A GUIDE TO EVALUATING ASSET-BASED COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT: LESSONS, CHALLENGES, AND OPPORTUNITIES

A COMMUNITY BUILDING WORKBOOK
FROM
THE ASSET-BASED COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT INSTITUTE

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By
Thomas Dewar

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from
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2040 Sheridan Road
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John P. Kretzmann and John L. McKnight, Co-directors

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A Guide to Evaluating Asset-Based Community Development: Lessons, Challenges, and Opportunities

by Thomas Dewar
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About the Author:

Tom Dewar is currently a Senior Project Associate with Rainbow Research in Minneapolis, Minnesota. He is also a faculty member of the Asset-Based Community Development Institute. He holds a Ph.D. in sociology and urban affairs from Northwestern University. Before joining Rainbow, he served on the faculty of the Hubert H. Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs at the University of Minnesota where he taught and conducted research for 15 years. He has carried out evaluation research on a wide range of projects and policies, including community health action, neighborhood self-help, sustainable agriculture, community economic development, employment and training, and programs for families in poverty. He has also led several participatory and self-evaluation projects that rely primarily on non-expert resident and citizen involvement.

Note to Reader:

This guide should invite and build upon the experience of the many people actually doing asset-based community development. As such, this is very much a work-in-progress that will have to rely on actual evaluation stories if it is to be useful. Thus, in addition to comments and suggestions about what is presented here, the experiences and stories of community practitioners and funders are also invited: How have you been able to show impact or report on progress in your assets work? How have you tried to tell your stories? What have you found to be effective with the audiences you encounter? What has been difficult to capture or particularly hard to evaluate? Can you send us some examples of evaluation tools that you have written up?

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This brief guide has been written primarily for community-building practitioners, but it should also be useful for funders and others who would like to be helpful to community builders. This document seeks to provide some guidance about how evaluation can more effectively improve the work of community builders, and tell the stories that emerge. It is intended to clarify some of the most important issues and dilemmas that come up in trying to evaluate this work and suggests some ways to address them.

"Asset-based community development" refers to the range of approaches that work from the principle that a community can be built only by focusing on the strengths and capacities of the citizens and associations that call that community "home." It is the knowledge, skills, resources, values, and commitments of residents that lie at the heart of the process and constitute the first set of assets to be tapped. Beyond these individual capacities, a second set of community-building assets is found in the groups and organizations through which local citizens come together to pursue common goals. These many voluntary "associations," whether they promote cultural, religious, civic, economic, or other ends, are both more ubiquitous and more willing to adopt community-building tasks than many leaders expect. Finally, a third set of key assets for community building is to be found in the various institutions located in virtually every community — schools, parks, libraries, police, local businesses, hospitals, and human service agencies. If citizens control the community-building agenda, some of the resources in these institutions can be put to good use.

When more of these various community assets — the gifts of individuals, the power and direction of citizens' associations, and the resources of local institutions — have been rediscovered and mobilized in relation to each other and their potential to solve problems, then a community previously regarded as empty and ineffective will appear capable and powerful. Asset-based community development, then, is the set of approaches being used to identify and apply these various assets in community building.

But the discussion offered here is more general. It applies to asset-based community development but is not limited to it. It describes some of the challenges and opportunities that people doing asset-based community development will face but is clearly applicable to other community development approaches as well. This guide is written from the point of view of an experienced evaluator, one who has struggled to follow the guidance offered here, and who has often stumbled on the way to "learning" it.

What is Evaluation?

The root of the word "evaluate" means to "determine the value of" or "give value to." Its common dictionary definition includes "to apprise, weigh, assess, gauge, or approximate." For our purposes here, a useful definition of "program evaluation" is "the systematic collection of information about the activities, characteristics, and outcomes of programs for use by specific people to reduce uncertainties, improve effectiveness, and make decisions with regard to what those programs are doing and affecting" (Patton, p. 14). Program evaluation is a form of applied research, and uses standard research methods to gather information. It differs fundamentally from basic research in its purpose. Basic scientific research is done to discover new knowledge, test theories, establish truth, and generalize across time and space. Program evaluation is carried out to inform decisions, clarify options, reduce uncertainties, and provide credible information to others elsewhere about how well the program being examined works, and what it involves. Ideally, it addresses questions about what kinds of impact or progress is being made. What explains or contributes to this progress? What is being learned along the way that might usefully be shared with others?

The logic and practices of program evaluation are useful points of reference for the discussion here, but can be applied to community-building work only if there is a discrete program to be studied. Quite often there is not. Indeed, community building is often viewed by participants as one of the things to do instead of programs. This reality requires a more flexible, less scientific, but still systematic approach to evaluation. As a result, there is ever more practical guidance being developed about how to document the process and impact of community building, and a growing body of literature. This brief guide belongs in this emerging field. (See Stone, 1996; de Souza Briggs, Mueller and Sullivan, 1977).

In any particular situation, then, the methods, subject, audience, and uses of an evaluation must be dictated by what is being done, who wants to know, and what they want to learn. In designing and carrying out a strong local evaluation, the particular context, history, and purposes of any local effort must be central.

Evaluation has become a necessary part of funded community-building efforts. In most cases, it is now expected that some form of evaluation be done, and most often, that it address the questions of the funder. While understandable, this is too narrow an audience and too restricted a vision for evaluation that seeks maximum usefulness with a broad range of constituents.

Evaluation is potentially very useful in asset-based community development work. Used wisely, it can become a genuine tool for learning and will build both understanding and support. It is important for evaluation to answer questions people actually have, and to do so in a way that doesn't distract from or distort the work. When carried out in a spirit of co-discovery, an appropriate or constructive evaluation can inform multiple audiences and help move the work along.

What Can Evaluation Contribute?

There are at least three ways evaluation can play a constructive role in support of asset-based community development. First, it can help those who are doing (and funding) this work to learn from one another. Clearly, there is much interest in doing this, and not enough information currently available with which to do it. Second, it can educate others about what the work involves, and about the kinds of impact it can have. It is important to see how evaluation can help define what the work actually is, as well as what it is not. Finally, it can help identify ways for those doing the work to be more effective.

To be most useful, however, evaluation designs, tools, and practices must be crafted to reflect the very different situations people and projects find themselves in, the specific audiences they seek to inform, and the specific questions to be addressed. Thus, evaluations must be both focused and flexible.

Typically, useful evaluations are also centered around what those doing the work consider most important and would like to learn themselves. By regarding the actors as the primary audience it becomes possible to develop an evaluation framework and practice that will minimize the disruption that evaluation often creates while also improving the quality and amount of information provided.

All of this is made more difficult by the fact that "evaluation" has become a charged term, and with good reason. Many have had bad experiences with it. A few have even managed to avoid it altogether. Unfortunately, this has meant the field has developed without the voice of those who have been disappointed, disturbed, or distracted by it. Thankfully, this is now changing. Newer and friendlier approaches to evaluation are being developed, and the field is rapidly being reinvented and shaped by more flexible and pragmatic approaches.

CHAPTER ONE

CONTRASTING EVALUATION APPROACHES: "SCIENTIFIC" AND "APPROPRIATE"

Twenty-five years ago, the idea of appropriate technology began to influence the way we think about the introduction and consequences of various tools. Some enable more effective use of local resources and talent, while others create dependence on outside expertise and production. The first kind, called appropriate technology, promotes increased self-reliance and local capacity, while the second kind erodes it. The challenge of choosing tools and technologies that are "appropriate" to local communities is similar to the one this guide addresses: What is "appropriate evaluation?"

In essence, there are two very different approaches to doing evaluation. One draws heavily on scientific models and methods, while the other seeks to describe and learn from what is being done. The scientific approach seeks to establish cause and effect relationships and relies on evidence that ideally can "prove" particular results. By setting such high standards, in effect, it establishes a threshold below which most social efforts fall. If applied to community building and other fluid or dynamic processes, it usually finds results that are inconclusive. These, in turn, are often interpreted as meaning that these efforts "don't work."

The other approach — what we're calling "appropriate" evaluation — isn't really trying to prove anything, or even to establish final judgments. Rather, it seeks to understand how things work, what is changing, and what might be done next. It seeks to inform those doing the work about the kinds of changes that might improve effectiveness, as well as those observing or supporting the work about how it is going.

"Scientific" Evaluation: Its Influence and Limitations

To realize the full potential of evaluation the assumptions underlying the promotion of scientific evaluation need to be examined. Further, the tendency to impose research designs on people and situations, and the resulting anxiety, must be overcome. Scientific models of evaluation intimidate most people. So do those people who listen to accounts of the kind of community work involved here, and to reports of progress being made, and then say, "But that's merely anecdotal." Or, "That's all very nice, but we need facts, not stories." Or, "In order to make a case for this approach, you have to have a solid baseline of data against which to measure gains." Or, they insist, "You need a control group, or at least independent observers, to really prove that what you are doing works."

These and similar remarks are rather common, and reflect an assumption that only "scientific methods" can make really solid claims about effectiveness, and further, that any other approach short of these methods is inadequate. This is unfortunate because it not only dismisses what are often good faith and quite promising efforts to document and improve this kind of work, it also gets in the way of learning. Standardized notions about rigor hang over the field of evaluation, and often intimidate the very people who will have to be enlisted in efforts to systematically describe and document what community development involves, and how it progresses.

It is important to understand that evaluation when applied in a community context can almost never prove cause-effect relationships between a supported activity and some desired outcomes. In most cases, there are simply too many other variables that could also explain that outcome. Community cannot be artificially segmented, or broken down into its elements in the ways many biological or physical processes can be. Typically, when people begin talking of proof, and begin applying the research designs and techniques they believe must go along with "science," they are not going to find evidence that anything works. In fact, they are going to be hard pressed to find situations where these techniques can even be used realistically.

Basic scientific research has its place and when the conditions allow, its methods can discover new knowledge, test theories, establish truth, and generalize across time and space. Much of science considers the ideal conditions to be attainable only in the laboratory where great control can be influenced over the environment. But when those conditions do not fit, strict scientific methods do not reveal much about the subject or situation under study. For example, randomization (where those receiving a benefit or participating in an activity are selected on a random basis) or control groups (where one group of participants receives the benefit or participates and another does not but is studied in the same way as the other group) are very hard to use in most real-life settings. (For an early discussion of ways to apply scientific designs and adapt them to natural settings, and for clarity about how truly rare these opportunities are, see Campbell and Stanley, 1963.)

Under the right conditions, the application of scientific method is the right and best thing to do. Those involved see it as both informative and persuasive, if not always conclusive. Indeed, as Donald Campbell and others have argued (see Campbell, 1969, 1971; Campbell and Stanley, 1963; Popper, 1961, 1963), strong science is about reducing our uncertainty, not about proving things to be true or false once and for all. It is not about choosing one way over another. Science is much more modest and much more careful than that. Despite the occasional well-publicized discovery or breakthrough, the growth of scientific knowledge requires patience, persistence, and skepticism about what is now considered true.

Much current program evaluation practice draws on scientific models for its logic and methods. Unfortunately, the conditions required by scientific models are very rarely found. Furthermore, as it is applied to community work of various kinds, there is no discrete program or intervention to be found and studied. Rather, there is a series of interrelated actions, relationships, and meanings that evolve over time. This makes evaluating community development that much more challenging.

A primary obstacle put before many local efforts is that they are held accountable for outcomes imposed upon them by others rather than for what they claim to be doing on their own. Often they are expected to do what failed institutional strategies and local reforms were not able to do. For example, neighborhood block clubs that may be making important and solid progress in their own terms (e.g., they are bringing out new people, developing relationships among them, identifying local issues, and developing joint action to address them), are judged by whether or not they are lowering overall crime rates. This creates an expectation that is difficult to satisfy. Even if the crime rate does decline, it is nearly impossible to assign credit to a single cause.

