



GREATER TEXAS FOUNDATION

# What does **Asset-Based Framing** Look Like in Practice?



# Practical Examples and Probing Questions

Have you heard the term “asset-based framing” or “asset-based approaches”? Have you wondered how to connect this principle to your work in education?

This brief offers a primer on asset-based approaches that enhance student outcomes. It poses **four questions** your organization can ask itself to facilitate asset-based approaches in your work and includes **two profiles** of our grantee partner organizations who are effectively utilizing asset-based approaches to support student success.

*“How do we create equitable outcomes for all members of our community? We can start by defining people by their aspirations, not their challenges.”*

-Trabian Shorters

Greater Texas Foundation supports the efforts of secondary and postsecondary education systems to effectively serve students from all backgrounds to complete postsecondary credentials. When working with students who have historically been underrepresented in higher education, it can be easy to approach the work from a deficit mindset, defining students by the challenges they face.

Doing so, however, places focus on things individuals lack, rather than structural inequities that create disparities in educational attainment. Asset-based approaches, on the other hand, center people and their strengths, abilities, and aspirations regardless of their starting point.



# What is an Asset-Based Approach?

The asset-based framework originated as an approach to more effectively serve students earning low scores on standardized tests. Rather than focusing on what was wrong with students' work, educators focused their interventions on identifying and leveraging students' strengths. This helped students avoid internalizing negative feedback as a reflection of their inherent intelligence and helped them better master the material.<sup>1</sup>

Longstanding psycho-social research affirms that asset-based approaches can be effective for our most vulnerable student populations.<sup>2</sup> As such, many organizations outside of the classroom are using asset-based approaches to address social issues by empowering the people and communities they aim to serve and centering their aspirations, talents and resources in the work, rather than the challenges they face.

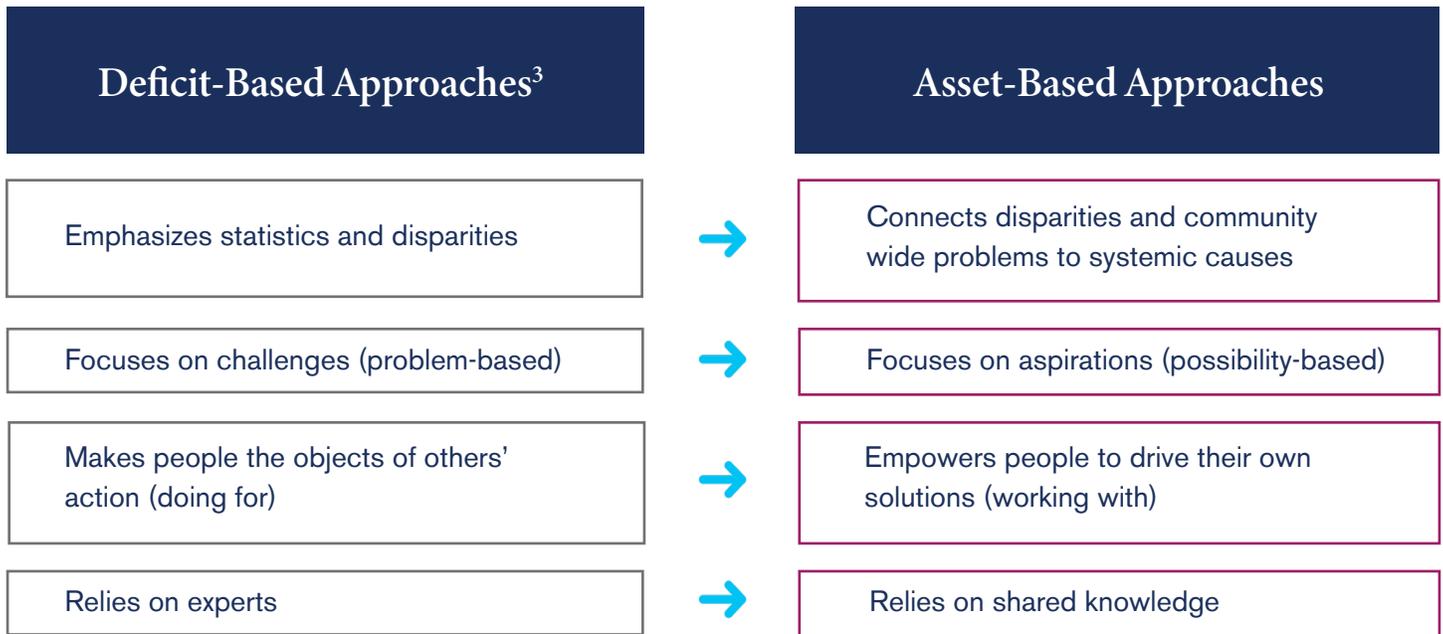
Social entrepreneur Trabian Shorters developed a cognitive framework called "Asset-Framing for Equity" that applies asset-based approaches to philanthropy, journalism, and social impact networks. His thought leadership has been a catalyst for changing the narrative around the populations social service organizations aim to serve and moving the field toward asset-based mindsets. To learn more about this work, please visit [bmecommunity.org](http://bmecommunity.org).

