UNIVERSITY OF SAN FRANCISCO

CHANGE THE WORLD FROM HERE

Nonprofit Approach to Asset-Based Language:
The Power of Intentional Communication

by

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Dedication

To my fellow nonprofit leaders –
we owe it to our communities
to listen actively, to speak intentionally, and
serve each other well.

Abstract

Language matters. Nonprofit organizations have historically created a story that begins with a "challenge" or "problem" to engage donors, as well as the public. This capstone project will address how strengths-based frameworks and asset-based language, particularly through the lens of education and youth within historically marginalized communities, can positively impact the outcome of nonprofit organizations and its primary stakeholders. Through the implementation of asset-based language, donors and volunteers can engage in uplifting a community, rather than working towards solving a problem the community may be facing. Through expert interviews and literature reviews, asset-framing is explored to uncover the implications of how positive language affects nonprofit organizations at a macro level.

Keywords: asset framing, asset-based language, youth empowerment, change management, strengths-based, community

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Section 1. Introduction

Within the nonprofit sector, organizational leaders are often asked to share the stories of the communities they serve. These stories are used to bring awareness, secure donation funding, as well as obtain public support through the media, volunteers, and constituents of the community. However, according to social entrepreneur, Trabian Shorters, these narratives are typically shared from the lens of a "deficit" approach, with the goal of inciting action from stakeholders, and to gain a "sympathetic ear" from the public. Asset-framing is the intentional shift to bring light through narratives that define a people and its community by their "aspirations and contributions", rather than any potential challenges or deficits. These narratives that organizational leaders use can lead to profound impacts on identities and behaviors within the communities they serve, in both positive and negative ways.

I first heard about asset-framing and asset-based language in 2020 when I was volunteering with an organization called Larkin Street Youth Services. One of the volunteer opportunities I participated in was to record myself answering prompts and sharing my personal life journey to share with the young people at Larkin Street. The volunteer coordinators explicitly talked about how we should frame our experiences positively, starting from a place of strength and resilience, rather than using a sharing only the challenges I faced because it may seem like I am "pandering" to the audience who would be watching the videos. This volunteer opportunity resonated with me, and I was lucky to have the privilege to learn more about this topic in the fall semester of the Master of Nonprofit Administration program.

My research is meant to examine how asset framing and asset-based language can positively transform organizations and its relationships with primary stakeholders. Language matters, and so does using language intentionally and purposefully. The questions that guide my research throughout this capstone are:

1. How does asset-framing and asset-based language impact the work of a nonprofit organization who is serving young people in historically marginalized communities?

2. How does asset-framing impact nonprofit relationships with major stakeholders?

In the following pages, I share more about the impacts of how asset-framing and asset-based language are used in the nonprofit sector and allude to its impact on communities at large. The deficit-based narrative that nonprofits have historically used to gain a sympathetic ear from the public needs to be eliminated and I argue to share stories of resilience, empowerment, and strength within the communities themselves. After digging deeper at the cause of why deficit-based language has been used in the nonprofit sector, I will offer recommendations how we, as nonprofit leaders, can purposefully and intentionally shift our thinking and narratives to honor and respect our communities. This will allow us to work towards building stories that are centered on individual contribution, strength, and commitment, rather than defining people by their circumstances.

I believe this to be meaningful work, and it is imperative that we listen to each other and to the people whom we serve. Understandably, it is difficult to push against what has historically been known to us, but I believe that it is our responsibility to our organizations, to the communities we serve, and to each other, that we continue to build inclusivity in our language through intentional communication.

This capstone project will start with a literature review, which will provide an overview of key concepts, as well as a few important terms within asset-framing. I will also discuss how the Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) model has been put into practice within the nonprofit space already. The literature review will also offer examples of how language can impact communities and individuals we serve. The data analysis portion will share results of my qualitative research studies, which include six semi-structured expert interviews, and a content analysis of ten annual reports. Lastly, I will share my findings, insights, implications, and recommendations on how we, as nonprofit leaders, can work together to build a more inclusive and strengths-based approach to nonprofits, with the goal of impacting major stakeholders.

Section 2: Literature Review

Asset-Framing and Impacts on Civic Engagement

Asset-framing and using asset-based approaches are still relatively new to the nonprofit sector, however, understanding these approaches will allow nonprofit leaders to examine the ways social and human capital can increase civic engagement and can eventually serve as a pathway towards economic opportunity for historically marginalized individuals (Benenson, 2017). Although civic engagement has not been examined as a means for economic mobility, an emerging body of literature suggests that "civic engagement activities such as volunteering, political involvement, and philanthropic activities can help facilitate connections and develop skills that may influence participants' employment statuses", this can lead to a population that "participates in a variety of civic activities that could particularly benefit from economic opportunities related to employment, education, income, and wealth" (Bolland and McCallum, 2002; McBride et al. 2006; Messias et al. 2005).

Although this topic is not the focus of my research, I would be remiss to not mention how asset-framing can impact civic engagement. An underlying question that stems from how asset-framing can impact civic engagement is: how defining community members through their strengths and aspirations affect civic engagement to later influence economic opportunities for individuals living in historically-marginalized communities? "Civic engagement is defined as individual or collective actions that address issues of public concern or unmet needs and are intended to improve or influence a community) (Adler and Goggin, 2005; Carpini, 2004; Levine, 2014). In these studies, civic engagement include donating money, informal engagement, community organizing, religious participation, as well as volunteering. In Benenson's 2017 journal article, Civic Engagement and Economic Opportunity Among Low-Income Individuals: An Asset-Based Approach, findings were able to illustrate that participants were often able to mobilize and deploy the "social and human capital assets accumulated through different types of civic engagement into employment and education opportunities." Embedded within social and human capital assets are also examples of the ways structural factors influence whether

participants could transfer social and human capital assets through civic engagements into opportunities that would advance them economically and professionally (Benenson, 2017).

