

## The Relationship between Service-Learning, Asset Building and Civic Engagement

While service-learning can positively impact all YMCA initiatives, its influence is perhaps greatest in the areas of building assets in youth and promoting civic engagement. Service-learning, asset building and promoting civic engagement are three approaches the YMCA emphasizes in efforts to enhance youth and adult development. While the approaches are distinct, efforts in one area often incorporate or enhance efforts in another area. For this reason, it is useful for those leading your YMCA's service-learning projects and programs to have an understanding of the three approaches, how they relate to each other and how they contribute to building strong kids, strong families and strong communities.

### Asset Building

Developmental assets represent a way of understanding a broad spectrum of what young people need to be successful in life. The research-based framework of 40 developmental assets developed by Search Institute includes two types of assets. External assets refer to the support and opportunities that are provided by family, friends, organizations and communities and include the categories of support, empowerment, boundaries and expectations, and constructive use of time. Internal assets focus on the capacities, skills and values that develop within young people and include the categories of commitment to learning, positive values, social competencies and positive identity.

Intentional effort to increase developmental assets for young people is called *asset building*. This kind of effort is needed for two reasons. First, many young people in our society do not experience even half of the 40 assets. Second, having more assets is highly beneficial to young people. The more assets young people experience, the more likely they are to do well in school, contribute to their communities, take care of their health and have many other positive outcomes. In addition, the more assets young people experience, the less likely they are to use alcohol and other drugs, to be violent and to engage in early sexual activity.

The power of developmental assets in shaping young people's choices has motivated hundreds of communities and thousands of individuals and organizations to join in efforts to build developmental assets for and with children and youth. The YMCA is one of these organizations, and service-learning is one of the strategies that many people have used in asset-building efforts. Developing assets in young people is really the ultimate goal of service-learning experiences.

By incorporating the asset framework in your service-learning projects and programs, you strengthen your service-learning efforts, program participants, the community and the YMCA.



The Abundant Assets Alliance ([www.abundantassets.org](http://www.abundantassets.org)) combines the resources of YMCA of the USA, YMCA Canada and Search Institute—three distinguished organizations with proven success in building strong kids, families and communities. The alliance seeks to strengthen the capacity of YMCAs and the communities they serve to provide young people with the support and experiences they need to become healthy, caring and competent adults. Harnessing the power of extensive research on developmental assets—the essential building blocks for human development—the alliance partners have developed a holistic, systematic approach to improving young peoples’ lives that involves the entire community.

The ultimate purpose of the alliance is to tap the strengths of these three organizations and their members to ensure that young people across North America have access to the developmental assets they need to grow up healthy, caring and responsible. To work toward this vision, the alliance has three broad, long-term goals:

1. To support the transformation of local YMCAs to be asset-rich resources;
2. To equip local YMCAs to be catalysts and partners for community transformation;
3. To join with other organizations across North America to influence social norms and policies.

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Reprinted from *The YMCA Service-Learning Guide: A Tool for Enriching the Member, the Participant, the YMCA and the Community*, second edition, pages 5–6.

## Building Assets through Service-Learning

Research and practice in the field of service-learning have established that engaging in service to others has clear potential for building assets in three broad areas:

- Building prosocial values and behaviors
- Enhancing personal identity, including self-esteem
- Enhancing school success, such as grades and motivation in school

In fact, an asset-building perspective can bring added benefits to service-learning projects by reminding leaders and participants

- To focus on the relational dimension of serving others. It is through relationships that young people often first get involved in service, and it is often the relationships that keep them committed;
- Of the value of multiple exposures to service over time in a wide variety of contexts, with each experience adding to and reinforcing the other as young people grow up;
- To use a strength-based focus both with the young people who are serving and with those who are being served.

You can use the following chart as a tool for examining how to enhance service-learning opportunities and focus on asset-building principles.



