Asset-based community development strategies can be employed within this framework.

Appreciative Education in Service: A Model for Practice

The appreciative advising model (Bloom, Hutson, and He, 2008; Cooperrider and Srivastva, 1987) can serve as a useful framework for planning and implementing community-based service programs that foster positive emotional engagement and well-being. Bloom, Huston, and He expanded Cooperrider's four D's to six cyclical phases—Disarm, Discover, Dream, Design, Deliver, and Don't Settle—that are designed to build on positive experiences and strengths that are manifest in the community.

Appreciative advising is easily adapted to the planning and implementing of community engagement programs, from service abroad trips, to service-learning courses, to short-term programs. Members of the university community as well as community partners important to the development of meaningful and sustainable programs can utilize the six phases.

Disarm. The Disarm stage is about breaking down barriers between students and community members. Setting a positive tone early in the process for all stakeholders sends an inclusive message that every person and his or her contributions are valued. A positive tone also opens up avenues of communication necessary for creating meaningful programs.

In a two-week service-learning program in Honduras (Mather, Given, Hendrickson, and Lash, 2010), the first interaction between community members and the service group is a social mixer, which can include a range of activities, from music performances to friendly competitions such as relay races. These activities reduce barriers (i.e., “disarming”) among participants, and establish a solid foundation for building relationships throughout the week.

It can also be “disarming” to begin from the first day to highlight the gifts and assets of community members and recognize that they are no less valued than the assets of the group that are guests in the community. It is important to undermine from the beginning the notion that one group exclusively possesses skills and gifts to be bestowed upon another.

Discover. University and community partners come to the table with diverse needs and previous experiences. Service participants should be prepared to avoid defaulting to easy answers about causes of poverty and related social problems. Participants should be open to learning about the

needs and assets of each stakeholder to ensure that the benefits of a program are maximized and to acknowledge the multiple gifts that come together in the community. Understanding each stakeholder's previous experiences and what strengths and assets they bring to the engagement program can make the planning process more effective.

Not all projects or programs are right for every community partner. Spending time listening to and learning about each person's strengths, needs, goals, and prior experiences will provide rich and important information. Focusing particularly on past projects or successes that community partners believed to be successful and meaningful can help to create a foundation to build new projects and create new successes.

In the Honduras program, this important phase is initiated by members of a local NGO working with the community to identify assets and needs prior to the service-learning group's arrival. With the groundwork laid, the service team comes into the village prepared to address this particular community's self-identified needs and priorities. Because the organization has a continuous presence in the area, they are in a strong position to recognize the gifts and needs of the community members.

Also prior to the service group's arrival in the community, students are put into research teams—based on personal and scholarly interests—to gain an in-depth understanding of the lives of community members. Teams have investigated questions about mental health challenges and resources, the experiences of adolescents in the educational system, and community members' assessments of the changes made to their community by the local NGO and service teams. The asset mapping process described above is also a potential investigative exercise.

Through these research experiences, service-learning class members gain a deeper understanding of the lives of the community members. This serves not only to enrich the relationships, but to engender an understanding of the complexity of poverty-related realities. This understanding can also spark curiosity and intellectual engagement, components of a flourishing life, as discussed by Hulme, Green, and Ladd in Chapter Two of this monograph.

Dream. Dream provides an avenue for all stakeholders to consider other options before committing to one particular path for the community. It is important to take the opportunity to allow university and community partners to think from a big-picture perspective about community goals and aspirations without the constraint of time or resources. This may lead to the development of new ideas and richer programs. It is important to record all of the project ideas in the Dream session—even ones that seem to be the most far-fetched—because components of these pie-in-the-sky dreams could be incorporated into the final project design.