Sometimes this challenge is dealt with by using methods developed for other settings and conditions. Despite the fact that conditions don't meet the requirements of science, many of its methods are often used to evaluate community building. To make matters more difficult, the process used to design and implement these "scientific" models has typically imposed evaluation on people and projects as a requirement rather than offering them as tools in support of improved effectiveness and learning. This reflects the extent to which evaluation has been used as a management strategy for gaining control over organizations and people.

Many evaluation practitioners have invoked the values and techniques of science to argue for more rigor, and have scolded other, less scientific attempts to evaluate programs and policies as weak and inconclusive. At the same time, using their preferred methods, these same conventional evaluators have rarely shown anything to work conclusively. The choice is sometimes posed between, on the one hand, what science regards as rigorous designs misapplied or forced upon natural settings, and, on the other hand, using more naturalistic methods that may better fit the situation but will be viewed as weak and unpersuasive. This is an unhappy choice. Ultimately, it is also a false one.

Donald Campbell, in teaching a generation of program evaluators, insisted that we ought to look for ways to be as solid and credible as possible, without getting defensive about not being able to define a "treatment," use control groups, or select participants through random assignment. Perhaps more important, Campbell also taught that few, if any, of life's "real situations" lend themselves easily to scientific methods. Thus, instead of feeling insecure or inadequate about what we are doing to learn from and document our efforts, we should instead simply try to be as systematic and explicit as possible.

For example, few community-building projects and activities remain constant long enough to study them scientifically. Science tells us that a "time series" approach is important, and it is nice if things hold still for you. Scientific evaluation is presented as requiring a treatment that is both definable and constant, and a system of selecting people for exposure to this treatment that is random, or at least controlled so as to eliminate the possibility that people will influence the outcome by choice. Thus, most scientifically based research designs require a degree of control over the participants, selection process, resultant activities, and methods of data gathering that is both unrealistic and, in most cases, completely inappropriate.

This insistence on scientific methods can actually lead us to look where the light is brighter rather than where we must actually go. It can have us attribute relatively more value to programs and physical results simply because they are more discrete, more quantifiable, more amenable to the scientific method.

Much of what gets called evaluation labors under a shadow of insecurity about how strong its claims are. If evaluation is conceived of as providing the basis for shared learning and increased effectiveness instead of as establishing conclusive proof, such defensiveness seems largely uncalled for. Many emerging projects or new groups, for example, have simply not been around long enough to have built a conventional track record. Still, their progress is worth recording. What do actual participants consider heartening? What keeps them involved? What have they found to be the most important barriers or challenges?

All of this points to the importance of understanding the underlying goal behind doing an evaluation in the first place. If it is to improve rather than prove, and to inform rather than judge, then we must simply try to do as well as we can under the conditions we find. Both the effects and limitations of the scientific approach to evaluation must be understood before applying them to community building, or to any other subject, for that matter.

The Alternative: Evaluation "Appropriate" to Communities

Thankfully, another kind of evaluation is both possible and growing in actual use. This second kind is what we are calling "appropriate" evaluation. Some examples of appropriate evaluation, all taken from recent experience, suggest what it means. Each describes community-building work that employed elements of the "assets approach," and each employed an evaluation framework appropriate to its purposes, practices, and audiences.

First, an example of crime prevention and community policing in a multi-ethnic neighborhood is described. Second, we look at a case involving efforts to turn a poor, inner-city neighborhood newly designated as "historic" into a strong model of locally controlled development and solid community building across racial lines. Third, we outline an attempt to mobilize community assets to work on personal and community health, broadly defined, and to design a self-evaluation that strengthens the work as well as informing key stakeholders.

Case I: Cops and Neighbors: The Whittier Community-Based Policing Project

The Whittier neighborhood is an inner-city, low-to-moderate income, multi-ethnic area in south Minneapolis. The Whittier Community-Based Policing Project (WCBPP) grew out of cooperation between the local neighborhood association, called the Whittier Alliance (an alliance of Whittier neighborhood residents, businesses, and local agencies that represent the neighborhood to the city and others), and the Minneapolis Police Department. The project aimed to bring the neighborhood's perspective into policing, to facilitate better communication between community members and police to solve some chronic problems in the area, and to reduce crime through the implementation of "comprehensive anti-crime and neighborhood stabilization strategies."

The evaluation was commissioned by the Whittier Alliance, and consisted of two phases. The first, completed in January 1991, described the process of WCBPP's development, including how the governing team was put together and operated, how the project presented itself to and was received by various neighborhood interests, and which local assets were found and enlisted (including individuals, groups, community organizations, businesses, and other institutions). The purpose of this first phase was to describe what had been done to date, identify key components to track given the stated goals, provide an opportunity for participants to reflect on the project's strengths and weaknesses, and make mid-course adjustments — which they did.

The second phase and the final report it produced, presented evidence about the extent to which WCBPP accomplished its goals, identified key components of greatest value (and interest) to those outside the project and neighborhood, and suggested several elements that might be added to further strengthen the work.

The governing team prioritized its work based on the seriousness of the problem and the level of community interest. They developed, implemented, and evaluated activities in several major areas: "targeted blocks" (which received concentrated attention); narcotics (which involved increased undercover work by the police, coordinated raids, anti-drug public education and prevention, and active participation from tenants, landlords, and businesses in the area, as well as Whittier Alliance members); prostitution (coordinated prostitute and john "sweeps" and other public actions to discourage this traffic); problem buildings; community building (often done in tandem with other activities to build stronger relationships among people and groups within the neighborhood and make the case that this should go on beyond this immediate project); and environmental work (including improved street lighting, and the physical redesign of public spaces known to have high crime rates).

The local shorthand for this model of community-based policing came to be the governing team or the "Team." Among the key findings in the final report that was completed in phase two:

- Team involvement in the neighborhood inspired and encouraged residents to organize.

- Team involvement also provided extensive, timely, and accurate information to community members so they could better protect themselves and join with others.

- Team coordination of multiple resources highlighted and mobilized residents' talents and energies, which previously had not been well used or were scattered.

- Team problem-solving was creative in approach, producing faster results than precinct police or city agencies, and was inviting to newcomers who had previously not thought of themselves as key to this.

For evidence about the impact this project had on crime, they found some important ***intermediate*** outcomes. For example, they found that calls to 911 for police service declined in nearly all areas where the project was active, and that both reduced crime and increased livability were reported. While they could not claim that community policing was the only or even the decisive factor in this, it was widely perceived by both official and unofficial sources as a key ingredient.

Through a resident-designed-and-executed door-to-door survey, it was also learned that neighborhood residents felt safer after the Team became active, and were typically clear about the Team's intentions, plans and results. This was very important because of past problems with inaccurate or partial information, rumors, and feelings of exclusion that various groups had experienced. By having residents carry out the survey, it was widely believed the quality of information improved, and that those being surveyed were impressed with the extent of involvement by neighbors. Doing the survey in this way reinforced some of the core values of the project.

While respondents felt safer as a result of Team presence and activity, they didn't all feel safe. Visible prostitution was reduced in the neighborhood, as was visible drug dealing. The Team was also more effective than other policy in dealing with housing issues. Long-term, on-going crime prevention efforts in the area increased in both number and variety. Furthermore, the evaluation found that though excellent relations were established between residents and participating Team police, they did not translate to equally good relations with precinct squads and other non-Team police.

Key lessons learned were identified for internal purposes, and for those watching this project from the outside. It should be recalled that this work was undertaken in the midst of a widespread interest in crime prevention and "block-watch" organizing. In the Twin Cities, few had taken the community-based rhetoric this seriously, engaged as many local interests, or committed as many community resources.

Overall, the evaluation process used here involved the following sequence of seven steps: convening, planning, action, reflection, celebration, re-commitment, and refocus. That is, residents came together to decide what to ask and how to find the answers; they participated directly in the process and became aware of what others were doing as well; they found the information gathered interesting and used it to develop a variety of spoken and written reports to the community which they provided to neighbors and friends, in public meetings, and through more formal accounts.

In this case the evaluation had to recognize that the police, the Whittier Alliance, and the Team all had different purposes, with some overlap. Accordingly, they each reported different lessons as part of the reflection process, and they each got something from the forum created by the evaluation. At the same time, they came to appreciate how questions like "How is it going?" or "What comes next?" do not lend themselves to simple answers and, more important, why the process of listening to how other participants and stakeholders respond is key to building common ground, increased trust, and strengthened relationships (see Scheie, 1991).

Case II: Old Roots and New Beginnings: Revitalization in Historic Springfield

The Springfield Historic District Revitalization is a collaborative effort to revitalize a racially, socially, and economically diverse neighborhood in the heart of Jacksonville, Florida. Four neighborhood organizations with support from the National Trust for Historic Preservation carried it out. The groups invited were the Historic Springfield Community Council, Springfield Ecumenical Ministries, Springfield Neighborhood Housing Services, and Springfield Preservation and Restoration. Together, these four sought to re-develop the area by leveraging the neighborhood's new designation as "historic" while avoiding the displacement of current residents so often associated with preservation efforts. In addition, the project sought to build the capacity of the four groups, increase the direct engagement of area residents, increase financial and technical resources available to the neighborhood, improve its social and economic conditions, and encourage greater cooperation among residents.

The year-long evaluation in 1993 followed many years of earlier work by some of the groups and residents stretching back into the mid-1980s, and several years of formal work on this particular Springfield Historic Revitalization project. The evaluation did not begin at the beginning, but came when participants and supporters felt the work was at a crossroads and would benefit from additional current information, including some gathered by an outside or third-party evaluator.

The evaluation was done first for the four groups and their members, and second for the funders. An important element of the process was an interim report that was prepared solely for the four groups and never became part of the public record. Candor was deemed an important goal, and it was felt this was a way to increase it. The field work in support of the interim report took a look at community conditions, community relations (both with those directly involved and those not), organizational effort, and the state of collaboration among the four. Beyond this, the interim report brought to the surface what was known at that time about the progress being made.

Presented at the six-month or midway point of the year-long process, this interim report created a forum for participants to discuss and debate findings and to learn about community perceptions of them. This was sometimes difficult, in that it reported perceptions or made observations some thought inaccurate or unfair. However, it afforded the group an opportunity to work through their initial anger or surprise, and made it possible for participants to respond to these tentative findings. They were able to develop stronger ways of running their groups, communicating to both members and nonmembers, and working together.

It also gave the group an opportunity to join the evaluation process by providing more and better information about what they knew they were accomplishing. Indeed, it motivated them to gather more and better information. This internal attention to discussion and debate at the mid-point set the stage for a stronger and more effective final report, which became a part of the public record.

The final report eventually became a key piece of evidence in efforts to create a neighborhood trust fund for the community. The report's willingness to address shortcomings as well as accomplishments was viewed by some outsiders and skeptics as evidence of the growing maturity and capacity of the neighborhood organizations involved.

Over the course of the full year, the evaluation found areas where significant progress was made. Many homes were in fact renovated and preserved; the people living in renovated housing were economically and racially diverse, coming from inside as well as outside the neighborhood; evaluators found no evidence of unwilling displacement; and the revitalization initiative attracted some city and considerable bank support that would not otherwise have come into this neighborhood. All of this was documented in a way the evaluators knew to be credible with key stakeholders. Stakeholders told the evaluators what would be persuasive, and what kind of evidence they were looking for. Their definitions shaped what information was gathered and analyzed. For example, evidence indicated that several downward trends, such as loss of people and quality of housing stock, had been slowed or stopped. It was also clear that while the project struggled to be truly representative of the residents, it had also been an important organizing tool. That is, the effort attracted into direct participation people who had not previously been involved in any other community work, and it kept most of them involved.