Using asset-based approaches considers how social and human capital can influence economic outcomes, including employment and educational opportunities for low-income individuals. Civic engagement activities can foster a sense of connecting with the larger community, as well as cultivate hard and soft skills that are transferable to employment-related efforts outside of the activity. Some examples include writing letters, planning meetings, giving presentations, and attending meetings where decisions are made (Cavendish, 2000; Verba et al. 1995).

Civic engagement alone cannot be the only cause of a pathway towards economic mobility for low-income individuals, however civic asset-building efforts should be seen as complements to other social programs for low-income individuals and families (Gamble and Prabhakar, 2005). The US Department of Labor also issued a letter in 2012 that active volunteering can help expand opportunities for folks who are unemployed (US Department of Labor, 2012).

Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) Model

According to Gretchen Ennis and Deborah West's journal article, "Exploring the Potential of Social Network Analysis in Asset-Based Community Development Practice and Research (2010)" strengths-based practices have become the choice for community work, especially with the model of "asset-based community development" (ABCD). ABCD practices can benefit from the integration of key concepts that stem from social network theory. "Internal looking" aspect of a strengths-based practice involves "locating, articulating, and building upon the strengths or assets of a community." These are used with the goal of assisting to find solutions for current problems based on currently available resources, including using past experiences as a pathway to navigate towards success (White and Epston, 1990). "External looking" of a strengths-based approach involves working to "recognise, understand, and at times, challenge, the social context or structures that negatively impact people and communities". However, sometimes using an external approach may appear to get "lost" in some strengths-based approaches to practice with individuals, groups, and communities (Ennis and West, 2010).

ABCD has four key principles: change must come from within the community; development must build upon the capacities and assets within the community; change should be relationship-driven, and change should be oriented towards sustainable community growth (Healy, 2006; Ennis and West, 2010). The ABCD model holds true to developing the positive assets of a community, rather than focusing on a communities "needs" or "deficits". In Ennis and West's 2010 article, assets are defined as a set of building blocks. "Primary building blocks" are known to be the assets that are already located within the community, which can be divided into those of individuals such as one's skills and abilities (McKnight and Kretzmann, 1996). "Secondary building blocks" are assets that are located within communities but are controlled from outside of the community. Some examples of this are schools, parks, and libraries (McKnight and Kretzmann, 1996). "Potential building blocks" are assets that "originate outside the neighbourhood, controlled by outsiders", such as access to social welfare (McKnight and Kretzmann, 1996).

The ABCD model uses a strengths-based approach to working with communities, where there is a large emphasis on building and strengthening social networks, so that assets and resources can be "mobilised to work towards positive change" (Ennis and West, 2010). The ABCD model uses interventions that can potentially impact various relationships that constitute a community. Relationships are what creates a community, and logically, "relationships are made for community development" (Ennis and West, 2010).

ABCD Model Within Education and Youth

The asset-based community development model (ABCD) has been widely used to map local assets and has also shifted towards addressing health inequities. However, understanding how ABCD enhances the level of participation for children, youth, and schools is currently being understood through a series of studies and research (Agdal et al., 2019). The building blocks of ABCD, as stated in the above section, starts from building communities from the insight out, and finding a path towards mobilizing assets that are already introduced and within the community. Research has shown that communities that mobilized their own internal assets, despite challenges and low incomes, believed that improvements could only come with the help of outside experts. However, based on Kretzmann and McKnight's research (1996), local

development would be more likely to succeed if it is "strength-based and focused on local capacities" rather than "deficit-driven and focused on needs." ABCD process can be defined by three characteristics

1. Citizen-led: local citizens map their resources and needs and lead the collaboration with outside partners
2. Relationship-oriented: There is a focus on building social networks
3. Asset-based: The process that focuses on strengths, resources, and assets

Within the context of asset-based frameworks towards high school youth, Roberts et al (1998), a pilot project was initiated by a junior high school and aimed to "discover, connect, and mobilize the assets of students, and to connect them with assets in the local community." Youth worked on projects to work on with community members, based on their own interests and assets. Not only were students able to meet the objectives, the project itself contributed to "increased self-esteem, leadership capabilities, sense of responsibility to the local community, critical thinking skills, including identifying challenges associated with community asset mapping, and the importance of teamwork."

Pillars of the ABCD Model

Asset-based community development responds to the dangers of "deficit views and disrespectful engagement by promoting an alternate approach: a framework for community development which insists on beginning with a clear commitment to discovering a community's capacities and assets" (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993). ABCD works to foster connections between strengths in order to address needs.

The first pillar of ABCD is asset-based, as the approach begins by identifying various assets in a community, often through in-person conversations with residents to build an asset map. These assets include local resources, such as businesses and libraries, cultural groups, and and can even affect groups of people who are framed in terms of their "deficits' ', such as "youth and the elderly".