<sup>1</sup>[The Power of Asset-based Language](#)

<sup>2</sup>[Wise Interventions: Psychological Remedies for Social and Personal Problems](#)



# SHIFTING THE APPROACH



Key to moving toward asset-based approaches is shifting the language and narrative used to describe the people and communities we aim to serve. Using terms such as “opportunity youth” rather than terms like “dropout” recognizes students’ aspirations and creates space to authentically engage them in creating solutions. Calling **institutions** “not student ready” rather than calling **students** “not college ready” is asset-based framing that allows changemakers to see the systemic barriers that prevent students from accessing and succeeding in postsecondary and to focus on systems change.

## Resources

For more information on the importance of **narratives**, see [this series of short videos](#) from The Skillman Foundation’s interview with Asset-Based Framework consultant, Trabian Shorters.

And for suggestions for **funders** on how to utilize asset-based frameworks in describing your work, see [this blog post](#) from Workforce Matters Funders Network.

<sup>3</sup>Adapted from [The SLCE Future Directions Project](#)

# QUESTIONS FOR YOUR ORGANIZATION

As organizations reflect on the importance of asset-based approaches, here are some questions to consider:

How can we describe our work using asset-based language? Are there words or phrases we use that emphasize what individuals or populations lack? Is there a better way to phrase or provide context that focuses on the aspirations and assets of the individuals we hope to serve?

Do we rely on expertise found within the communities we hope to serve?

Do we look for opportunities to amplify and empower student voices?

Do we understand the systemic causes of disparities in educational access and attainment? Do we focus our efforts on making systems more equitable?



# Building from Language to Action: A Showcase

Asset-based communication is an important first step toward powerful, practical solutions to systemic challenges.

Following are **two profiles** of Greater Texas Foundation grantees effectively using asset-based approaches to support students to success. Each case study describes how the organization is modeling asset-based approaches in their work.



# Partner Profile

## ASPEN OPPORTUNITY YOUTH COLLABORATIVE

*“Shifting the locus of responsibility from the young person to the system is the crux of this work”*

-Dr. Hannah Gourgey, Senior Fellow, Opportunity Youth Forum, Aspen Institute

### The Project: Innovation Fund

With seed funding from Greater Texas Foundation, The Aspen Opportunity Youth Forum (OYF) and Texas Opportunity Youth Network (TOYN) launched an Innovation Fund to increase community and program expertise, leverage state policy and public/private funding partnerships, and build sustainable and scalable opportunity youth pathways statewide. Across the state, communities often have strong programming for opportunity youth, largely serving small numbers through private philanthropy. The fund will enable participant programs to plan, pilot, and launch programs that **greatly increase the number of young people participating in sustainable programs.**



# The Approach

OYF Innovation Fund



## CONNECTS DISPARITIES TO SYSTEMIC CAUSES

How data is presented and what language is used is critically important to asset framing. The Aspen Institute and leaders of the Texas Opportunity Youth Network have been intentional in describing the disparate outcomes opportunity youth face as a consequence of broken systems, and not as a result of individual deficits. Director of the Texas Opportunity Youth Network, Hannah Gourgey, explained this point. She said, “How you label matters greatly. With the term ‘high school dropout,’ the locus of responsibility is on the student. If we instead say that the schools or the education systems led to non-completion for these populations, the locus of responsibility shifts from just the young person to include the system.”





## FOCUSES ON ASPIRATIONS

Central to the Aspen Institute's work with the Texas Opportunity Youth Network is their emphasis on belonging, purpose, meaning making, and well-being. From their overview statement:

*“Time and again youth and young adults (Y/YA) tell us, ‘I am more than the worst thing that ever happened to me.’ In response, we propose to support development of innovative well-being and healing measures developed by Y/YA of color that incorporate their lived experiences through a participatory action research process.”*

The project seeks to develop measures of well-being and provide a framework for investing in the social, emotional, and physical well-being of opportunity youth. Data gathered will provide end-users valuable information about the strengths and needs of Y/YA of color in their community, including examples of well-being provided by the youth themselves. For more information on the project, visit [Youth and Young Adult Wellbeing Project](#).