The evaluation also found areas where progress had been more limited. The organized activities of the four groups did not attract participation of very many renters or people of color, even though they are in the majority in this neighborhood. The City of Jacksonville's involvement and direct contribution fell short of both expectations and promises. Finally, the process determined that too little attention was paid to commercial revitalization and resident employment issues. Although inherently valuable, the core activities of these four groups were perceived as primarily homeowner concerns.

The interim report was discussed with the four groups and, to some extent, with the broader community. The evaluation offered three recommendations which gave voice and specificity to concerns expressed by project leaders and by other residents outside the four groups.

First, it was suggested that the four groups seek to ***broaden the base*** of active, interested people through a combination of door-to-door visiting and meetings with other groups to explore neighborhood interests and concerns.

Second, it was suggested that the groups ***expand and strengthen resident leadership*** by circulating citizens into roles with more responsibility and authority. This activity might focus both on current members and on people new to the organizations or even to the neighborhood. If the initiative is understood as a table, it needed to be enlarged, while still attempting to keep it a circle that welcomes, listens, develops plans, and undertakes joint action to achieve common goals.

Third, it was suggested that the groups ***develop a more diversified strategy*** for the initiative. That is, they might include especially the roles of commercial revitalization, jobs, and income, and concentrate more on harnessing new institutional support of the neighborhood's agenda. Having started out by trying to leverage the historic designation, the project had both succeeded and confronted its limitations. The next challenge was to move beyond this initial vision. Based on the gifts and aspirations of residents other than those most easily organized through the initial emphasis, the project could broaden and deepen its work, and could make it ever more strongly resident controlled, resident produced, and resident rewarding (see Dewar, et al., 1993).

This entire process required that questions guiding the evaluation be jointly developed among the four groups and the evaluator (with the funders having the option to add questions if their key concerns were not addressed). In this case, the funders found the community-defined framework quite satisfactory. The framework developed required considerable reporting from each of the four neighborhood groups, as well as additional fieldwork, interviewing, and observation by the evaluators. The groups became partners in the process rather than merely serving as objects of study.

Case III: The Healthy Powderhorn Story: To Find and Receive the Gifts of Community

Healthy Powderhorn began in the fall of 1994 as an "experimental community-organizing initiative which seeks to improve community health and wellness in the Powderhorn neighborhood" of south Minneapolis. Originally, it was conceived of as a two-year project. In the course of its first year it worked hard to "uncover the resources and talents already existing in the community." It sought to give these a "voice, a place, and an opportunity ... to be heard and made visible." By the middle of its second year, in its own words, it had begun to discover how to "release the power of citizens" and, building on its growing support and connections to the community, was moving to create a successor project — the newly opened and currently operating Powderhorn/Phillips Cultural Wellness Center, which carries on the work.

Healthy Powderhorn represents an "asset-oriented" project that had no formal contact with the asset-based community development network when it began its work. It simply used asset principles and approaches because participants reported this was the most effective way to do community building. Similarly, its approach to evaluation reflected the kind of guidance suggested here. They were not interested in a top-down or outside-in evaluation. Project leaders had previous experience with overly formal and even intrusive evaluation procedures that had turned them off and not produced new or useful information for their work. Their plans sought something else. A graphic describing their evolving methodology follows. (See Figure 1.)

Thus, the charge to the evaluator at the outset here was to assist in developing a self-evaluation that was doable, clear, and constructive. The participants and funders of this project sought a self-evaluation that would communicate clearly to those directly involved as participants, as well as informing key stakeholders and skeptics alike. Furthermore, the lead funder (the Allina Foundation) wanted to record the lessons being learned for possible sharing with others working in "community health action." Allina had already started to look in other communities around Minnesota and western Wisconsin for ways to promote the kind of community action in support of health that was involved in Powderhorn, so it had a stake in this project as a kind of research-and-development investment. As it turned out, the evaluation accomplished all these purposes to some extent; it also provided the basis for some important mid-course adjustments in the ways the work itself was carried out.

From the beginning, this project was faced with a series of daunting challenges. As an approach and a philosophy, Healthy Powderhorn managed to generate both great interest and considerable skepticism as to whether it would be able to deliver on its promise and vision. Numerous others before it had talked of finding real community-based alternatives to conventional health care delivery. But what, concretely, had come of these efforts? Furthermore, a wide range of medical, public health, and social service agencies were directly threatened by the rhetoric and logic of a project that so vocally and articulately argued "there has to be a better way." Thus, this evaluation took place within a political context that included some strong opposition and deep skepticism.

Even more basically, this project was confronted by a host of practical challenges, including:

1. how to mobilize a community and its assets around health action and cultural practices;

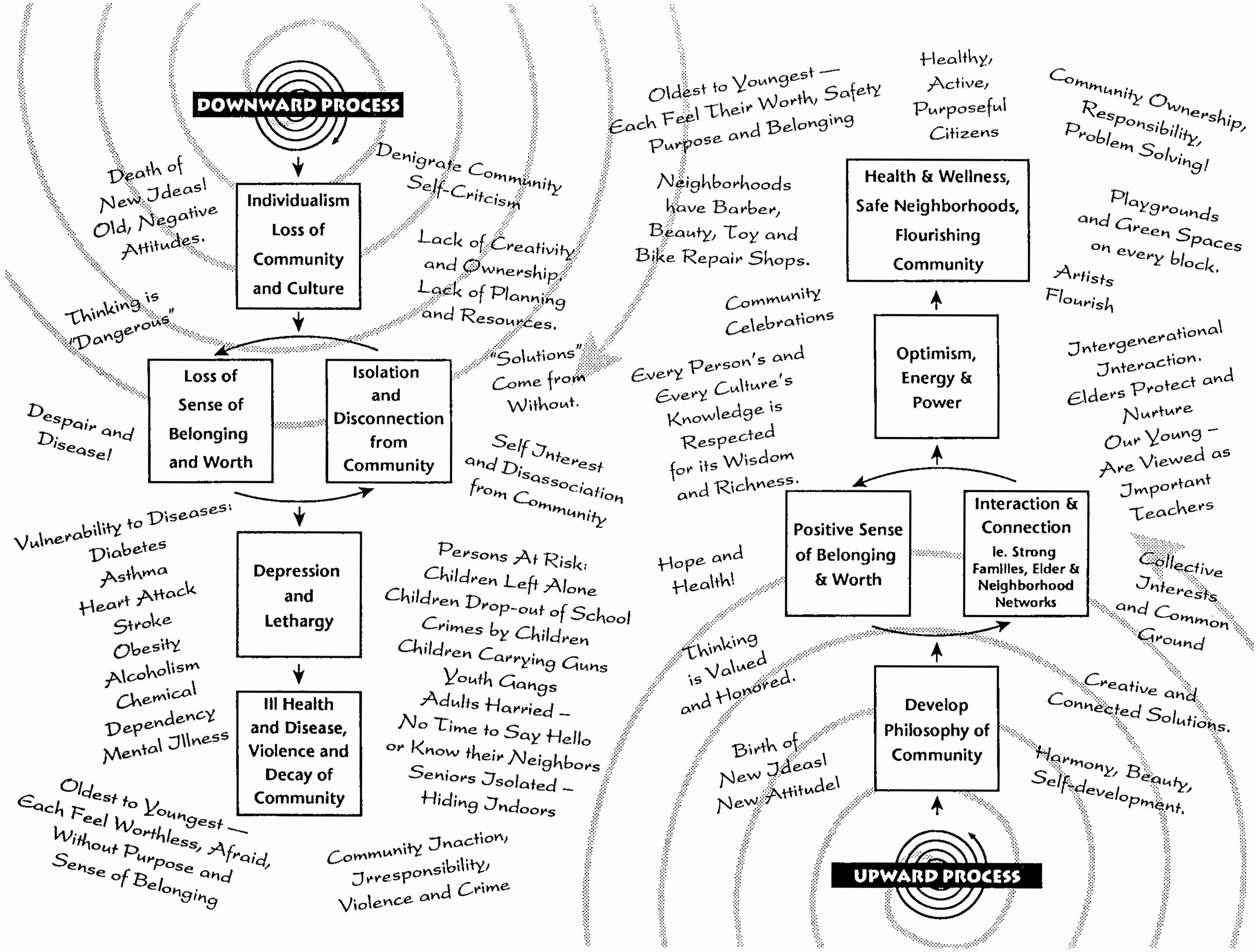


Figure 1. *This is one way that a community visualized both its challenges — the downward path — and its journey back to wellness.*

2. how to deinstitutionalize community residents and their organizations in their approach to both individual and collective health;

3. how to develop and run an effective community intermediary that is connected to and truly respectful of the values and aspirations of community residents (and their "preferred practitioners") while still being able to selectively work with the mainstream health care delivery system when appropriate; and

4. how to document the impact and report on progress toward goals in ways that are credible, community sensitive, and do-able.

It is worth noting that the leadership and active participants of Healthy Powderhorn are now considered resources on how to address these various challenges, often by people who have previously expressed skepticism about "alternatives." These invitations to be resources are one example of an intermediate outcome that represents progress, new relationships, and widening influence.

What Have Healthy Powderhorn Participants Learned? What Did the Self-Evaluation Discover and Document?

First and foremost, participants learned it is possible to find and receive the gifts of community residents, but to do so requires very different kinds of conversation, gatherings, joint work, and ritual. At its heart, community is about relationships, and Healthy Powderhorn committed a great deal of time to building these ties, both in and outside of meetings. Most often, this was done out of the limelight and was largely invisible to those not directly involved.

Over a period of 26 months, a total of 249 meetings were convened. These had an average attendance of nine people, with a carry-over from one meeting to the next of 76%. Forty-one of the ideas generated in these meetings were implemented, and have become ongoing activities. These include, for example, walking clubs, community health action teams, Native-American spirituality classes, etc. At the core of this work were Community Health Action Teams (or CHATS), which involved 1,468 people. Of great importance to the vision behind this project is that 72% of these participants indicated they would not have been actively involved in community work had not Healthy Powderhorn engaged them and their gifts.

Furthermore, the participants learned that many previously unengaged people, though not all, will respond if approached in a patient and open way. This includes people who have been disrespected and ignored, as well as those who report they have "been there" and "done that," and may have become disillusioned. They found that both veterans and newcomers, and some others in between, typically respond better if they sense that their contribution is genuinely important — that it would make a difference. They do not respond as well to being enlisted into somebody else's plans and activities.

Thus, Healthy Powderhorn demonstrated the desirability of real ***organizing*** over simple recruitment. As opposed to recruiting, which seeks to get residents to join in and help with what others have decided to do, real organizing requires an understanding that people want to be heard before being asked to listen, and often want to be directly involved in designing as well as doing their community work. They don't want to be recruited into someone else's agenda, nor relegated to being mere recipients of the good works of others. At a deep level, many residents long to make a contribution and seek to help design, carry out, and evaluate what is done in their name, and in the name of community.

In addition, project participants learned about the importance of ***group building,*** and particularly, developing effective ways to do it. The CHATs were a principal example, though not the only one. Throughout, the project's meetings were well run and lively. They symbolized the project's commitment to the attendees and what they had to contribute. The meetings often featured food, art, music, and storytelling. They also afforded people an opportunity to share informally and get to know one another, while still attending to the tasks that so often dominate meetings. Through these gatherings, the groups gradually built up a set of shared goals, ideas, symbols, and practices. These various gatherings continually revealed the kinds of cultural knowledge and practices that resided in this neighborhood but were rarely identified, much less tapped as an asset.