ABCD's second pillar is also internally focused and internally motivated, meaning it highlights local definitions, creativity, and control. This means that "community residents have significant input into the nature and process of engagement activities, aligning with service-

learning's foundational Wingspread principle, which is "an effective program allows those with needs to define those needs" (Honnet and Poulsen, 1989).

The third pillar of ABCD is suggesting an emphasis on building relationships. This involves a personal investment and time spend on nurturing interpersonal connections, as well as efforts to foster stronger links between various groups and people.

As we continue to integrate asset-framing and asset-based approaches to work with youth, it is imperative to nurture these three pillars to build upon a strong foundation and correlation amongst all organizational leaders, stakeholders, and constituents a nonprofit organization serves in its work.

Section 3: Methods and Approaches

The purpose of this research is to get a better understanding of how inclusive and intentional language can drastically impact youth- and education-centered nonprofit's relationships with its constituents, including, but not limited to, the community it serves, donors, as well as internal staff. These ongoing discussions around asset-framing and asset-based language can contribute to how nonprofit organizations can use the power of intentional communication to change its historically known deficit-based narratives into positive, strengths-based attributes.

- Research Question:
  - How does asset-framing and asset-based language impact the work of a nonprofit organization who is serving young people in historically marginalized communities?
- Sub Question
  - How does asset-framing impact nonprofit relationships with major stakeholders?

Primary Data Collection

Primary data was collected from a series of six expert interviews with nonprofit leaders in education and youth-centered organizations. These interviews were semi-structured with five pre-chosen open-ended questions. Four of the interviewees were in C-level leadership, including a Chief Executive Officer, and three Executive Directors. Two interviewees were in senior leadership, including a Senior Director of Program and Director of Development. Five of the six expert interviews were conducted remotely 1 on 1 via Zoom video conferencing. One of the six expert interviews was done through email because we could not find a mutual time to connect over video conference.

The nonprofit organizations selected were based on my personal connection to the organization through previous volunteer experience, as well as its emphasis and focus on supporting youth within historically marginalized communities. The organizations selected were

Students Rising Above, Braven Bay Area, Breakthrough Silicon Valley, iMentor Bay Area, and Larkin Street Youth Services.

According to the websites of all the above organizations, Students Rising Above is a nonprofit organization dedicated to impacting the future through the cultivation of extraordinary youth. SRA invests in low-income, first-generation college students who have demonstrated a deep commitment to education and strength of character in overcoming the tremendous odds of poverty, homelessness and neglect. Braven Bay Area is a nonprofit organization whose mission is to empower promising, underrepresented young people – first-generation college students, students from low-income backgrounds, and students of color – with the skills, confident, experiences, and networks necessary to transition from college to strong first jobs, which lead to meaningful careers and lives of impact. Breakthrough Silicon Valley empowers young people from underserved communities to reach their full potential. Their multi-faceted six-year program launches low-income, first-generation students on the path to college through personalized academic advising and support, college counseling, and leadership development. iMentor works to build mentoring relationships that empower first-generation students to graduate high school, succeed in college, and achieve their ambitions. The mission of Larkin Street Youth Services is to create a continuum of services that inspires youth to move beyond the street through nurturing potential, promoting dignity, and support bold steps by all.

Secondary Data Collection

My secondary data collection is an examination of annual reports as the subject of my content analysis. Annual reports were chosen as the focus of the content analysis because they are easily accessible and most nonprofit organizations use annual reports to share a recap of the previous year to the public. Annual reports are also used to demonstrate a nonprofit organization's mission, vision, and values.

The content analysis examines ten annual reports from ten Bay Area based 501(c)3 nonprofit organizations focused on youth, youth empowerment, and education. The annual reports examined were the most recent publications found on the website, and were focused on

analyzing the "About Us" page, mission, vision, values, and understanding the type of work and constituents the nonprofit organization works with.

In addition to the five nonprofit organizations mentioned above in Primary Data Collection, the content analysis also includes five other nonprofit organizations: ScholarMatch, YearUp, CityYear, 826 Valencia, and Hidden Genius Project. According to its websites, ScholarMatch's mission is to support first-generation college students earn a bachelor's degree within five years. It provides individualized advising, targeted financial support, and career mentoring all the way to graduation. YearUp's mission is to close the Opportunity Divide by ensuring that young adults gain the skills, experiences, and support that will empower them to reach their potential through careers and higher education. 826 Valencia is dedicated to supporting under-resourced students ages six to eighteen with their creative and expository writing skills. Hidden Genius Project is a nonprofit organization that trains and mentors Black male youth in technology creation, entrepreneurship, and leadership skills to transform their lives and communities.

Section 4. Data Analysis

Interview Summary

This section includes a summary of six semi-structured interviews, as well as a brief description of the conversation and notes taken during the conversation. These summaries are the reflections and opinions of each individual, not my own. Each individual has their own personal experiences regarding asset-framing and intentional communication through asset-based language.

After the following summaries, there is a section on common themes, ideas, and conclusions. For a list of prepared interview questions, see Appendix A.

Interview #1: Elizabeth Devaney, Chief Executive Officer of Students Rising Above

This interview was conducted via Zoom video conferencing with Elizabeth Devaney, Chief Executive Officer of Students Rising Above. SRA was built somewhat organically over twenty years and it had made huge gains in its capacity to serve students who were economically marginalized. However, what Devaney stated is that, unless there is "explicit attention paid to the diversity and inclusion of leadership who are BIPOC, what will be legitimated is the white middle class perspective."