In addition to the Wellbeing Measure Project, TOYN emphasized the importance of asset-based approaches within the Request for Proposals for the Innovation Fund, in which organizations were asked to specify how their programming promoted a sense of belonging and encouraged well-being.

*Proposal Question from Texas Opportunity Youth Network Innovation Fund Request for Proposal:*

*Inclusion of Positive Youth Programming Components*

Describe the specific program features that will foster a sense of belonging, encourage participants to develop their sense of purpose, provide participants with strategies to make meaning from their life experiences, and cultivate practices to promote well-being.





## EMPOWERS PEOPLE TO DRIVE THEIR OWN SOLUTIONS

The Innovation Fund gives grants and technical assistance to build capacity within exemplary community organizations working to support opportunity youth. Communities applying for the Innovation Fund proposed projects based on the **needs identified through their local partnerships**, such as expanding wraparound supports for opportunity youth, integrating young adults with lived experiences as OY to help re-engagement strategies, and prioritizing particularly vulnerable populations such as justice-involved or youth aging out of foster care.



## RELIES ON SHARED KNOWLEDGE

Asset-based approaches importantly center the knowledge and ideas of people with lived experience in the work. The Texas Opportunity Youth Network places an intentional focus on including and engaging opportunity youth. Innovation Fund RFP respondents were asked to describe how they engage opportunity youth in identifying systemic barriers and addressing them. Many communities shared that they had **youth leadership councils** to actively participate in the process. Many of these youth councils are paid leadership opportunities for the participants. Others shared that they engage youth with lived experience in **focus groups** to solicit direct feedback on a particular project. Some organizations have made efforts to hire **staff with lived experience** to tap into their personal expertise.

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## About Aspen Opportunity Youth Collaborative

In 2013, the Forum for Community Solutions (FCS), a program of the Aspen Institute, launched the Opportunity Youth Incentive Fund, now called the Opportunity Youth Forum (OYF), as part of its vision to build a future where communities create their own vibrant and lasting solutions to the social and economic problems that they face, in pursuit of a more just and equitable society. OYF supports communities to come together to expand mobility, eliminate systemic barriers, and create their own solutions to their most pressing challenges.

The OYF is mobilizing a network of 30+ urban, rural, and tribal communities in their efforts to achieve better outcomes in education and employment for 660,000 opportunity youth (OY).

The OYF launched the **Texas OY Network (TOYN)** to continue in this model of adding value to participating communities, building awareness, capacity and shared lessons learned that can be leveraged into strong programming and a platform for equitable systemic change throughout the state.

For more information in the Opportunity Youth Forum, read this article in the [Stanford Social Innovation Review](#).

# Results

The Innovation Fund has awarded planning grants to ten communities to develop projects to serve opportunity youth effectively and sustainably. Although the development of these projects are still underway, the RFP process successfully demonstrated the benefits of an asset-based approach. Grants awarded through the Innovation Fund will support the needs and vision identified by community organizations and opportunity youth themselves.



# Partner Profile

## YOUNG INVINCIBLES

*“Focus on the system. Young people want to be part of changing the system. Make sure they are co-creating and leading.”*

-Aurora Harris, Southern Regional Director, Young Invincibles

### The Project:

## Women and Parents in the Texas Workforce: Building a Path to Apprenticeship

Apprenticeships can be a critical pathway to a living wage career in many industries. However, women and mothers are often underrepresented among apprentices. With support from Greater Texas Foundation, Young Invincibles conducted a study to better understand the intersection of gender, parenting status, and apprenticeship opportunities in Texas. Young Invincibles implemented an asset-based approach to the research, centering the process on the stories of young women and mothers. In addition to conducting secondary research into the landscape of apprenticeship opportunities in Texas, Young Invincibles used a survey of young people to understand their knowledge of and experience with apprenticeship programs. They then created the Youth Apprenticeship Council, composed of twelve young women who had engaged in an apprenticeship program, to dig deeper into their experiences and generate recommendations. Their work resulted in a widely-distributed report with specific policy recommendations.

# The Approach

Young Invincibles



## CONNECTS DISPARITIES TO SYSTEMIC CAUSES

Asset-based framing doesn't ignore challenges and barriers a particular group may face. Rather, asset-framing recognizes those challenges and connects them to systemic causes. The Young Invincible's Apprenticeship Report provides strong examples of this:

There are gender and racial inequities in apprenticeship access.