In addition, considerable time was spent developing the idea of ***accountability*** — of individuals to one another, and to the group; and of small groups to one another, and to the larger project. According to the participants, this encouraged people to be both more realistic and more effective as they developed and carried out joint work.

By making ***structured listening*** a key component of so many meetings, it also increased the skills of participants. It was not assumed that people already knew each other or understood how to work together, and so steps were taken to build skills, share stories, and keep information moving freely.

Closely related to listening was an ethic of ***hospitality*** or welcoming. Newcomers kept joining the process throughout these first two years, which is a tribute to the openness of the group to new contributions rather than simply relying on supporters of an already finished plan. A high proportion of participants at the first gathering held by the project (85%) are still involved, and many reported (72%) that they would probably not have been involved in community building had not Healthy Powderhorn come along, operating the way it did.

The project found or produced a great deal of specific information about the neighborhood and the systems that supposedly serve it. This included commissioning a random telephone survey of area residents, as well as a study of how income flows into, around, and out of the neighborhood. Significantly, participants learned this kind of information was never self-explanatory. It didn't point clearly to what should be done. Rather, it invited further discussion, dialogue, and debate. Thus, it could be said that information set the stage for real engagement rather than substituting for it.

The project also kept unearthing local knowledge and wisdom. They found a wide range of skilled, thoughtful, and culturally connected practitioners, as well as others eager to learn about cultures and practices different than their own. The idea of the Invisible College was a powerfully appropriate way of recognizing what various residents and their cultures already knew and practiced. It was at once a way of recognizing and sharing some of this popular knowledge. In addition, the idea of an Invisible College reminded area residents they could learn from one another.

In putting together its Report to the Community, a variety of tools were used, including photographs, graphs and charts, symbols, illustrations, quotes from and stories about the experience of participants as well as statistics (both official and unofficial).

The original idea behind Healthy Powderhorn was to convene a table large enough for every one to join. In the course of doing the work, this goal was adapted to reflect how people actually live and what they want. Given the goals of the project, and the cultural and social richness of this community, *many tables* had to be found, developed, and tied together. This was not a drive toward one big table. For many, these smaller tables were their home communities, the places where they felt most comfortable and accepted, the places where they felt they belonged. For others, the small tables were health action or work teams where people learned about each other and built their relationships through developing joint work.

It was found the big table was still a good idea, but only if it meant that residents didn't have to leave their home community. Thus, those present at the myriad small tables being uncovered all the time could decide whether and how they might want to relate to the overall project, and how they might want to bring their individual and collective gifts into the growing circle of community building. This was especially reassuring to people who had previously been marginal or uninvolved.

Finally, in terms of health action, the people of Healthy Powderhorn found that health was not the easiest or best starting point to carry out this organizing and community building. It typically wasn't among the stated priorities for residents. For many, health has become a medicalized set of ideas and practices about getting help from others. Residents active in Healthy Powderhorn experienced this help as technical, expensive, often quite hard to get, and culturally insensitive. In addition, health is too often seen as something we engage in as individuals rather than as families, groups, or cultural communities.

By challenging conventional ways of thinking and acting about health, the project managed to break through considerable resistance and apathy and enlist numerous area residents to promote wellness and improve health in ways that are more active, collective, and eventually, it is hoped, more effective.

In sum, Healthy Powderhorn learned that it is possible and effective to seek and activate citizens rather than clients. To do so, attention must be paid to where people are rather than where others want them to be. Residents not only have a wide range of relevant gifts, they are willing to share them with others under the right conditions. It is these conditions that Healthy Powderhorn tries to create and maintain (Azzahir, 1997).

Summarizing the Evaluation Cases

Each of these evaluation stories suggests some ways in which individual gifts, the power of associations, and certain institutional resources can be enlisted by local citizens engaged in community building. Approaches to understanding and learning from these stories must be appropriate to the purposes and people in each given situation.

It is clear that asset-based community development, as described above and as typically practiced, is not really a model as much as it is a compass. It is an orientation, a set of approaches and interrelated ideas. When one listens to the people telling about doing this work, it is apparent that they are not building or replicating a model. Rather, they are trying to figure out how to do some of their own local problem-solving. They are trying to find better ways to invent and nurture a locally grown and rooted alternative to the kinds of top-down and outside-in strategies that have defined too much community work over the past 25 years.

Many other promising stories exist. Other new ideas, such as "results mapping" and the development of benchmarks to fit the situation rather than vice versa (Kibel, 1996), or developing a "learning history" for projects, remind everyone that learning-as-we-go is how real community development happens.

These cases also point to the fact that capacity building is taking place all around us every day. In this sense, capacity has as much to do with being flexible and reflective about the limitations of one's own approach or project as with knowing just what to do. In keeping with the ideas at work here, one must ask how evaluation can be turned into a real asset. That is, how can we proceed with who and what we have? How can the evaluation process actually strengthen and inform the work as it moves forward? (For more discussion of ideas about better ways to carry out evaluation, see Fetterman, 1996; Patton, 1986; and Stone, 1996.)

CHAPTER TWO

FEATURES OF AN EVALUATION APPROPRIATE FOR ASSET-BASED COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

This section describes some of the features that appropriate evaluations typically possess, and suggests some strategies that have been informative and persuasive to observers, supporters, and skeptics alike. More than anything else, these strategies insist that evaluation can become a tool for learning. Used in this way, it can help participants get to know the territory within which they work, document progress along the way, and more effectively share their stories with others who would like to know what they are learning.

It is worth remembering that for most funded projects some kind of evaluation is nearly inevitable. The question is: Who will define, implement, and learn from it? Whose questions will it address? For evaluations to be appropriate, it is important for participants to exert control over this process, and to insist that the methods and questions be as helpful as possible to what is being attempted.

Even in those cases where an evaluation is not required, it can be argued that participants have a great deal to gain from seizing the opportunity to document and learn from what they are doing. Among the important kinds of information that asset-oriented evaluation will reveal are these:

- The key definers, governors, and producers of the work, and how they operate.
- How individuals' skills and contributions are found and mobilized.
- Through what kinds of associations local citizens act, and what they might contribute.
- How the various assets identified are engaged and put to work.
- How connections among these community-based assets appear and begin to multiply.
- How having these local people and associations strongly at the center of the process and action makes a difference.

Ten Principles for Appropriate Evaluation

Beyond this emphasis on who produces the work, what else seems to make evaluations appropriate to different community contexts, purposes, and histories? Indeed, what helps to make them useful?

The following ten principles or features are offered here as elements to consider in evaluating asset-based community development. They are not meant to be a model, or even a complete checklist. Rather, each principle reflects lessons learned in community building, and is at least worth considering in the process of designing and carrying out evaluations appropriate to asset-based community development.

1. Involve participants directly in the process.

Perhaps the most basic challenge in making evaluation useful is to center it around those actually doing the work. This requires considerable time and energy, right from the outset, but it is well worth it.

As a first step, it is very important to acknowledge how much the people doing this work already know. It is not as if the work of evaluating these efforts starts from scratch. Those directly involved typically have a very clear sense about progress and impact, and have often developed and improved practices based on their sense of what is working and what isn't. Good evaluation starts with this kind of experience and looks for ways to record it that are credible, clear, and persuasive to others. In fact, the people doing this work are the real experts, and ought to be the first point of reference. This may surprise many community actors, who have experienced the evaluation process as something that has not involved them directly and, when it happens, it happens to them rather than with them. They need to know that their careful observation, good listening, and common sense are highly valued. Their knowledge is the primary "asset" in evaluation.

Working with these local experts has taught Rainbow Research evaluators what is perhaps the most important lesson — ***the value of co-discovery***. At its best, evaluation cannot be done solely from the outside in. It is a mutual process whereby those directly involved in the activity are both discovering or learning for themselves — and finding ways to share this with others — as well as learning new things from outsiders, or fresh listeners. Building some internal practice around evaluation, which might record certain reflections or note key issues as they are discussed, is the starting point. But clearly the outside view is also critical. What might an outside partner contribute? The possibilities are legion — perhaps such a person could interview key institutional representatives or newcomers to the project; or he or she might provide a fresh perspective, and might listen across the many voices and settings for the stories, language, and lessons noted.

Co-discovery applies to planning as well as carrying out the actual evaluation. There is no one way to do this but it is critically important that some appropriate ways be found in all cases at the beginning of the process. Questions for everyone to ask at the beginning include:

- What is the purpose of the evaluation?
- Who are the most important audiences? (see Principle 2)
- What would we like to learn?
- What questions will guide us?

Once the initial design has emerged, it is important to remember that the ***conduct of the evaluation work should strengthen or complement*** rather than distract from the work. Often this involves thinking through ways to rely on community people to gather information as they make their daily rounds, rather than on "evaluators" or third parties. Such a process will lead participants to think through what they would like to learn, and to ask how they might be directly and productively involved. Building the trust between participants and evaluators is key, and working together both to design and carry out the evaluation helps to build that trust.

There are still other benefits to directly involving participants. Nothing increases the amount of ***useful*** information as quickly as designing the evaluation so that it will ***answer questions people doing the work actually have***. People are more willing to cooperate with evaluation if they find it useful and if they know it will inspire their work.

It is important to remember that two of the most common criticisms leveled against outside evaluation are that it becomes a burden to actors and that its purposes are unclear. Combining inside and outside perspectives and energies from the beginning will help to overcome these shortcomings and will produce a stronger, more credible evaluation.

2. *Know your audience.*

Like any form of communication, each evaluation has an audience. Ideally, this audience can be identified and understood. The best evaluations are purposeful about this, and focused on known audiences. They are done with someone in mind. Who is that someone, and what does that person want to know? This focuses the work. (See, particularly, the work of Patton, 1986 on the value of "utilization focused evaluation.")

The primary audience may be those actually doing the work, the participants. If that is the case, many projects develop their own internal means of documenting progress and ensuring accountability. For example, high-quality traditional community organizing always takes time for citizen participants to evaluate the meetings, training sessions, and public actions they conduct. In other cases, the primary audience, the one participants tend to worry about, are the interested nonparticipants, such as funders or other practitioners. Clearly, these two kinds of audiences interact — inside and outside — and the boundaries between them are not always clear. Most useful evaluations are done for both, and often operate on the principle that if those directly participating are truly informed so too will others who are less directly involved.

Since there is growing pressure from funders and others to document impact, it will be most useful to proceed here as if the primary audience is <u>external</u>. Clearly many of the practices or elements described in this discussion apply equally well to both internal and external evaluation.

Specific external audiences vary from situation to situation, but typically involve several different types. Here are four of the most common types of external audiences:

- People who might be considered ***friends***, such as key allies who share an interest in the participants' good reputation, current or former colleagues who know and like the groups and who may tend to protect rather than inform them, and others who simply like the groups or what they are doing so much that they can't see past this to what is missing or may not be working. Often, friends are too uncritical.

- Some who are ***supporters***, but still want to see evidence about progress and who may be under increasing pressure to justify their support to others. They might include people who have lobbied for the participants; who have directly provided support (in time, energy or money); or who sympathize with what the group is doing and appreciate the efforts, but also know how hard it is to accomplish what the participants set out to do.

- Some who are ***skeptics***, such as people (sometimes board members) who advocated for another project or approach than the one the group has chosen, people who have seen too many projects that are "long on rhetoric and short on results." They may also be people who simply feel the problems involved are too serious to be solved by community action, that they are systemic and large-scale, or caused by factors beyond the control of local effort (such as economic dislocation).

- Some who are ***opponents***, such as those who feel resources devoted to this group's efforts detract from their own; or people who dislike or fear groups or people like those involved here, and who worry that increased democratic control may spread to threaten their power and status; or those who have decided that another way — very different than the one the group is pursuing — is more effective or correct. In many cases, these opponents may be immovable.