SRA previously used the "patriarchal benevolent framing of students" -- at its worst, it can appear as pandering to donors who want to feel an emotional response in order to give. There were episodes of practicing poverty tourism, where donors would take a trip to the "other side of the tracks" to see the difficulties students were facing and to learn about the startling and incredibly difficult situations of students. There was not a recognition or an acknowledgement of the re-traumatization that was happening to students who were reliving those stories, or that students were being cast typecast as victims of trauma.

The staff at SRA immediately understood that there needed to be a change of how they speak about their students, but also how students speak for themselves. SRA has begun to use a pragmatic model that is focused on understanding the strengths, the assets, the capacities, and potential of the students and use that as an inspiration for their donors. This still allows donors to

have an emotional engagement, but it is built upon the inspiration that donors feel when they see how SRA students have demonstrated the capacity to rebuild, prove resilience, persistence, and most important skills and strengths.

Using this framework and tying an emotional response that highlights the resiliency and inspiration each student has is changing the way SRA works with donors and students themselves.

Interview #2: Diana Phuong, Executive Director of Braven Bay Area

This interview was conducted via Zoom video conferencing with Diana Phuong, the Executive Director of Braven Bay Area. Phuong's experience with asset-framing and asset-based language stems from her experience in the K-12 education space and has been a part of her work for many years. Phuong shared that Braven provides a cohort model for their students because it is important for students to get peer to peer feedback, build their work routines, and have support when they're willing to take risks, learning and failing with each other in a safe, controlled environment.

Students are encouraged to talk about their lives and dive into all of their identity markers, how they go to where they are and share where they want to go after college and beyond. Asset-framing can start from how students talk about themselves and even transition into how others talk about them. It is important for Phuong that students reframe how they tell their story in an asset-based way. Because when they go into these job interviews, they might get the question -- "tell me about yourself". This doesn't necessarily need to be a "sob story", but it is important to share the realities of one's life, the obstacles they've faced, but more importantly how they have overcome these challenges. Simply put, for students themselves, it's building confidence for them. Ensuring that they feel empowered to share their story and that they feel like they can achieve what they set their minds to.

Interview #3: John Hiester, Executive Director of Breakthrough Silicon Valley

This interview was conducted via Zoom video conferencing with John Hiester, Executive Director of Breakthrough Silicon Valley. Hiester notes that philanthropy has a long way to go when it comes to asset-framing and intentionally using asset-based language. At Breakthrough

Silicon Valley (BTSV), Hiester and BTSV's board of directors are actively having conversations on how to frame students and families in a way that "honors them and focuses on their strengths." Hiester shares that nonprofit organizations are used to using language like "low-income families", "low-income students", "urban youth", "marginalized youth", and "disconnected youth". A lot of this languages comes from foundations and donors. He shares that it is important to push back on this framing and start with describing students and families positively, because that's where it should always start. Sometimes funders want to identify people by the problems they face or the mistakes people have made, but starting with a deficit-focused lens can negatively impact the perception of he communities nonprofit organizations serve.

One of the students in BTSV was interviewed by the San Jose Mercury News. Hiester referenced this article in our interview discussion. The article was looking at how graduating high school seniors are viewing college post-pandemic and highlighting the differences in how students navigate the college process. Lisette Chavez, a rising high school senior, said that "hearing her teachers talk about her class falling behind academically, has caused her to adjust her expectations of college." Hiester is acutely aware of how language impacts how students feel about themselves, as well as their own future opportunities. Within BTSV, Hiester wants to ensure that when talking about students and families, it is important to share that they are people first. Hiester highlights that BTSV is currently working on not using terms like "low-income individuals." He understands that they are individuals first and that they are not defined by their economic status or mobility. Hiester also shares that equipping student with tools to unpack this language and to push back on it will ultimately be what can help shape nonprofit organizations with asset-framing and asset-based language.

In terms of fundraising, donor-centric fundraising has been around for a long time. Historically, "donors are made to seem like the hero of the story", however, "the "donor isn't always the hero; the donor is someone who invests in the community to try to create equity where isn't, or to try to create justice where there isn't. Donors are not the hero of the story, but they can be part of the solution." Reframing this narrative can also contribute to move into a more community-centric fundraising model.

One of the initiatives that BTSV has implemented regarding asset-based language was a rework of its grant language. BTSV staff members put up key pieces of their grant language on a wall and "poked holes in it" by speaking up when things don't feel right in the language, as well as highlight things that "feel really good." Some of these examples were terms they don't like, terms they will use, and agreements around them. Asset-based languages and asset-frameworks require a lot of learning, but also a lot of unlearning. Hiester also suggests that bringing in consultants might work, but what can be even more powerful is to have conversations with young people to understand their perspectives and the internalization of how language can affect everyone.

Interview #4: Denice Kelley, Interim Executive Director of iMentor Bay Area

This interview was conducted via Zoom video conferencing with Denice Kelley, Interim Executive Director of iMentor Bay Area. Kelley notes that the history of philanthropy is grounded in white saviorism. She shares that it is "difficult to untangle the work that we're doing from the approach of the benevolent donor". This narrative is how we've come to understand how we interact with each other and understand our social position. As nonprofit leaders, there is a lot of work we are trying to undo. Although the historical roots of philanthropy has always had the intention of being good and positive, it is important to also realize that is is wrapped up in "white supremacy, culture, and racism."