**In Texas, only 9.9 percent of registered apprentices are women.**

The gender representation gap mirrors national trends, where only 12.5% of registered apprentices in the United States are women.



Describes disparities for women's participation in apprenticeship programs.

**Women also navigate gender-specific workforce barriers, including** student debt, decreased workforce participation amidst the pandemic, likelihood of lower wages, and a gender pay gap—the combination of which many refer to as a “she-cession.”



Points to systemic barriers in place for women that affect their access to and participation in apprenticeships.

**The pandemic had a devastating career impact on working mothers.** Mothers are more likely to work in roles impacted by the pandemic, such as the service industry, and they are more likely to tend to childcare and household chores.



Explains how constructed gender norms affect mothers and how this impacts participation in the workforce.



## FOCUSES ON ASPIRATIONS

Young Invincibles utilized the method of journey mapping to center the lived experience and aspirations of young people in their research. Typically used in the business world to understand client needs, journey maps create a visual representation of the process an individual goes through to accomplish a particular goal. In a similar way, **social service organizations use journey mapping to understand individuals' goals and how they navigate systems to accomplish those goals.**

### JOURNEY MAP PROMPT PROVIDED TO YOUTH APPRENTICESHIP COUNCIL

Young Invincibles engaged members of their Youth Apprenticeship Council in a journey mapping exercise to understand their aspirations, their experiences with the apprenticeship program, and their long-term goals. These journey maps were shared and discussed as a council and used to frame the report and recommendations.





## EMPOWERS PEOPLE TO DRIVE THEIR OWN SOLUTIONS

The Youth Apprenticeship Council was a key driver in producing the final report and creating recommendations. The council was a six-month paid opportunity for twelve young women to shape recommendations to make apprenticeships more accessible and equitable for young people, women, and mothers. The council worked with Young Invincible staff to identify shared challenges and barriers in the school/apprenticeship to workforce pipeline and then craft solutions to make apprenticeships more widely known and available.



## RELIES ON SHARED KNOWLEDGE

Young Invincibles took a very intentional approach to data collection that involved many different partners and highlighted the availability of apprenticeships from differing perspectives. The research team **interviewed over 20 organizations** involved in apprenticeship opportunities, including agencies, apprenticeship programs, and pre-apprenticeship programs.

Importantly, the research team also conducted a **survey** of over 1,000 young people in Texas to measure their understanding of and experience with apprenticeship opportunities, as well as collect their stories and shared experiences. Members of the Youth Apprenticeship Council shared their experiences with apprenticeship programs through a **vlog series**. See the video created from council members' vlog exercise [here](#).

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## About Young Invincibles

Young Invincibles was founded by a group of students in the summer of 2009, motivated by the recognition that young people's voices were not being heard in the debate over health care reform. They began providing the facts about barriers young adults face in affording quality health insurance and by asking peers to share their stories. It turned out young people were eager to organize friends, educate the public about new health insurance options, and develop real solutions to the challenges young people face.

In the years since, Young Invincibles has grown into a national organization with offices across the country, taking on issues related to health care, higher education, and economic security. They are committed to expanding economic opportunity for young adults ages 18 to 34 and making sure that their perspective is heard wherever decisions about their collective future are being made. YI does this through building a community of young leaders to take action for social change, sharing the stories of young adults, cutting-edge policy research and analysis, providing tools for young people to make smart economic choices, and mission-driven social enterprise ventures.

# Results

The research resulted in a widely-distributed report, *Women and Parents in the Texas Workforce: Building a Path to Apprenticeship*. A youth advocate affiliated with Young Invincibles testified before the Texas legislature on the findings from the report and offered recommendations on how the legislature could improve access to apprenticeship opportunities for Texans from all backgrounds.

[See the final report](#)





# **Conclusion:** **Asset-Based Approaches Lead to Better Solutions**

Asset-based framing pivots away from traditional approaches to philanthropic giving. Traditional notions of “charity” and “helping the poor and disadvantaged” create a power imbalance between funders and the communities they are trying to serve and hinder the creation of effective, sustainable, and long-term solutions.

When philanthropy embraces asset-based approaches, it shifts focus back to the populations it tries to serve and empowers individuals and communities to reach their goals and aspirations. Asset-based approaches in philanthropic giving also necessitate a focus on systems change, recognizing that current systems place barriers that affect different groups inequitably.



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