Each of these audiences may be looking for something different. Getting to know them and what each finds persuasive is an essential part of any evaluation process.

Of these four types, the first and last, uncritical friends and immovable opponents, are the least interesting for the purposes of this discussion. This is especially true when it comes to evaluation. Uncritical friends can be a major liability. Too easily impressed, too apt to tell their own favorite anecdotes about what is happening over and over again, these friends are often looking only for ways to promote the work rather than learn about it, improve it, or come to understand the challenges it faces. Serious community builders understand that friends can actually get in the way of learning by being too easy on practitioners, too believing, or too uncritical. They may actually hinder a project's progress by representing it to others in weak or hackneyed ways, and when challenged, may not be able to come up with much that is credible to a neutral observer.

Intransigent opponents are also a special problem, and are not likely to be people around whom evaluation work should be organized. These opponents are not likely to support the work regardless of its demonstrated impact, or how it compares to other approaches. Reasons for opposing asset-based community development are very common. For example, by offering an alternative to current practice, this approach is often disruptive and threatening. By promoting the idea that those most affected are the central problem-solvers and should be in control of the process, asset-based community development is also "subversive." It tends to undermine support for existing institutional arrangements. In particular, it may call into question the way resources are currently allocated. People with strong commitments to the status quo will find many reasons to oppose these strategies no matter what an evaluation might discover.

Unlike most friends and opponents, both supporters and skeptics are looking for more information that may lead them either to change or strengthen their initial impressions. Supporters will want to know about progress and may be looking for evidence to put before those pressuring them to justify an initial grant or expression of support. Similarly, many skeptics will want to know more about what the group is doing and may appreciate an effort to inform them. When asked for their questions, skeptics will often share them. Often, they ask the best questions.

Funders and other advisors often remind practitioners that it is important to develop board member "champions" for community-building work. Champions, in this sense, are people who can credibly represent and even advocate for this work because they are perceived by others as neutral. The most powerful champions any effort can have are former skeptics. Their voice is forceful because of who they are, and because they have become persuaded that this approach actually works or is making real progress. Cultivating some of these skeptics is a critically important part of any evaluation strategy.

Skeptics may wish for "scientific" approaches to evaluations. This request is often based more on convention than conviction. Discussing alternative ways to answer the skeptic's questions will often yield some trust that good faith is being used, and may even enlist their cooperation in the evaluation process. Once persuaded, or better informed, skeptics can often reconstruct how they came to believe that something works or warrants their support. Thus, their stories can be powerfully influential with other skeptics.

3. *Focus on appropriate goals and document intermediate outcomes.*

Don't give up on outcomes. Name some that do apply to the group's goals, and track them as carefully as possible. Since so many community actors have had their feet held to the fire around outcomes they did not choose and do not accept as fair, there is an understandable tendency to become resistant to the idea of outcomes in general. Rather than giving up on the possibility of finding some appropriate outcome measures for the work, however, it is very important to find some that really fit the goals, and to track them. These will often include some short-term or intermediate outcomes.

In fact, paying attention to outcomes is one important way in which scientific and appropriate evaluation meet. If the search for good outcomes is abandoned altogether, it is very difficult to recover credibility with neutral or skeptical audiences. The attention of at least some observers will not be captured without them. Further, appropriate outcomes are important internally as well, among active participants. Tracking them can be a source of pride, and can foster a greater awareness of how real progress is being achieved.

People working at the first stage of asset-based community development are usually engaged in identifying local assets, as expressed through individuals' skills and resources as well as through community associations of various kinds. Participants doing this work can usually describe what they consider "encouraging so far." For example, they often report:

- More and different people getting involved, including many who were formerly regarded as mainly needy and deficient.

- More local citizens becoming engaged in the design as well as the implementation of joint action.

- Increased activity and new capacity for existing associations, groups, and organizations such as block clubs, church groups, womens' and mens' clubs, athletic leagues, cultural groups, etc.

- New groups emerging around activities such as skill exchanges, neighborhood festivals and celebrations, enterprise activities, beautification projects, etc.

- More connections between and among local voluntary associations and local institutions such as schools, businesses, parks, police, libraries, etc.

- Participants in both old and new groups feeling and acting more capably, and their appetite growing for this kind of community-building work.

Providing evidence of these various signs of local progress can be very compelling. It represents the sense in which strengthening the means available for local community building and problem solving is a result, an important intermediate outcome on the road to more ultimate outcomes or goals. Participants can describe some of these intermediate outcomes, and explain how they point in the right direction, set the stage for other work to follow, and represent real accomplishments in themselves.

For example, in a poor community that has been plagued by a lack of participation, the group might describe how a new organizing drive has brought out a diverse group of residents who not only have come together to work toward some common solutions, but are also producing real outcomes themselves. The overall level of poverty may not have fallen in the short run, and no major institutional policies may have been changed as yet, but residents are no longer waiting and watching. They are finding their voice, defining issues in their own terms, and beginning to act in concert. This is real progress. Here are some other examples of efforts that recognize the importance of intermediate outcomes:

Ultimate Goal	Examples of Intermediate Outcomes	Typical "Official" or Final Outcomes
Improve children's health	Self-help or support networks for mothers and primary caregivers, up and operating, taking in new members. Increased interaction between new and experienced mothers, and with other culturally appropriate supporters and practitioners. Local action teams to respond to identified threats, such as traffic, environmental and household hazards; identification of child health as a key neighborhood priority; and publicity around concrete actions that can make a difference.	*Fewer low birthweight infants* *Lower infant mortality* *Better child status indicators* *Fewer 15-19-year-old mothers and repeat moms*

Ultimate Goal	Examples of Intermediate Outcomes	Typical "Official" or Final Outcomes
Employment at livable wages	Completion of skills surveys. New connections to regular participation in permanent membership groups and associations. Increased access to informal networks and the referrals and supports that go with them. Inventory of local businesses and other employers. Creation of database about local jobs, live openings, what skills they require, and where these skills can be obtained; evidence this information is being used by those seeking better work. Creation of a community scorecard that reports on which local trainers have the best placement and retention rates, and best follow-up support, while still treating residents with dignity and respect.	*Good jobs found and kept* *Follow-up evidence about job ladders and their use by local residents* *Local hiring that is tied to firms growing stronger*

None of the intermediate accomplishments in the center column are final outcomes in any conventional sense, but they are building blocks and serve as legitimate indicators of progress. They are certainly no less "hard" than the number of clients served or the number of housing units built that might be reported by a social service agency or housing development group. They simply happen earlier, and may relate to different dimensions of doing this work than those typically tracked. They set the stage for further action, create knowledge about important local resources, foster a sense of shared experience and common work, and begin to weave relationships and social networks into the fabric of community life.

In some cases, community builders also know about some conventional outcomes, and should report on them as clearly as they can. The daily lives of people affected by assets work are often the sources of outcomes that may be taken very seriously by decision-makers and other skeptics. For example:

- Reports of people who previously had been hard to reach, or who had often dropped out of programs, becoming engaged in specific community-building activities, and following through and completing commitments, are signs of progress.

- Reports of people in areas known for their apathy or lack of citizen activity turning out and contributing to community festivals, cleanups, and block watch activities, are clear signs of progress.

- Reports of area employers who agree to sponsor events or to hire local youth indicate important new commitments to the community.

- Reports of expenditures saved, reduced, or delayed are also very powerful. These reports will often capture the attention of a wider range of people. Once these new audiences are paying attention, they can be given other information as well. For example, some evaluations of Visiting Nurses or the Retired Senior Volunteer Program (RSVP) have demonstrated that by linking up older residents with local community resources a number of program expenditures have been avoided or reduced.

Outcomes like these should be claimed and publicized. Evaluations need not impose a scientific or proof model that doesn't apply, but neither should they back away from being as strong and credible as possible. A large part of the current emphasis on outcomes has grown out of the perception that mainstream institutional delivery systems and conventional social services either can't or won't demonstrate enough performance to justify the current level of resources and authority that they command. Thus, strong evaluations of asset-based community work require that more appropriate outcomes be identified and tracked. Ensuring that the choice of these outcomes reflects the full range of impact the project is achieving, as well as the developmental or step-by-step nature of the work, is one of the most important challenges appropriate evaluation faces.

4. Document some results as quickly as possible.

This boosts morale, gives people a sense of movement, and helps develop the practice of recording important information. It also begins to name the kinds of outcomes that are realistic and appropriate for the particular group or community in question. This is important because of how charged the discussion of outcomes has become, especially in the current climate. (See Principle 3 above.) There is often a tension in community-building work between those outcomes promised or expected by outside observers, and those actually sought and achieved through community-building practice. This tension is particularly important to recognize and address in the early stages of this work.

5. Develop some strong baseline evidence.

Closely related to the value of getting some results down quickly is the usefulness of having baseline or starting point information against which to gauge progress. Indeed, one of the most common gaps in telling the story of community development is the lack of documentation over time. Unfortunately, this is sometimes referred to as "before" and "after," static categories that do not adequately describe this kind of work. Reasonable people will want to know, however, how things are going based on more than one point in time, and the more systematic one can be about this, the more powerful the story can be. Not everything can be known early on, but of the things that are known, which ones warrant continuing attention? Or, put another way, which provide the basis for documenting progress?

For community builders, it is important to track the assets as they begin to scale up, as they are connected with each other and used. Much of the power of this work is in how it unfolds, how — literally — one thing leads to another. This can often be told in a time series, which is just a fancy way of saying "over time." Fear of fade out is a very legitimate worry. Observers have often noted that initial benefits that appear from program interventions fade over time unless they are built upon or reinforced. It is frequently difficult to see progress toward final goals, to identify appropriate intermediate outcomes, and to use these to convey a sense of movement.

Typically, key stakeholders such as funders and institutional representatives are especially interested in baseline information. Basic demographics, combined with a "map" of a community's resources and challenges, provide outsiders with an introduction to the project. Having an initial snapshot helps establish this work as credible, even though the picture may portray a view of the community that is new to the observers.

6. Be descriptive.

Many times the most valuable contribution of an evaluation is simply to describe what is happening in actual practice. Evaluators may imagine that our goal is something much fancier, something called "analysis," and so we seek to reach conclusions about whether the project or group actually seems to work, and if so, how and for whom? But in fact, it is much more common to hear that the evaluation has been well received because it simply describes the work and its variety, themes, and dilemmas. Once described, the work is much better understood both for what it is and for what it is not. People are often told a great deal about the philosophy, purposes, hopes, and meaning of this kind of work. But observers often have difficulty imagining what community building actually involves. If people haven't done something like this before, they often report having a hard time picturing it.

Even different parts of the same project are often relatively unknown to others in that project. But on those occasions when care has been taken to describe what the work involves and how it is done, people report gaining a much better sense of how their piece fits into the whole, or what they are trying to do together. In the process, this descriptive work becomes useful to both participants and outside observers.

This is also why well-told stories can be so powerful. Instead of taking things apart and putting them under the microscope, both evaluations and practitioners have learned that good stories put the parts back together and convey meaning in a holistic way. Stories provide concrete examples that "make the work real" and "bring it home" for people.

Interestingly, the value of being descriptive is particularly important to grassroots groups, many of whom operate under the assumption that what they are actually doing cannot possibly be of interest to others. They are often told, for example, that they are merely "a drop in the bucket," or that what they are doing isn't unique. Indeed, outsiders often complain that too many groups are going their own way, and shouldn't be "trying to reinvent the wheel." In fact, grassroots people often resonate to this call for good description. Among other things it represents a way of respecting what community actors are actually doing, and it often reveals that people who may believe they already know what is involved, might not, in fact, understand this particular situation.