Kelley also goes on to note that her assumption about nonprofit leaders is that they want to get this work done. They want folks to be impacted, have more choices, and less suffering. She shares an analogy of Monster's Inc. In Kelley's opinion, Monster's Inc is an incredible example around the power of asset-framing. When [they] scared everybody, they were able to get some energy from it. That fear got people to move a little bit. However, when folks were able to get people to laugh and have joy, the amount of abundance and excitement that came out of it was incredible. What research has shown and evidence-based practice has shown is that is the root of strengths-based work. Kelley describes it as "we flourish underneath it, we perform, we work harder, smarter, more creatively. We're able to work across differences that could often lead to challenges, but instead lead to opportunities."

Kelley's advice to nonprofit leaders who are looking to enact change at this level is to examine the ways they may have gotten their positions of power because of deficit-framing. She also adds that it is important to ask ourselves if we use asset-framing too. "How do we use it in order to get us motivated, or motivate our staff or get to those outcomes? And we need to ask ourselves if it is getting us what we want? Is it getting to that intention and helping us reach our mission? If it's not, look at the evidence, look at what is being seen. See how people change, grow motivated, get to outcomes. We have the ability to shift and change and that it was so possible and like amazing about this is that for all of these leaders, they do have the capability to do this and more."

Interview #5: Clare Armbruster, Director of Development of Larkin Street Youth Services

This interview was conducted via Zoom video conferencing with Clare Armbruster, Director of Development of Larkin Street Youth Services. Armbruster shares that having youth voice and agency is a pillar within her work at Larkin Street. It is important to embed positive messaging throughout her work, especially as we share stories out with people. By sharing stories with a deficit-based approach, it means that we are telling stories and could possibly retraumatize people in the process. Oftentimes, people are told that we are tackling such big, complex problems that are hard to solve. However, if you break down the story a little bit, you can actually try to get donors to see and invest in community outcomes.

Getting donors to see that if they are not a part of this movement and shift with asset-framing can be beneficial in the long-term. Having donors think "if I don't support this, what is society losing? If we don't do this, where will this potential go? Each young person who walks int our doors has innumerable things that they could be doing and want to be doing. So really, this is a less to society if we do not do anything about it. This is a loss to our future educators, our future artists, our future business leaders, etc. That is what connects all of us to our shared humanity." If we are not investing in the potential of the community, what other things can we be losing?

Asset-based narratives also contribute to how individuals introduce themselves. Armbruster shares that when we are able to get to that fundamental level of the description of the individual, that can start the movement. People are not defined by their experiences.

Interview #6: Christine Rabbitt, Senior Director of Program of iMentor Bay Area

  This interview was conducted via email with Christine Rabbitt, Senior Director of Program of iMentor Bay Area. Rabbitt's first experience with asset-based language happened during her undergraduate career as a student at New York University, when she was interning at a nonprofit called Upward Bound, which was an organization focused on supporting under-credited high school youth navigate their academics and apply to college. She saw how asset-based language was used in how teachers communicated with their students. Rabbitt saw that leaning more on how students' strengths often encouraged them to take risks and challenge themselves.

  Two of iMentor's organizational values are he belief in human potential and educational opportunities and she sees this as the foundation of how iMentor incorporates a strengths-based approach in the work they do with young people and volunteers. By recognizing that mentees are on various academic achievement levels, iMentor aims to create a welcoming and inclusive classroom environment where they are able to speak to the multiple types of post-secondary pathways (not just college), and keep language positive to ensure that all members of the classroom are seen (i.e. financial aid applications rather than just FAFSA to ensure undocumented students know that they have options, as well).

  Using asset-based language has improved the program experience for all stakeholders. "Mentees feel both seen and heard by our inclusion, while our volunteers have a better understanding of their mentor – mean to be a thought-partner, champion, connector, etc. rather than authoritative figure." Internal to iMentor, the Strengths-Finder assessment has been used to create inclusive leadership trainings and has personally helped her apply an asset-based approach to staff. As a manager, it is important for her to recognize staff members' strengths, talking about them with teammates, and shifting work to better reflect staff members' strengths has led to increased role satisfaction, and ultimately, program impact.

Content Analysis

  The objective of this content analysis is to examine common themes across ten annual reports from ten Bay Area 501(c)3 nonprofit organizations that are focused on youth, youth empowerment, and education. This analysis pulls the most recent annual reports of each

organization found on the website, and dives into examples of asset-based and deficit-based language in the "About Us" section, mission, vision, and values. In the table below, I will share my key findings and highlight any results that may seem relevant to this topic and my research questions. The following are links to the ten annual reports I used in my analysis. Organizations are listed in alphabetical order.

1. [Braven Bay Area (2020)](#)
2. [Breakthrough Silicon Valley (2018)](#)
3. [CityYear (2020)](#)
4. [Hidden Genius Project (2020)](#)
5. [iMentor (2020)](#)
6. [Larkin Street Youth Services (2020)](#)
7. [ScholarMatch (2020)](#)
8. [Students Rising Above (2020)](#)
9. [Year Up (2020)](#)
10. [826 Valencia (2020)](#)

Content Analysis Key Findings

I focused the first portion of my content analysis on understanding the annual reports of the ten nonprofit organizations. I examined the types of demographic information the annual reports highlighted. As said by Elizabeth Devaney in our interview, "people acknowledge what they care about." 7 of the 10 annual reports shared demographics of the students and youth it serves. Most notably, 5 of the 10 annual reports highlighted the percentage of students/youth are "people of color", "students of color", "race/ethnicity", or "BIPOC". 5 of the annual reports recorded information centered on economic mobility and percentage of students/youth who come from "low-income" backgrounds or have "free or reduced-price lunch." 3 of the 10 annual reports highlighted the percentage of students/youth who are first-generation college students.