As Harrison and Hasan discussed in Chapter Seven of this volume, faculty or staff leaders often have a need to “possess” questions and answers. However, it is necessary not only to remain open to different ideas, but to

structure experiences that invite new ones. This can be accomplished by having different groups (i.e., service team and community members) have responsibility for introducing discussion topics and questions. Since the parties are likely to have diverse perspectives on life and the projects at hand, this will almost certainly broaden participants' frames of reference. In addition, taking time to ask thoughtful big-picture questions can uncover and foster shared themes among participants, which supports experiences of bonding among people who, on the surface, are very different.

Design. The Design phase centers on narrowing the big ideas from the Dream session into manageable and realistic programs that maximize the investment and talents of the stakeholders. Piecing together components from multiple ideas to form one co-created project will give all stakeholders a vested interest in the project's success.

Whenever possible, it is important to allow time in the Design phase to rework and refine the project several times in order to develop a sound and meaningful final product. Participants should explore the resources—temporal, financial, human, and so on—that will be needed to successfully implement the project or program.

It can be useful to work through several different paths for achieving the same outcomes to uncover multiple options. It is valuable to spend time on the details; consider contingency plans, if applicable; and plan the project the whole way through. Wheatley and Frieze's (2011) discussion of communities that have transformed themselves through recognizing and applying their assets offers examples of worthwhile designs.

Deliver. Time spent building relationships, communicating needs and expectations, and co-creating a plan in the previous phases should facilitate smooth program implementation. It is important to continue to communicate frequently throughout the duration of the program. In particular, positive feedback will help to motivate participants and reassure community partners that the experience is valuable. Adjustments may need to be made throughout the program, and expectations should be established that changes will be necessary for successful implementation. It is important to encourage all parties to give open, honest, and constructive feedback, so that adjustments can be made immediately if necessary. Alterations in the plans should be clearly communicated to all involved.

Don't Settle. Reflection is integral to community engagement projects, whether considered service-learning or simply community service programs, because it provides university and community partners with the opportunity to internalize the meaning of their work. Internalization through reflection helps to promote a sense of well-being by nurturing mindfulness and movement outside of one's conventional and customary reality.

As the program comes to a close, it is valuable to look forward and think about next steps and future programs. Generally, service-learning programs focus on reflection that occurs either privately or within the

confines of the service team. In this approach based on appreciative education, community members are integral partners in the reflection process. Thus, it is important to create forums where reflection can be performed both individually and in a group setting to enable individuals to process their own experiences, as well as providing the opportunity for the community to reflect on the experience from their own cultural perspective.

Even the most successful projects can improve. It is useful to carve out time to reflect on what would have made the program even more successful if it were to be repeated. Recording this information and making it accessible to all stakeholders is recommended for future use.

Using an appreciative approach to planning community engagement programs provides a multidimensional structure that focuses on leveraging the very best of what the university and community already have to offer. By placing university and community partners together with a shared responsibility for creating, planning, and implementing a program, both parties have a natural interest in seeing it succeed. Additionally, the shared responsibility between both groups can eliminate the power dynamic of having one group seen as the expert, fixing the other.

Conclusion

Providing real assistance to high-poverty communities is no easy task. In particular, higher education institutions committed to making a positive difference must navigate complex political, cultural, and psychosocial considerations in the implementation of service programs. We have argued that positive psychology can serve as a useful theoretical foundation for social justice practice due to its focus on improving lives. In this chapter, we offer asset mapping and appreciative education service activities as useful models for guiding effective partnerships in boosting the quality of life in high-poverty communities. While there is a growing body of evidence of the effectiveness of asset-based community practices (Kretzmann and Puntenney, 2010; Puntenney and Zappia, 2013), the appreciative education in service model is offered as an approach that has intuitive appeal but has not yet been empirically tested. In the spirit of positive psychology, which has a strong basis in empirical research, we have offered this approach with recommendations for continued study on its efficacy.

In its relatively short existence, positive psychology has produced substantial guidance for enhancing life quality. There is a great opportunity for supporters of social justice to apply this rich and growing knowledge base to communities and people that operate on the margins.

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