7. Be graphic.

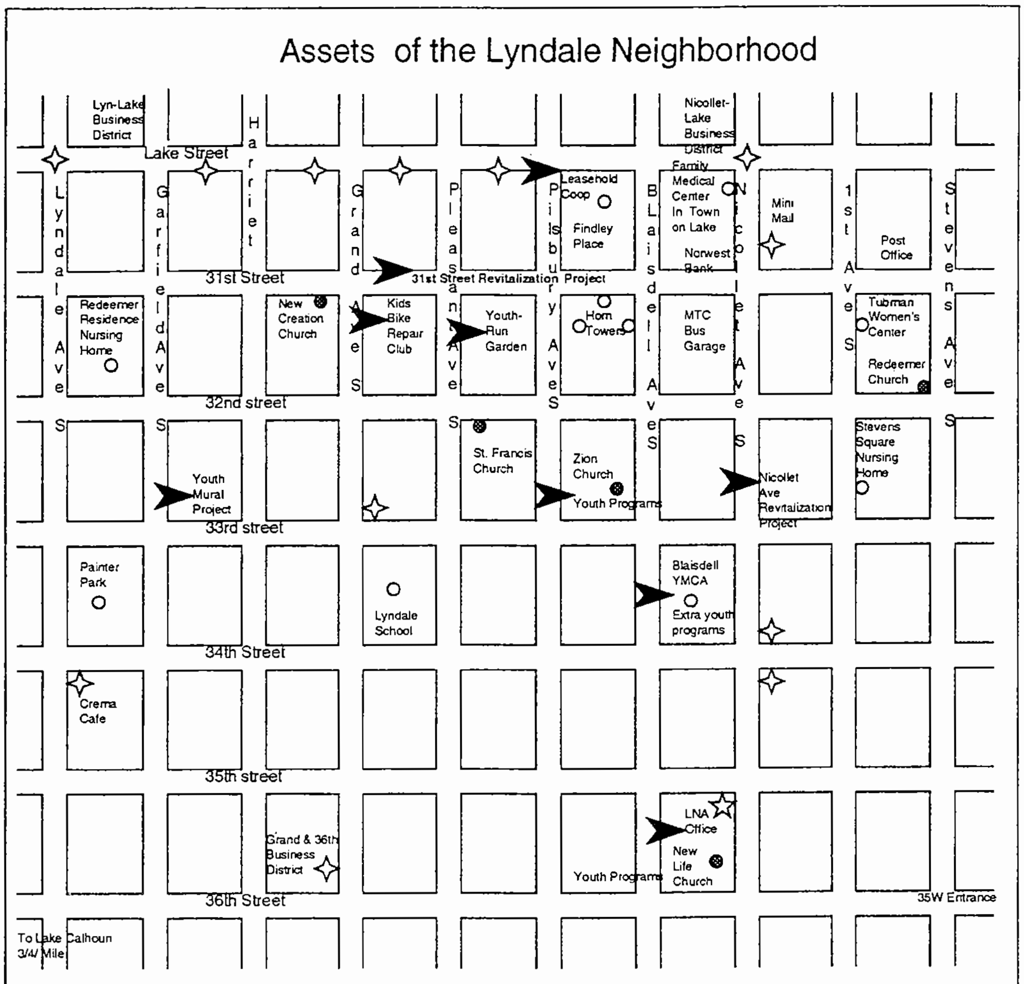
Pictures, charts, bulletin boards, photo displays, and the like, can be a great jumping-off point for getting more deeply into discussion of what community building involves. Much asset-focused work lends itself to "mapping," and many groups have found ways to put the various assets they have identified on an actual map — often differentiating individual, associational, and institutional resources (see Figures 2, 3, and 4). Several have also used this map to differentiate between those merely identified and those being used, or connected with each other, or activated in new ways.

These visual representations don't have to remain static; they can become dynamic. Often, in addition to being a good summary of the work, visual representations of the kinds of assets being identified can also show how assets begin to scale up or become more connected, and in the process be put to greater use. Over time, these graphics can show progress by how the maps or pictures fill in, or how the assets listed become more connected to one another, or more activated. As with the imperative to be descriptive, the call to be graphic can also be an important way to report to the community, or to participants, in ways that are both simple and engaging.

Another advantage of visual or graphic presentation is that it invites different participants. People not typically thought of as reporters or messengers about community building do become reporters when the means of communication is something other than speaking or writing. Young and old people, immigrants with limited English, shy people, and artistic people often move to center stage when the means being used are more graphic.

8. Make sure the evaluation is telling people something they didn't already know.

People find evaluations useful when they provide new information or when they provide evidence about something they thought was true but could not really substantiate. This sounds absurdly obvious but it is surprising how often evaluations are either a form of marketing or of predictable criticism. If evaluations simply rehash what is already well-known, or package it so that it looks like something new, the process begins to seem like "going through the



Lyndale Neighborhood Projects

31st Street Revitalization Project
Nicollet Avenue Revitalization Project
Findley Place Leasehold Cooperative
Youth Mural Project
Youth Run Garden
Kids Bike Repair Club

Major Institutions

Blaisdell YMCA
Family Medical Center
Lyndale School
Painter Park
Redeemer Residence Nursing Home
Stevens Square Nursing Home
Harriet Tubman Women's Shelter
Norwest Bank- Nicollet/Lake

Churches

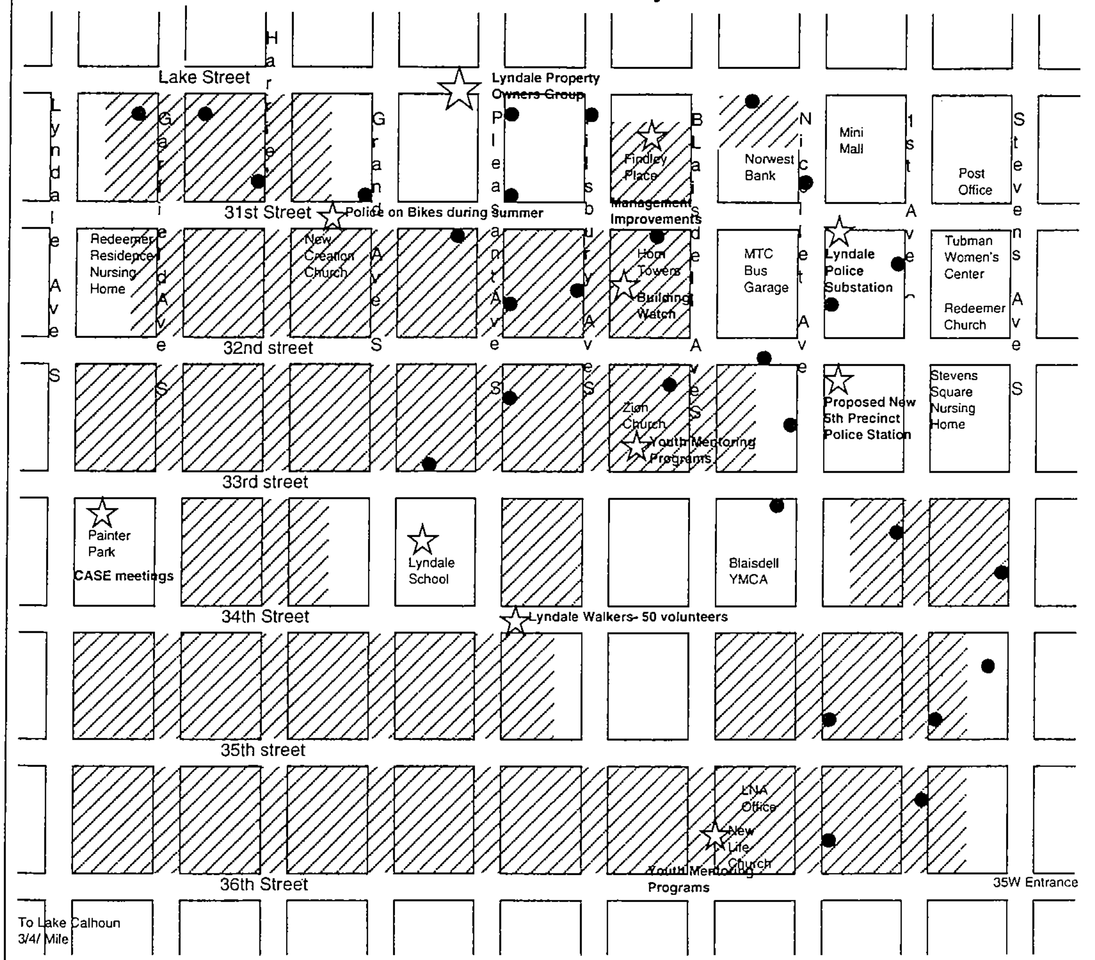
Little Flock Community of Faith
Liberal Catholic Church of St. Francis
New Life Church
New Creation Bible Church
Redeemer Missionary Baptist Church
Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church

Business Districts

Lyndale-Lake Business District
6 Restaurants, Jungle Theatre, Orbit Mall
Nicollet-Lake Business District
Four restaurants, K-Mart, New Market Grocery
Grand and 36th Business District
Coffee shops, art gallery, book store, laundry
Mini- Mall- 7 stores
Crema Cafe- 34th and Lyndale- coffee shop

Figure 2. *Using a large map of the neighborhood on a wall at the community center, LNA identifies, highlights and records community assets. Using ♀, O, and △ symbols, they change to the color green when activated.*

Crime in Lyndale and Citizen Safety Efforts



Citizen Safety Efforts

Active Block Clubs

Areas with high numbers of reported crime ●

1994 Lyndale Neighborhood Crime Data
Reporting- Jan 94- Oct 94

Murders	3
Burglary of Dwelling	104
Robery of Person	85
Auto Theft	61
Property Damage	165
Assault (incl. domestic)	110
Rapes	4
Criminal Sexual concuct	4
Auto Theft	61

Property Damage	165
Assault (incl. domestic)	110
Prostitution	10
High level of Narcotics Sales	

Special Efforts ☆

Lyndale Walkers- 50 volunteers

Police on Bikes during summer

Lyndale Police Substation

Proposed New 5th Precinct Station

Horn Towers Building Watch- Whistle Stop

Findley Place Management Improvements

Youth Mentoring Programs

Bi-monthly CASE meetings

Lyndale Property Owners Group

Figure 3. *On another large wall map, LNA records crime and the ongoing efforts of block clubs and other groups to make the neighborhood safer.*