Table 1: Reported Demographic Information in Annual Reports

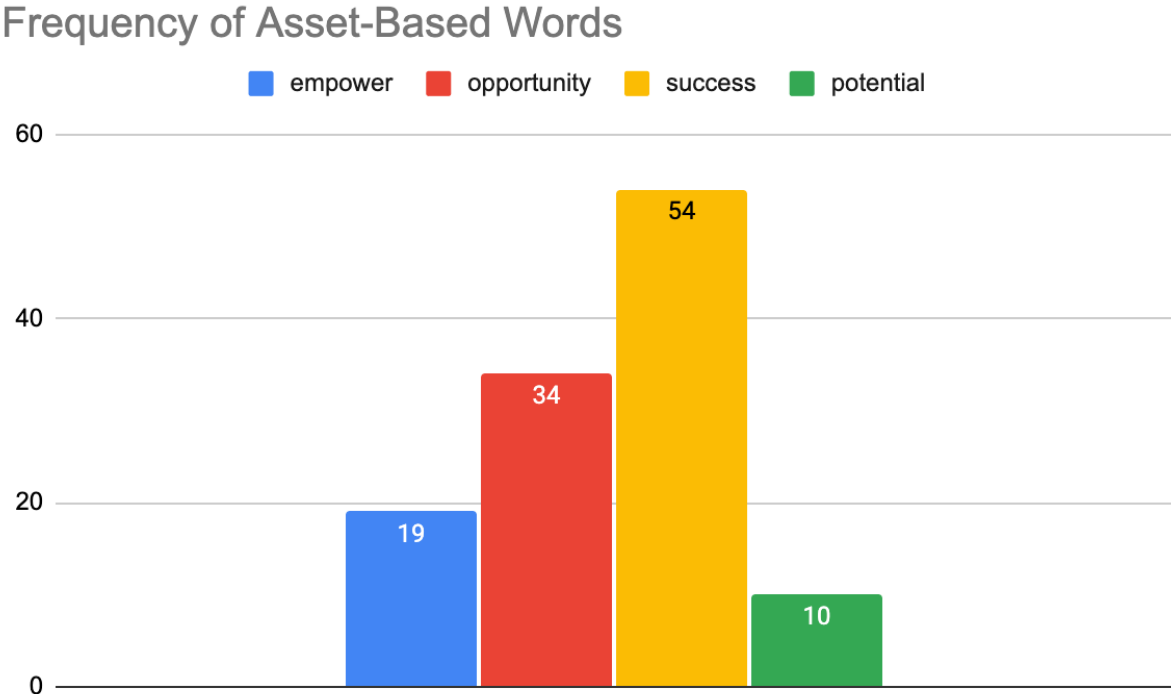|	Is Demographic Information Shared in the Annual Report?	Type of Demographic Information Highlighted
Braven Bay Area	Yes	% of people of color, % of first-generation college students, % of those coming from a "low-income background"
Breakthrough Silicon Valley	Yes	% of first-generation college students, % receiving free or reduced-price lunch, % live in a household where English is not the primary language
CityYear	Yes	% of students in partner schools are students of color, % eligible for free or reduced-price lunch
Hidden Genius Project	No	N/A
iMentor	Yes	% of students of color, % eligible for free or reduced lunch, % first-generation college students
Larkin Street Youth Services	Yes	% of place of birth, % of age, % of race/ethnicity, % of LGBTQ+ identity
ScholarMatch	Yes	% first-generation & low-income combined
Students Rising Above	No	N/A
Year Up	Yes	% BIPOC representation, % women, % men
826 Valencia	No	N/A

For the second portion of my content analysis, I analyzed the frequency of asset-based words that were present in the ten annual reports I examined. I chose to focus on four keywords: empower, opportunity, success, and potential. The word "success" was used in 54 instances across all ten annual reports, yielding it as the highest frequency asset-based word. The second-leading word used was "opportunity", which was written 34 times across all of the annual reports. The annual report that uses the most asset-based words, based on the small sample size I have taken, is Students Rising Above. Students Rising Above uses 22 asset-based words across its annual report. Following closely afterward is Braven with 21 asset-based words, as well as iMentor with 21 asset-based words, as well. Although this is a small sample size of the given data based on four asset-based words, it is interesting to see which annual reports did not have much asset-based words in its vocabulary. Hidden Genius Project used 3 asset-based words in its annual report. Following closely, both City Year and Larkin Street Youth Services used a total of 4 asset-based words in its entire annual report.

Table 2: Frequency of Asset-Based Words Used in Annual Reports

	empower	opportunity	success	potential	Total
Braven	5	10	6	0	21
BTSV	1	1	7	1	10
City Year	0	1	3	0	4
HGP	1	0	2	0	3
iMentor	4	4	11	2	21
LSYS	1	2	1	0	4
ScholarMatch	1	4	2	2	9
SRA	2	5	12	3	22

YearUp	2	3	5	2	12
826 Valencia	2	4	5	0	11
Total	**19**	**34**	**54**	**10**	**--**

Figure 1: Frequency of Asset-Based Words Used in Annual Reports

Source: Author's creation. Elaborated from Sarah Heraldo, 2021.