# Enhancing Service-Learning with Connections to the Categories of Developmental Assets

Category of Developmental Assets	Description	Service-Learning Connections
Support	Young people need to experience care, love and involvement from their family, neighbors and many others. They need organizations and institutions that provide positive, supportive environments.	Working together on service-learning projects can cement relationships of support and caring between peers and with parents and other adults.
Empowerment	Young people need to be safe, to be valued by their community and to have opportunities to contribute to others.	As they contribute to their world, young people become experts about issues that are important to them, and are seen and see themselves as valuable resources for their organizations and communities. Careful preparation and good supervision during their service-learning efforts help them be and feel safe.
Boundaries and Expectations	Young people need to know that others have high expectations of them and what behaviors are in bounds or out of bounds.	Boundaries and high expectations are reinforced when activities include ground rules for involvement and as adults and peers become positive role models for each other. Commitment to Learning
Young people need constructive, enriching opportunities for growth through creative activities, youth programs,	involvement with a center of worship or spirituality, and quality time at home.	Service-learning provides opportunities for young people to expand their minds and hearts, offer hope and support to others, and use their creativity to deal with new challenges and opportunities.
Young people need to develop a lifelong commitment to education and learning.	Education linked to action can unleash a new commitment to learning as youth apply their knowledge to issues and problems and as they are exposed to questions and situations that challenge their worldview and perspectives.	Constructive Use of Time
Positive Values	Young people need to develop strong values that guide their choices.	Through service-learning, young people not only express their positive values, they also have opportunities to affirm and internalize values that are important to them.
Social Competencies	Young people need skills and competencies that equip them to make positive choices, to build relationships and to succeed in life.	Many skills and social competencies are nurtured as young people plan their activities, take action and build relationships with diverse peers, adults who serve with them and service beneficiaries.
Positive Identity	Young people need a strong sense of their own purpose, power and promise.	Service-learning becomes an important catalyst for shaping positive identity as young people discover their gifts and a place in the world through their acts of service and justice.

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For more information on developmental assets and service-learning, see *An Asset Builder's Guide to Service-Learning*, published by Search Institute, 2000.

## Involving Youth in Planning and Decision Making

Quality service-learning involves the participants in planning and implementing projects. Ideally, this also extends to involving youth in the broader planning stages. Invite, encourage and support youth to work with you in shaping a vision and setting goals. Adding the youth voice to your planning efforts builds not only youth but the community and the YMCA as well.

In service-learning, participants plan all aspects of projects, which they choose and follow to completion. This is true for participants of all ages, and it particularly fits with developmentally appropriate practice for young people as defined by the YMCA. The YMCA “Working With” training series lists the following needs for children and youth:

- ◉ Competence and achievement
- ◉ Self-definition
- ◉ Creative expression
- ◉ Positive social interactions with peers and adults
- ◉ Structure and clear limits
- ◉ Meaningful participation

These are all developmental assets that are strengthened by participation in service-learning activities. Service-learning offers a necessary opportunity for young people to explore independence while still being supported by an adult and allows young people to self-select activities rather than follow a structured program where adult activities are prevalent.

As stated earlier, the essence of service-learning is a partnership involving the participants, community and program staff. Each partner has specific roles that lead to a successful outcome. Young people offer needed energy and leadership to the partnership on many levels: they take the lead in recruiting for their projects, organize the ongoing program leadership structure and run their own meetings. If the issues being addressed by the program or project reflect the interests of the participants, the enthusiasm will be boundless.

### Recruitment

Recruitment is the place to start sharing ownership. All the usual methods still apply: mailing and flyers (in new or existing YMCA materials), calling and word of mouth. It is also good to keep in mind that young people are typically very plugged into technology, so using e-mail for networking and conversation can be very effective. Here are some tricks and strategies that can make recruitment of young people easier:

- ◉ Work with young people as co-creators. Share ownership of program development with young people from the start. An informal advisory group will provide authen-



tivity, cultivate ideas and create excitement. For more information about youth advisory councils, see the YMCA of Greater Tulsa case study on page 170.

- ◉ Start by working with participants who are interested. Focus initial recruitment efforts on people who want and/or have a willingness to get involved. Don't work hard at first to reach those who are not initially interested.
- ◉ Because many young people have very full lives already, build on areas where potential participants are already engaged or efforts where they are already invested. With older youth, meetings and trainings can be held in cafés or at other convenient locations as an alternative to the YMCA location.
- ◉ Be clear about what you are asking people to join. If it is meaningful, relevant and valuable, they will want to be involved, even if they are very busy.
- ◉ Build on existing collaborations and use existing catalysts to maximize support. Use plugged-in individuals who can access existing groups within the organization (staff, program participants, members). Connect with other like-minded organizations and their key staff.
- ◉ Take advantage of personal invitations and existing relationships. People will often step up to the plate if they are asked by someone they know. Ask each member of your informal advisory committee to bring one new member.
- ◉ Casual, Connected, Committed. Provide an array of opportunities that helps move participants from casual to committed involvement. One-time events can introduce participants to greater opportunities. Continue to increase ownership and meaningful program development for more committed participants.