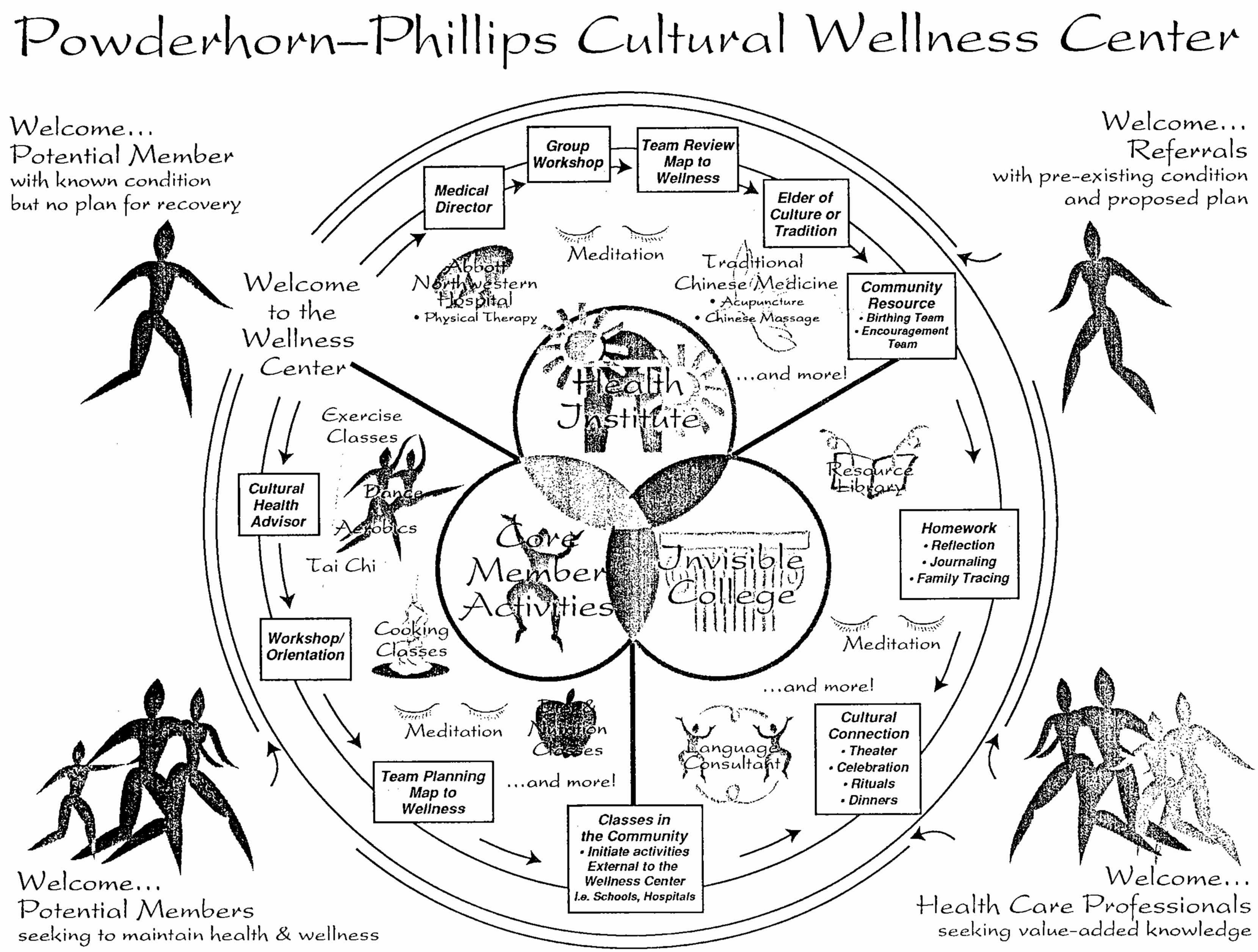


Figure 4. *This is an example of a dynamic and powerful graphic. It's a community map in action showing the processes and players in Healthy Powderhorn.*

motions." Even if a funder or outside party has required them, evaluations can be useful. This is especially true if they are organized around what those doing the work would like to keep track of, learn about, or improve.

Time and time again, when evaluators sit down and talk with the people doing community-building work about what they would really like to know, they discover important insights. Participants ask very good and often tough questions, both of themselves and of those around them. For example, participants in recent evaluations have wanted to know:

- How to involve more people, and once they're involved, how to keep them involved.
- Whether or not initial results being seen are sustainable, and if not, why not.
- How the participants are perceived by others whose point of view they respect or must learn more about in order to be effective.
- What are the most important barriers to their work, and what others think might effectively address them.

The interest participants express in evaluation, and the effort they are willing to put forth in carrying it out, is directly proportional to how much they think they will learn or benefit from its being done well.

9. Be open about shortcomings.

This commitment builds credibility and adds tremendously to the usefulness of the evaluation. It is never the case that shortcomings mean that nothing can be done, or that nothing worked. More likely, obstacles noted indicate that the work was difficult (sometimes surprisingly so) because of specific barriers and dilemmas that can be named, better understood, and in some cases, dealt with over time. For example, projects often begin with the intention to connect with certain groups in their home community or to establish stronger ties to key institutions. Finding that they are not doing this as well or rapidly as planned becomes an important lesson and can prompt participants to rethink strategies.

The successful experience of strong projects is often rooted in a full and open discussion of difficulties along the way. Healthy Powderhorn's recent self-evaluation, for example, found some important shortcomings that then led to a major rethinking of the group's work. This group was originally organized to mobilize community and cultural resources in a Minneapolis neighborhood in order to engage residents in community action to improve health. What they discovered, through practice and evaluation, was that health was not a particularly good starting point for engaging people in common action. They learned that people did not respond to calls for better health, partly because these calls were misconstrued as calls for more or better health care ***services***. Instead, they found residents, including many newcomers to the area and other longer term residents who had previously been disengaged, had a more general goal in mind: They yearned to "make a real contribution to something bigger than themselves." They wanted to belong and to expand their horizons. Many residents simply wanted to address very local issues, those that affected them at the household, block, or neighborhood level.

The most pressing of these were not understood as health care issues, but included instead an increased sense of safety, a stronger neighborhood economy, and the urge to belong to a group. The project found, through debriefing the many community "circles" or roundtable discussions they had convened, that this was especially true for the many newcomers to the community. The project had initially made connecting with these new arrivals a priority, but the evaluation revealed that presenting itself to the neighborhood as a "health care project" did not constitute an effective invitation. These insights led to a fundamental refocusing of the project's strategies and approaches.

Being open about shortcomings means that residents or project participants create and maintain forums where it is safe to worry about what is not working, as well as to get a better sense of what is going well. In these forums participants can also brainstorm new or different approaches. There will always be problems and setbacks. No one expects otherwise. The challenge is to find ways to proceed despite them. Effective community-based work turns these frustrations and worries into group dialogue and planning. Discussion of these shortcomings educates participants as well as outside observers about the challenges involved, and often serves to place even greater emphasis on the importance of the effort.

10. Share and discuss findings as the project progresses.

For information to be useful it must be shared; and for it to be put into practice, it must be absorbed while the work is still underway. For these purposes, final reports are too late. The time for sharing lessons and information is often much earlier than originally planned. Circulating drafts and looking for informal discussion of preliminary findings often serve as the basis for clarifying issues, for understanding better the meaning of what is being learned, and for informing participants. Furthermore, if participants are given an opportunity to learn along the way, they will cooperate and even invest in the evaluation process in order to make it as current and credible as possible. For all of these reasons, effective community evaluators try to share what is being learned before it reaches the report stage, so that participants are given an opportunity to discuss, digest, and respond to new information in a way that makes sense. By doing so, they also increase the quality of the analysis and reflections.

Community-sensitive evaluators often prepare final reports for outside audiences, while midterm or interim reports are for internal ones. Further, discussions along the way about what everyone is learning reinforces the sense in which participants contribute to and benefit directly from the process. Waiting for results until the end simply doesn't fit with what is being suggested here as a more appropriate, learning-oriented evaluation.

Summary: Ten Features of Appropriate Community Evaluation

1. Involve participants directly in the process.
2. Know your audience.
3. Focus on appropriate goals and document intermediate outcomes.
4. Document some results as quickly as possible.
5. Develop some strong baseline evidence.
6. Be descriptive.
7. Be graphic.
8. Make sure the evaluation is telling people something they didn't already know.
9. Be open about shortcomings.
10. Share and discuss findings as the project progresses.

CHAPTER THREE

ASSET-ORIENTED GUIDELINES AND REPORTING: EXAMPLES FROM THE FIELD

A number of things can be done to help set the stage for good evaluation. Funders can do some of this, as can local practitioners. For funders, one important tool is the set of guidelines to prospective grantees. These guidelines often identify key issues and questions, thus helping to frame the evaluation approaches.

This chapter offers four examples of guidelines developed by researchers and funders. The first set was published in *Building Communities from the Inside Out* (1993) and then revised as a discussion piece for the September 1996 Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) Institute conference, "Funding Community Capacity." The other three were used by funders forging ahead with asset-based community development projects. Their guidelines are examples of best practices from the field. Their stories show how creativity, sensitivity, and concern for appropriateness in the design of guidelines produces a powerful tool for ongoing communication between funder and grantee.

A Guide to Funding Asset-Based Community Development (The ABCD Institute)

In keeping with the spirit and practical implications of the work reported on and anticipated by their book, *Building Communities from the Inside Out,* Kretzmann and McKnight have developed a useful set of possible guidelines for funders of asset-based community development. Similar guidelines have been developed by numerous community foundations as well as other funders.

Clearly, each of these seven suggested guidelines requires follow-up information that would report on the work as it develops. The value of clear guidelines is that they focus the process on certain key questions. By knowing these in advance, the likelihood increases that relevant information will be gathered, discussed, and reported. Strategies can be developed that increase the quality and variety of information, and tools for getting information can be tried out and improved.

A Guide to Funding Asset-Based Community Development

Prepared for the Asset-Based Community Development Institute by
John Kretzmann and John McKnight

We support proposals from community-based groups that:

1) **Clearly identify the skills, abilities, capacities, and assets that local residents will contribute to the proposal. How will local residents' capacities be used to address the issues identified? Have you developed an inventory of the capacities and skills of local residents to help guide this process?** We are particularly interested in how you will discover and use the gifts and abilities of the "strangers" in your community — those people who have been marginalized and overlooked because of labels such as disadvantaged, underclass, elderly, developmentally disabled, ex-offender, physically disabled, mentally disabled, mentally ill, etc.

2) **Clearly identify the capacities of your community's citizens associations, and indicate how they will be involved in both governance and problem-solving in your proposal.** We are interested in the involvement of groups such as arts organizations, business associations, church groups, organizations of the elderly, organizations of men or women, ethnic associations, health groups, self-help groups, outdoor organizations, block clubs, school groups, political organizations, unions, service clubs, youth groups, veterans organizations, etc.

3) **Indicate how this proposal will mobilize, utilize, enhance, and expand these local capacities.** How will local citizens and groups be stronger at the end of this proposal? How will they be better able to develop local assets?

4) **Clearly identify:**

   - **the major institutions in the community** (e.g., schools, hospitals, human service agencies, parks, libraries, etc.)

   - **the many different resources, or "treasures," held by each of these institutions** (e.g., people, space, equipment, budgets, etc.)

5) **Clearly indicate how these local institutional resources can be mobilized to solve problems in the local community, and to enhance the capacities of local residents and their associations.**

6) **Contribute to building the local economy by:**

- **Identifying and mobilizing the enterprise and job-related skills of local residents.**

- **Identifying and directing local consumer spending toward enterprise development and support of local businesses.**

- **Mobilizing the savings of local residents to reinvest in neighborhood economic development.**

- **Involving local citizen associations and institutions in business and economic development efforts.**

- **Identifying and mobilizing local businesses for economic development efforts.**

7) **Show evidence of significant investments of resources and time by local residents and organizations before our funding is initiated.** We are particularly interested in projects that local residents design, carry out, and control themselves.

The Community Capacity Building Fund (Cincinnati, OH)

In addition to framing the evaluation process by presenting clear guidelines, funders and other community-building supporters can design reporting strategies that encourage mutual learning. Here, for example, is a set of questions developed by Cincinnati's United Way to track the success of neighborhood projects that have been funded by the Community Capacity Building Fund.

Tracking the Success of Neighborhood Projects
Funded by the Community Capacity Building Fund

The United Way and Community Chest and the Greater Cincinnati Foundation are honored to be able to support your neighborhood's community building project. We join you in wanting to make sure that the project is a success and helps to build "citizen spirit" in your community. During the year, we ask that you spend a little time with your Community Capacity Building Fund liaison person and discuss how the project is going. Your liaison person will be interested in your answers to questions like the following:

- When you applied for the grant, you told us that there were some specific things you wanted to accomplish during the year. Do you feel you're on track for getting those things done? Are you finding it difficult to accomplish some of the things in your plan? If so, do you think it will still be possible to accomplish them?