As can be inferred from the above table, the asset-based word "success" was used most frequently across all annual reports. It also appeared more than 5x as much as the word "potential". "Potential" showed up across all ten annual reports a mere 10 times, and was most

frequently used in the Students Rising Above 2020 annual report. Braven, City Year, Hidden Genius Project, Larkin Street Youth Services, and 826 Valencia did not use "potential" at all in its annual reports. Conversely, "success" was used the most times in Students Rising Above's annual report, compared to only once in Larkin Street Youth Service's annual report.

Section 5: Implications and Recommendations

After a deep dive analysis of literature on asset-framing and asset-based language, six expert interviews, and content analysis on ten annual reports, I was able to dissect a few common themes and takeaways:

1. *We can honor and respect our communities without painting them in a negative light and defining people by their circumstances.*

   Highlighting people by their strengths and aspirations instead of defining them by what is considered "wrong" or "challenging", can actually uplift communities and create a positive impact. It is important to note that we are individuals first and that we are not defined by our circumstances. Framing language in this way can also make great strides in how others also talk about themselves and ideally, help to build confidence in their own skills.

2. *Keeping ourselves accountable is imperative to identifying and eliminating this language from our own vocabulary.*

   Language is how humans communicate, and because of how prevalent deficit-based language is in the nonprofit space, it is important for us, as nonprofit leaders, to be intentional in our communication. This means to keep ourselves accountable by working to purposefully identify and work to erase any and all deficit-based language from our vocabulary. This includes in the vocabulary of other staff members, educating donors and volunteers, and also having conversations with the people themselves.

3. *Intentionally choosing positive language challenges us to communicate more accurately* without falling back on stereotypes that perpetuate harmful misinformation or view others in a deficit pint of view.

Understanding and learning how positive language can affect relationships across nonprofit organizations is the first step to ensure that we are not continuing to work against the positive narrative we are trying to build. By choosing our language purposefully and intentionally.

My recommendations to continue building an asset-based language framework in a nonprofit organization begins with the following three points:

1. *Unlearning, learning, and relearning*

   Educate staff members, donors, volunteers, and all primary stakeholders about the importance of changing the narrative and stories of the populations the nonprofit serves. This can be done through conversations, workshops, and creating open and honest dialogue between everyone. Understandably, it is difficult to unlearn a lot of the language that has been passed down, particularly language that paints a deficit point-of-view, but that is where the learning and relearning begin.

2. *Don't try to boil the ocean*

   Change takes time. Unpacking deficit language piece by piece will be more beneficial than trying to make all changes at once. It is imperative to decide what is most important to the organization. Is it to dive into its mission, vision, values? Is it to update the language on the website because it is external facing? Does it start with internal trainings? Does it start with poking holes in one's grant language? Once where to begin is decided, the rest can move slowly but surely from there.

3. *Develop authentic relationships with stakeholders*

   Invest in donors and community members that align with the mission of the organization

and are also invested in supporting the community's strengths and aspirations. Donors and volunteers want to help the community, whether that be by giving time or by giving money. Building authentic and real relationships with these major stakeholders and share the aspiration and potential successes community members have will allow for a more truly invested community and support group.

Section 6: Conclusion

We can't deny that language has profound impacts on how we communicate with each other. As nonprofit leaders, it is our responsibility to hold our organizations to a standard where inclusive and intentional language is used positively throughout the organization. As noted many times throughout this capstone project, a deficit-based approach has been used time and time again by nonprofit organizations. Some may argue that is is easier to build an emotional connection if the narrative of a story is centered on "helping the poor" or "supporting the impoverished". However, it is up to us, nonprofit leaders, to work towards building an organization that is centered on strengths of the community, of the resilience we have, and of our potential and aspirations. It is our responsibility to contribute to changing the deficit-based narrative in which our organizations may currently operate, and work towards building stories that uplift our communities.

Through this research, I have learned that it is possible to transform the public perception of nonprofit organizations without having to compromise relationships with major stakeholders, such as donors, staff, volunteers, and beyond. We still have the opportunity to create authentic and meaningful partnerships without having to pander to poverty. Investing in relationships that work to support the community will be beneficial in the long run. There is a long road ahead of us. Change does not happen overnight. We must be committed to unlearning the negative language we already use and remain committed to learning and relearning how we can shift perceptions of our communities through stories of strength.

However, to enact real change, there needs to be a level of buy-in from all levels of the nonprofit organization, ranging from staff to executive leadership to board members. All stakeholders need to be committed to making the necessary changes to continue building stories of strength and resilience. From here, cross-functional stakeholders, such as volunteers and donors can also be positively affected by the work we are doing. We can't be doing this important work alone. It requires everyone to participate purposefully to shift narratives and change hearts and minds around this topic. Together, we are able to create meaningful exchanges with each other.

Limitations and Further Research

My research within this topic is limited in scope compared to the overall subject of intentional communication, asset-framing, and asset-based language. My main focus is to dig deep into small nuggets of information, such as shifting narratives and perceptions, impacts on major stakeholders, as well as the importance of defining individuals first before their circumstances. I also acknowledge that many people area already doing amazing work as they shift the perceptions within their own organizations, particularly the folks I have spoken with in my expert interviews.