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Reprinted from *The YMCA Service-Learning Guide: A Tool for Enriching the Member, the Participant, the YMCA and the Community*, second edition, pages 28–29.

## TOOL

### Reinforcing Assets During Action

Here are some ways adult leaders and allies can model asset building and create an asset-rich experience for young people during the action phase of service-learning.

#### Support

- Get to know all the young people who are serving.
- Encourage warm relationships between young people themselves, between young people and community members, and between young people and adult supervisors and servers.

#### Empowerment

- Ensure that all young people have meaningful roles and feel like they are really contributing.
- Monitor safety and enforce safety rules.

#### Boundaries and Expectations

- Have clear assignments, guidelines and behavior expectations for young people.
- Encourage all adults and young people to model responsible, healthy behavior.
- Give young people assignments that are challenging but not overwhelming.

#### Constructive Use of Time

- Make sure that all young people have useful ways to spend their time.

#### Commitment to Learning

- Keep the learning goals in mind. Point out connections between service and learning at the work site.
- Informally reflect on the experience during the project.

#### Positive Values

- Be honest with the young people and expect them to be honest with you.
- Talk about issues of social justice that arise during the project.

#### Social Competencies

- Don't always immediately answer questions or tell young people how to do things; encourage young people to figure out some things for themselves.
- Encourage young people to get to know people who are different from them, even if it's awkward.

#### Positive Identity

- Let young people make mistakes and take risks (within appropriate boundaries). Help them learn from mistakes and then move on.
- Affirm and thank young people. Let them know they are making a difference.

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**WORKSHEET**

## Using the Developmental Assets to Guide Your Reflection

If you are including discussion and learning about the 40 developmental assets as part of your service-learning program, here are some questions that can help young people view situations through an “asset lens.” It will help young people to have a list of the assets to refer to when thinking about these questions.

### General Asset Building

- What assets do you see being built today for yourselves and for the people around you?
- Who were the most important asset builders at the work site? What made them such good asset builders?
- What assets were most missing from your experience?

### Support

- Who were your biggest supporters today? What did they do to make you feel supported?
- Who did you support today? How did it feel to be an asset builder for someone else?
- How did what we did today make a difference in how supportive young people in our community (school, neighborhood, organization) will feel in the future?

### Empowerment

- How safe did you feel on the work site? What would have made you feel safer?
- Why do you think our work today will make adults in the community think of young people in a different way?
- Did you feel valued and appreciated while you worked? Why or why not?

### Boundaries and Expectations

- Did everyone who participated in our project behave in ways that you thought were appropriate? If not, what were some of the inappropriate things you saw? (Note: Ask participants to talk about the behavior, not individuals.)
- Do you think we should have had more ground rules about what was OK and what wasn't? Why or why not?
- Who were the best role models at the site? Were they mostly adults? Young people? Volunteers? Staff?

### Constructive Use of Time

- Did you do anything today that felt creative? Explain.
- Did your experience today make you more interested in getting involved in a youth program? Cocurricular clubs or organizations? A congregation? Another organization?

### Commitment to Learning

- Did our work today make you interested in learning more about any particular subjects or topics? Which ones? Why?
- Did our work make you feel good about our YMCA (school, organization, congregation)? Why or why not?
- Why do you think nurturing a commitment to learning is important? Wouldn't it be just as good to just do service?

### Positive Values

- What values were you acting on today?
- Which values did you see reflected in people (staff, clients, volunteers) you met at the site?
- Asset #27 is valuing equality and social justice. Is that a commonly held value in our community? What do you see happening that makes you think that?

### Social Competencies

- Did being prepared for our work make it successful? Why or why not?
- Did you encounter people today who seemed very different from you? What was it like?
- Did anyone pressure you today to do anything you didn't want to do? How did you handle it?

### Positive Identity

- Did anything you did today make you feel powerful? Explain.
- Did anything make you feel powerless? Explain.
- Did your service experience introduce you to any career ideas or interests that you hadn't thought about before? Which ones?

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## 40 Developmental Assets

Search Institute has identified the following building blocks of healthy development that help young people grow up healthy, caring and responsible.