- Now that you're involved in the project, what do you think are the most important benefits it's bringing to your community? Which situation or situations in the neighborhood are changing as a result of the project? Please give us some facts that show how you know these changes are happening.

- How much of the project's work is being done by people who live in the neighborhood? How many neighborhood residents actually are working on the project? About how many of the neighborhood people who are working on the project are newcomers to neighborhood building work? Do you think they'll stick with your group after this project is finished?

- Have you been able to persuade some of the other groups in your neighborhood to work with you on the project? (This can be any type of group, even small and informal ones.) How many groups have you been able to involve in the project? Do you think those groups might want to work with you again on projects for the neighborhood?

- Have you been able to get some of the institutions in your neighborhood (e.g., schools, churches, social agencies, businesses, the police, the fire department) to give you some help on the project? What kind of help are they giving you? Is this the first time some of these institutions have worked with your group? Do you think they're likely to work with you again in the future?

- Have you been able to get some other money to help with the project? Where did it come from? Has any money for the project been donated by people who live in the neighborhood or has it come from some fundraising work they've been doing?

- Has doing this project given your group other ideas for things you might do to improve the quality of life in your neighborhood? Please tell us some of these ideas.

The Mile High United Way (Denver, CO)

A number of evaluations take care to feature the kinds of success and outcomes that are most valued by residents or participants themselves. They avoid imposing additional expectations other than those agreed to by participants and funders at the outset of funding.

The Mile High United Way in Denver has developed several strong programs that embody the assets approach. One of these is the Denver Neighborhood Partnership, which is governed by a board of neighborhood residents. These people are really peers of those seeking support, rather than experts or professional funders. Thus, they can credibly ask projects what they are learning that could be passed on to others, like themselves. In their requests for information to funded projects, they are careful to ask for these lessons, along with information that corresponds to the guidelines under which the partnership operates and by which grants are made. Among other things, they specifically ask, "How did you (or your project) utilize the assets, skills, people, or organizations in your neighborhood?"

Interestingly, Mile High United Way Vice President Chuck Shannon reports that since "evaluation" is such a charged term, the partnership prefers to ask funded projects for "Project Observations." In requesting this information, they also ask participants to "take a few moments to answer the following questions," thus hoping to further lower the anxiety or perceived burden of providing responses. Specifically, they ask:

Project Observations

1. In concrete terms, how did the project have a lasting positive effect on the neighborhood? How did you define success?

2. How did you (or your project) link people and resources within your neighborhood? If appropriate, how did your project link neighborhood resources to outside resources? How did you (or your project) utilize assets, skills, people, or organizations in your neighborhood?

3. What have you learned from your experience with the project?

4. Describe what you can do better now than you did before? What has the project given you?

5. Based on your experience, what changes would you make if you did this project again? What advice would you give other people who would like to be more involved in their communities and start a project like you have? Are there any other people who were involved with your project that we may contact?

The Community Partnership Fund of Greater Memphis (TN)

Another rich and community-sensitive example of reporting comes from the Community Partnership Fund of Greater Memphis, which has a recommended format for its final reports. This format expresses great interest in the opinions and experience of participants. It demonstrates faith in them. It asks a series of very straightforward questions that can be answered without special expertise or preparation. Items specified in it correspond closely to the foundation's stated mission, and to questions asked in the original proposal each group submitted.

Format for Final Reports

Please help us better understand the impact of our Community Partnership Fund investment in your organization and how we can help your organization build on this investment in the future. We are particularly interested in your thoughts on the following questions. Please answer these questions on your own paper, attach a financial report for the funded project, and send to Janis Foster at the Community Foundation, 5210 Poplar, Suite 150, Memphis, TN, 38119. Feel free to call if you need clarification on any question.

1. Please describe the activity or project that your organization undertook with support from the Community Foundation's Community Partnership Fund.

2. What do you believe was the most important outcome of this work for your organization?

3. What do you believe was the most important outcome of this work for your organization's community?

4. What relationships or partnerships did your organization form with community residents, program participants, and other organizations or institutions through this project? Please indicate what others contributed to the project.

5. What do you believe were the most important "lessons learned" through this work? How has your organization used these lessons learned to enhance other areas of your work?

6. What have you done or do you plan to do to insure that this project or activity continues or to insure that the learning that was associated with the project is passed on to others?

7. What do you see as the next steps your organization can take to build on the successes of this project or activity and enhance the role you can play as a catalyst for positive action in your community?

8. Would you be willing to share your insights and experiences relating to this project with others? If yes, would you be willing to help the Community Foundation organize an information-sharing meeting with others that may have similar experiences? Are there any particular topics that you would most like to discuss with others?

9. What can the Community Foundation do — in ways other than to provide additional money — to help you in your work?

10. Do you have any suggestions for how we might improve our grant process (information received prior to application, the application itself, procedures for site visits, notification procedures, interaction after the grant award, etc.) Please help us make our process more useful to you!

In sum, and as the examples illustrate, good evaluations are focused. They check in with key audiences early to determine what their questions are. They are confident that by being systematic and "user-friendly" their intended audience(s) will be informed — and in the process, some unintended audiences may be impressed as well.

In addition to being focused, good evaluations are also flexible. One size does not fit all. To be useful, they must be responsive to what the intended audience is looking for, and they should plan and execute the process in a way that is realistic.

Asset-oriented guidelines can help set the stage for focused and flexible evaluation by identifying issues of continuing importance around which some data-gathering ought to be planned from the outset. Good questions often follow directly from these guidelines. By following through on these questions, trust is built among participants, funders, and third-party evaluators. With clear guidelines, project participants report having greater clarity about what to keep track of (and what the funder wants to know), as well as having to deal with fewer surprises or imposed questions. And finally, reporting formats that respect community wisdom, but challenge everyone to learn and grow, can only serve to enhance the creative energies and intelligence already evident in community-building efforts.

CHAPTER FOUR

SUMMARIZING AN APPROACH TO EVALUATING ASSET-BASED COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

Asset-based community development turns on several key questions. Who are the producers of achieved results? Who decides what will be done? How are the gifts of individuals identified and mobilized? Are local citizens' associations involved? How are they enlisted in community building? Which institutional resources are brought into the mix, and how is this achieved?

- Evaluation appropriate to participants and communities focuses on their questions, and those of key supporters, including funders.
- It looks for ways to involve actors directly in the process, early and throughout.
- It seeks to inform rather than disrupt or judge the work underway.
- It pays attention to the particular situation, while still striving to offer insights that go beyond this case, project, or community.
- It is as systematic and clear as possible; it is flexible about the practical constraints and realities presented, such as time, energy, and money.
- It is focused on the questions to which people want answers, describes the work as it unfolds, and documents the kind of progress achieved in ways that are clear and credible.
- In the short run, it names appropriate intermediate outcomes and tracks them over time.
- In the long run, it provides the basis for telling the community-building story in ways that inform both participant and observer, both supporter and skeptic.

It is important to note these qualities in closing, for some evaluations seem to have a way of getting away from the heart of the matter. There is always pressure to shift attention either to those aspects of the work that can be more easily studied or measured, or to expectations and questions being imposed on the participants from the outside.

People may disagree about how much progress is actually taking place, or about how this particular community-building effort compares with what might have happened had other approaches been used. But they don't often disagree about who are considered the key actors, or about which local assets are identified and used.

At the heart of this approach are citizens and their associations. Given how very important this idea is for asset-based community building, this commitment to move citizens and their associations to the center of the action, it seems reasonable to expect an "appropriate" evaluation to describe the extent to which this is achieved.

Furthermore, since interest in asset-based community development appears to be growing and, along with it, a curiosity about how the various asset-based approaches actually work, community builders are challenged to begin to document this work in a way that is persuasive and informative to supporters and non-supporters alike. It is important to recognize the myriad and sometimes unrealistic claims being made about asset-focused approaches, and to appreciate how these claims can undercut the entire effort. With this in mind, appropriate evaluation examines projects to discover how they accomplish what they specifically set out to do, how they meet the claims they actually make, rather than for the grand purposes sometimes claimed by some of their occasionally overzealous proponents and supporters.

When an approach such as asset-based community development begins to develop support, and when, for example, the language becomes "hot," new challenges arise. Some people will accept appearance or form over substance. They will want to appear to have applied asset approaches to their work, but will not actually want to be bothered by any major disruption or changes in their current practices, policies, or perceptions. Some will simply adopt the language, and not the practices, and will merely change how they describe what they do. Clearly, language and the use of asset-oriented concepts alone are not enough to ensure that practices have changed, or that community actors are more clearly viewed as the key producers and central decision-makers.

This problem of appearances — of changes in language without corresponding changes in practice — exists alongside an opposite phenomenon. It is clear that many interesting and important examples of asset-focused work ***don't*** use the language or concepts used in *Building Communities from the Inside Out*, but are nevertheless the "real thing." They are inventing their own methods for finding and mobilizing citizen energies. Community builders have as much (or more) to learn from these pioneers as from those projects that are consciously trying to follow the direction, reflect the values, and implement the practices of "asset-based community development."

Clearly, this approach to community development is not a mechanistic model. Rather, it is a set of values and ideas that provide direction. As one group committed to this path has said, "it is a compass and not a map." This means there is a great deal of hard work involved in figuring out just how the compass applies to specific local situations. This figuring out is an important part of the story, and an important feature for an appropriate evaluation to try to capture. Often it is the single most interesting element for others working elsewhere.

What these asset-oriented approaches claim also varies a great deal from site to site. Different people in different places face different challenges, and thus develop their own versions, their own language and strategies. As they adapt the asset ideas and values to their own circumstances, they will identify and build upon different assets. That's the point. Clearly, standard evaluation designs cannot be imposed across all of this rich variety.

The guidance that has been offered here is meant to be suggestive. It is based on the recognition that evaluation is all too often imposed on people, and only rarely becomes a real asset in its own right, a tool for learning. At some level the assets approach is not new at all. It is important to recognize that many people do it without having been in direct contact with written materials or training events that have been developed recently to describe or promote it. In this sense, the approach involves popular knowledge. It builds upon the common sense of local citizens operating in many different community settings who have always understood the value of starting with what and who you have available close at hand, and who insist on having as much control as possible over what is planned and carried out. They define themselves as the heart of any solution. In keeping with this reality, an important contribution for the kind of appropriate evaluation being suggested here is to record, extend, and circulate this popular knowledge.

At another level, the assets approach is quite new. Increasingly, it is viewed as an effective alternative to institutionally based and professionally controlled strategies for community development — strategies that often turn citizens into clients, and that define the community and citizen role as what's left after professionals and institutions have done what they can about the problems and needs of those they "serve." The dominance of these outside-in solutions today helps create the environment within which asset-based approaches operate, and directly affects the context within which evaluation is carried out. As these professional strategies are challenged around their limited effectiveness and the active disrespect they often show toward community residents, new alternatives are understandably being sought and found. Asset-based community development is one of these and, based on experience to date, appears especially attractive to citizen-run groups of various kinds, and to funders who would like to find something to support besides the standard institutional delivery systems and existing social and human service agencies.

For these and other reasons, the time has come for all of those doing or supporting asset-oriented work to get more serious and systematic about evaluation. This means that assets-oriented evaluation tools must be added to the tool kit that shapes this work. It is expected that various tools and methods based on the elements described in Kretzmann and McKnight's *Building Communities from the Inside Out*, will continue to be developed through actual practice. They already are. These tools will focus on releasing individual capacities, harnessing the power of local associations and organizations, and capturing local institutions for community building.

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