If I had the opportunity to continue this project with additional resources, my research would go beyond what is of this capstone today. I would like to gather more information and literature review on the topic of language, its effects on our communities, and how deficit-framing and donor-centric fundraising stem from white saviorism in the philanthropy space. I would also like to interview more experts in this field and send out a survey to gather more quantitative data. Lastly, I would like to address how nonprofits can turn this asset-framing ideals into actual practice as they continue to grow as organizations.

My research in this capstone project is a small drop in the ocean compared to the vastness of this topic, but I hope my contribution to this topic is meaningful and can help support the next generation of nonprofit leaders.

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Appendix A: Interview Questions for Semi-Structured Interviews

This is a list of the prepared interview questions I used during each expert interview. However, all interviews were structured as a conversation, so the list of questions was used as a guide. Since each interview was structured as a conversation, these questions were left open-ended, and the interviews touched on a variety of topics.

Interview questions:
1. When did you first hear about asset-based language and asset-framing?
2. How is asset-based language and framing actively used in your organization?
3. How has asset-based language influenced your relationships with your primary stakeholders: the students/community you serve, donors, among staff?
4. How does asset-framing impact the work of a nonprofit organization who is serving youth in historically marginalized communities?
5. How do nonprofit organizations transition asset-based framing ideals into actual practice?
6. If you had to give one piece of advice to nonprofit leaders who are looking to become more intentional in their strengths-based journey, what would it be?

Follow-up points of interest:
1. Donor-centric fundraising versus community-centric fundraising
2. Deficit language and poverty tourism
3. White saviorism
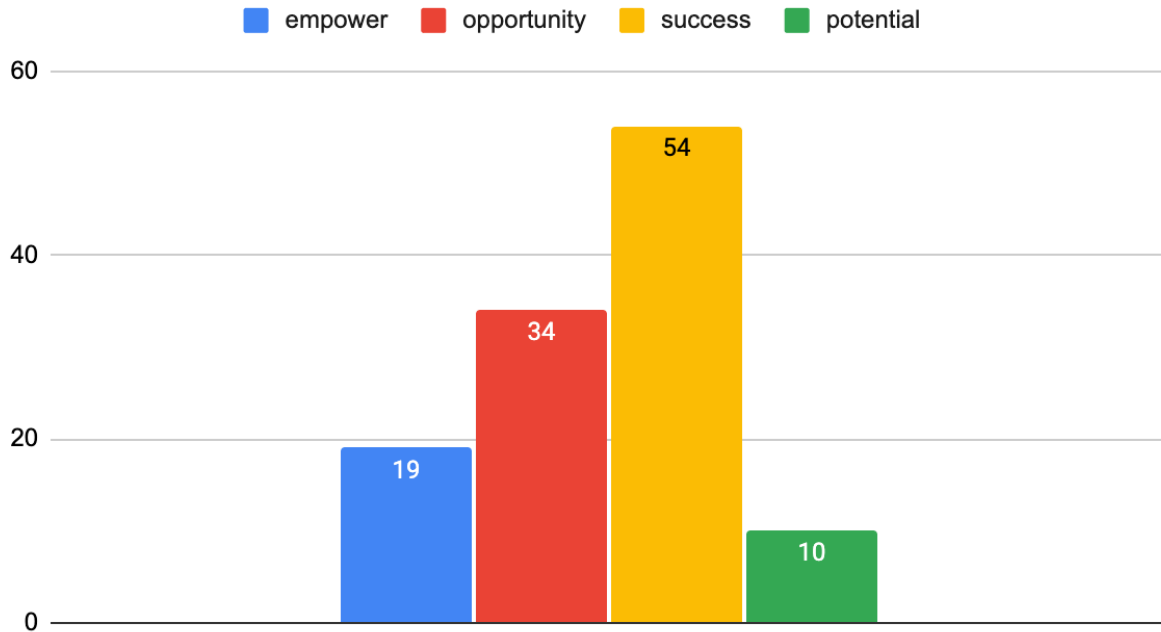4. Importance of intentional language

Appendix B: Content Analysis

Table 2: Frequency of Asset-Based Words Used in Annual Reports

	empower	opportunity	success	potential	Total
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Total	**19**	**34**	**54**	**10**	--

Figure 1: Frequency of Asset-Based Words Used in Annual Reports

Frequency of Asset-Based Words

empower   opportunity   success   potential

Author's Bio

Sarah Heraldo is the Executive Director of Read Write Discover, a California nonprofit organization dedicated to increasing access to free, summer literacy tutoring opportunities to K-8 grade students in the San Francisco Bay Area. Sarah received her Bachelor's degree from San Francisco State University in Child and Adolescent Development with a School Age Concentration. She is also currently pursuing her Master's Degree from University of San Francisco in Nonprofit Administration.

Sarah has nearly a decade of experience working in various educational capacities (nonprofits, educational community programs, public schools, private schools, and education technology companies). She currently serves as a Board Member and Education & Training Chair for a national mental health nonprofit organization called the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention. She also is a Young Executive Board member for the Bay Area chapter of a national educational nonprofit organization called iMentor.

Sarah also currently works for Course Hero, an education technology company, as a Recruiting Operations Program Manager. Due to her varying experiences within different industries, Sarah is skilled in board governance, fundraising and development, and cares deeply about diversity, equity, and inclusion.