### EXTERNAL ASSETS

#### Category Asset Name and Definition

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|-----------------------------|--|
| Support                     | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <b>FAMILY SUPPORT.</b> Family life provides high levels of love and support.</li> <li>2. <b>POSITIVE FAMILY COMMUNICATION.</b> Young person and her or his parent(s) communicate positively, and young person is willing to seek advice and counsel from parents.</li> <li>3. <b>OTHER ADULT RELATIONSHIPS.</b> Young person receives support from three or more nonparent adults.</li> <li>4. <b>CARING NEIGHBORHOOD.</b> Young person experiences caring neighbors.</li> <li>5. <b>CARING SCHOOL CLIMATE.</b> School provides a caring, encouraging environment.</li> <li>6. <b>PARENT INVOLVEMENT IN SCHOOLING.</b> Parent(s) are actively involved in helping young person succeed in school.</li> </ol> |
| Empowerment                 | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>7. <b>COMMUNITY VALUES YOUTH.</b> Young person perceives that adults in the community value youth.</li> <li>8. <b>YOUTH AS RESOURCES.</b> Young people are given useful roles in the community.</li> <li>9. <b>SERVICE TO OTHERS.</b> Young person serves in the community one hour or more per week.</li> <li>10. <b>SAFETY.</b> Young person feels safe at home, school and in the neighborhood.</li> </ol>   |
| Boundaries and Expectations | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>11. <b>FAMILY BOUNDARIES.</b> Family has clear rules and consequences and monitors the young person's whereabouts.</li> <li>12. <b>SCHOOL BOUNDARIES.</b> School provides clear rules and consequences.</li> <li>13. <b>NEIGHBORHOOD BOUNDARIES.</b> Neighbors take responsibility for monitoring young people's behavior.</li> <li>14. <b>ADULT ROLE MODELS.</b> Parent(s) and other adults model positive, responsible behavior.</li> <li>15. <b>POSITIVE PEER INFLUENCE.</b> Young person's best friends model responsible behavior.</li> <li>16. <b>HIGH EXPECTATIONS.</b> Both parent(s) and teachers encourage the young person to do well.</li> </ol>  |
| Constructive Use of Time    | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>17. <b>CREATIVE ACTIVITIES.</b> Young person spends three or more hours per week in lessons or practice in music, theater or other arts.</li> <li>18. <b>YOUTH PROGRAMS.</b> Young person spends three or more hours per week in sports, clubs or organizations at school and/or in the community.</li> <li>19. <b>RELIGIOUS COMMUNITY.</b> Young person spends one or more hours per week in activities in a religious institution.</li> <li>20. <b>TIME AT HOME.</b> Young person is out with friends "with nothing special to do" two or fewer nights per week.</li> </ol>   |



## INTERNAL ASSETS

Category	Asset Name and Definition
Commitment to Learning	21. <b>ACHIEVEMENT MOTIVATION.</b> Young person is motivated to do well in school.
	22. <b>SCHOOL ENGAGEMENT.</b> Young person is actively engaged in learning.
	23. <b>HOMEWORK.</b> Young person reports doing at least one hour of homework every school day.
	24. <b>BONDING TO SCHOOL.</b> Young person cares about her or his school.
	25. <b>READING FOR PLEASURE.</b> Young person reads for pleasure three or more hours per week.
Positive Values	26. <b>CARING.</b> Young person places high value on helping other people.
	27. <b>EQUALITY AND SOCIAL JUSTICE.</b> Young person places high value on promoting equality and reducing hunger and poverty.
	28. <b>INTEGRITY.</b> Young person acts on convictions and stands up for her or his beliefs.
	29. <b>HONESTY.</b> Young person “tells the truth even when it is not easy.”
	30. <b>RESPONSIBILITY.</b> Young person accepts and takes personal responsibility.
	31. <b>RESTRAINT.</b> Young person believes it is important not to be sexually active or to use alcohol or other drugs.
Social Competencies	32. <b>PLANNING AND DECISION MAKING.</b> Young person knows how to plan ahead and make choices.
	33. <b>INTERPERSONAL COMPETENCE.</b> Young person has empathy, sensitivity and friendship skills.
	34. <b>CULTURAL COMPETENCE.</b> Young person has knowledge of and comfort with people of different cultural/racial/ethnic backgrounds.
	35. <b>RESISTANCE SKILLS.</b> Young person can resist negative peer pressure and dangerous situations.
	36. <b>PEACEFUL CONFLICT RESOLUTION.</b> Young person seeks to resolve conflict nonviolently.
Positive Identity	37. <b>PERSONAL POWER.</b> Young person feels he or she has control over “things that happen to me.”
	38. <b>SELF-ESTEEM.</b> Young person reports having a high self-esteem.
	39. <b>SENSE OF PURPOSE.</b> Young person reports that “my life has a purpose.”
	40. <b>POSITIVE VIEW OF PERSONAL FUTURE.</b> Young person is optimistic about her or his personal future.

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