Asset-Based Community Development

ABCD was developed from more than thirty years of research by Northwestern University professors John McKnight and Jody Kretzmann. The Asset-Based Community Development Institute was originally established within Northwestern University and today exists within the Steans Center of DePaul University in Chicago.

Background: Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) is a community organizing strategy focusing on the strengths and resources existing within a community. While a needs-based approach identifies deficits in a community and outside resources which might provide assistance, ABCD instead leverages the strengths of individuals and existing community associations and connections to mobilize more sustainable citizen action.

Guiding Principles

Guiding Principles: “Shifting the focus from what’s wrong with our people and our communities, to what’s strong within our communities.”

- Under this premise, ABCD organizers believe everyone has a gift, strength, or talent to share.
- Neighbors are seen as citizens in a community and not recipients of services or clients.
- Building and sustaining relationships within a community helps network these strengths, and leaders seek to build capacity for these relationships.
- Communities are often able to identify solutions to the issues they see, requiring larger organizations and associations to listen to act based on community identified-action.
- Asking questions, inviting participation through trusted relationships, and identifying what motivation the community has to act must be integral parts of building community relationships.
- “Citizen-Centered” organization, where people control the direction of action, means institutions must take a step back to create an opportunity for people to engage the wider community.
Identifying Assets

ABCD focuses on identifying five key assets for community development:

**Individuals:** These are the citizens of the community with important strengths and gifts. Much time is spent identifying these individuals, their talents, and motivations. Remember, everyone has a strength and gift to be identified. The focus is to build on citizen involvement, not convince citizens to participate.

**Associations:** Small groups already formed within a community such as neighborhood councils, clubs, interest, or volunteer groups are called associations. These groups are crucial to bringing more people and relationships to action.

**Institutions:** Groups of individuals who are generally paid professionals with structured organizations and institutions. Institutions are assets because they often house resources and power to drive more extensive community involvement.

**Physical Assets:** Include land, buildings, funding, and other physical assets needed for action.

**Connections:** Building relationships and encouraging the exchange of ideas and assets happen through connections between individuals. In the ABCD model, relationships and connection are the key resource, not money.

ABCD in Action

In their research, McKnight and Kretzmann found that in every circumstance, the neighbors knew their local assets – the individuals with strengths and gifts. When these neighbors are connected through relationship and capacity building, successful neighborhood action is achieved. Leaders, or connectors, are required to bridge assets – individuals, associations, and institutions. These connectors are trusted, believe the community is welcoming and focused on individual gifts (not needs).

As part of the organizing process, three planning questions can be used to focus the work:

“As neighbors, what can we achieve by using our assets?”

“What can we achieve with our assets if we get some outside help?”

“What can’t we do with our assets that must be done by outsiders?”
Cases:

In rural Richland County, Wisconsin, the “Richland Together Let’s Connect” program began to support seniors living in place longer. Volunteers met with 154 Richland citizens to learn more about their individual assets. Through these meetings, they found that neighbors loved to volunteer, be active, and be part of the community. In a larger community meeting, citizens brainstormed ways to address community challenges by building on strengths.

Richland created a Technology Expo and ongoing Technology support, connecting youth to individuals with tech questions. In addition, a Time Bank was proposed to exchange services without monetary compensation, several Little Free Libraries were created, and a community resource guide was created to connect all these relationships, opportunities and talents.

ABCD Canada is the home of Canada’s national ABCD Institute. After being adopted across the nation, local studies were completed to gather success stories and knowledge. In Charlotte County, residents identified the many entrepreneurs as a local strength and created a Business Bootcamp. The goal of the 10-week mentorship program is to connect successful business leaders with new entrepreneurs in the area.

Milltown Elementary School, which faces many challenges, worked with local institutions and associations to create the Super Duper Fun Fun Fun Camp to address summer learning loss. 100% of the students either maintained or improved their literacy level. The school also identifies the strength of families as an asset and worked to offer support by providing affordable daycare and childcare options, parenting resources and workshops.

References

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3. Instructional: What is Asset Based Community Development
4. ABCD Basic Slide Presentation
5. Video: Richland Together Let’s Connect”
6. 2018 New Brunswick Case Study