

Asset-Based Community Development: The Essentials

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In 1988 the Asset-Based Community Development Institute was established by two faculty colleagues, John McKnight and Jody Kretzmann at the Center for Urban Affairs at Northwestern University. The Center was an urban policy research group of 24 faculty members, largely social scientists. While the faculty was dedicated to social justice and urban change, their implicit view of neighborhoods was that they were full of problems and victimized people. Like nearly all other universities, their work focused on policies that would alleviate poverty and discrimination. Their understanding of the appropriate actors to implement their policies were government, health and social welfare agencies and other large institutions. Their unstated assumption was that "fixing" neighborhoods was the job of outsiders.

McKnight and Kretzmann recognized that this academic and policy framework rarely included neighbors. At that time, almost none of the policy research recognized that a principal party in neighborhood change was local residents and their inventiveness and problem solving capacities. Nor did the researchers conceive that there were local resources that represented the wealth in local places.

Because of this policymaking blind spot, McKnight and Kretzmann undertook research to make visible the multiple resources in neighborhoods. Over four years they gathered resident stories (called 'case studies' in universities) in several hundred neighborhoods asking, "Can you tell us what residents in this neighborhood have done together that made things better?" The responses provided four key findings that became the core of ABCD practice.

The first is that scale is a critical factor in effective neighborhood work. ABCD stories came from small neighborhoods and towns. Therefore, the three findings that follow are based upon information gathered in small space-bound places. The essence of ABCD is lost when neighborhood personal relationships are not the basic connective tissue.

Second, the analysis of the hundreds of neighborhood stories enabled the Institute to identify the principal local resources that generate productive neighborhoods. These resources became the classic 6 assets that are the core of ABCD practice:

1. Individual resident capacities
2. Local associations
3. Neighborhood institutions - business, not-for-profit and government
4. Physical assets - the land and everything on it and beneath it
5. Exchange between neighbors - giving, sharing, trading, bartering, exchanging, buying and selling
6. Stories

The Institute published a book titled, “Building Communities for the Inside Out: A Path Toward Finding and Mobilizing a Community's Assets.” It described each of the assets and their uses. Very soon, thousands of copies of the book were sold and an “asset-based “movement emerged in many neighborhoods and some universities and agencies. This movement was manifested in a paradigm shift in the organizing and policy fields where the importance of local resources provided a new framework for analyzing and implementing community change.

The rapid spread of the ABCD paradigm was largely the result of three critical characteristics of the ABCD framework:

1. It is simple
2. It is eminently usable
3. It has universal applications as the worldwide movement has demonstrated.

The third core finding was that the most common method used by the groups to implement their collective activity involved three steps:

1. Local assets were identified
2. Assets that were unconnected were connected
3. Usually, a group or individual acted as the initiating connector.

Central to this process is the connective function. In fact, the hundreds of stories could be understood as descriptions of how unconnected local assets got connected. This understanding emphasizes the importance of ABCD work focused on connectors in contrast to leaders. While some leaders are connectors, most connectors are not thought of as leaders. Although there are thousands of leadership development

programs, the Institute has developed a unique role in enhancing the capacity of people who are connectors and expanding the understanding of this function.

A fourth finding was the method used by effective local groups that engaged outside institutions. The process emerges when local groups undertake a more comprehensive initiative. In planning such an initiative, three questions are most frequently involved:

1. What can we produce with assets in our neighborhood?
2. What can we produce with our assets and some supportive outside resources?
3. What will our assets not be able to produce so that outside resources will have to do the entire function?

The sequence here is critical because, "you don't know what you need from outside until you know what you have inside." Therefore, ABCD work always starts with "what do we have in the neighborhood that can produce what we want?" The answer, of course, requires a thorough understanding of what local resources are available. This is why the "map" of the 6 assets has been so universally useful.

In summary, the work of ABCD is to enhance and support local residents' capacity to make visible their assets and to support and enhance the connection of those assets. These two essential roles are the way we undergird productive citizenship.

We should emphasize the word "productive." The basic standard for determining whether local activity is ABCD work is to ask who was the producer of the outcome. If it is a group of local citizens, then it qualifies. And to be the producer doesn't mean to be a client, advisor or advocate. It means to be the implementer - a person with the power to act.

Alexis de Tocqueville wrote that, "The health of a democratic society may be measured by the quality of functions performed by private citizens." This is why the ABCD work that enhances citizens and their associations is critical to the future of democracy. Citizens and their associations have a different place in democracy than institutions. In the 20th century there were 2 great tyrannies and both had great institutions. They were tyrannies because they stamped out all free standing associations and the free expression of citizens. They knew that they could control institutions but they couldn't control citizens so they outlawed the basic power-making tools of citizens - freedom of expression and association. This is why the essential home of ABCD is with citizens, their gifts and their associations.

In 2016 the ABCD Institute found a new physical and spiritual home-DePaul University in Chicago. At the same time, the Institute Faculty was restructured to fulfill new functions and innovations. The result is a renewed ABCD Institute at DePaul University with increased ability to support a worldwide movement of powerful citizens.