Evaluating Identities:
SOS Outreach and UC Santa Cruz, a case study of asset-based student
evaluation tools

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According to Pew Research Center, Generation Z is on track to be the most diverse and best educated generation of all time (Fry & Parker, 2018). Nearly half of Generation Z is a racial or ethnic minority, 41% identify as neutral on the spectrum between masculinity and femininity, and 55% claim that identity labels do not help them define who they truly are (Vice Media, 2019). For Generation Z, the societal constructs previous generations have devised limit the expression of their complex, intersectional identities. As McKinsey & Company explains, "the core of Gen Z is the idea of manifesting individual identity" (Francis & Hoefel, 2018). As consumers, they demand personalized products and services that highlight their individuality. As students, they see education as a means to express their singular identity and capitalize on their unique strengths (Kozinsky, 2017). The future of education is thus contingent upon academic institutions' capacity to recognize these intersectional identities as a critical asset and to foster their cultivation. This case study examines SOS Outreach and UC Santa Cruz's adherence to the *asset-based approach.* Through an appraisal of their student evaluation tools, it explores how each organization demonstrates their commitment to nurturing individuality and maximizing potential in Gen Z students.

Strengths First: The Asset-Based Approach

The recent emergence of scholarship and practical resources on *strengths-* or a*sset-based approach* to learning and program development continues to galvanize momentum in the international education community. In the recent past, education has had a myopic focus on barriers; whether it be financial, familial, or situational factors, ongoing dialogue highlights the individual and circumstantial considerations that

obstruct students' access to educational experiences (Trujillo, 2017). This emphasis on obstacles has shifted attention away from student potential and has fixated instead on their deficits. As Trujillo explains, "Deficit-based thinking denies the intersectional identities and experiences of individuals, and presupposes that an outside force must ... solve the existing problems." Consumed by their deficits, students are regarded as problems to solve with gaps to fill, instead of seeds of potential.

The emerging alternative view is that of an *asset-based approach*. This approach sees students' unique experiences and identities—particularly those of marginalized social groups—not as impediments, but as specialized knowledge, skills, and abilities. As Yosso (2005) suggests, each student contributes a distinct set of strengths and talents to their educational experiences and environment that can be used to their advantage. This model helps to reframe student profiles and consider the attributes that might situate them as "at promise" rather than "at risk" (Trujillo, 2017). Recent scholarship demonstrates that programs and practices that encourage students to identify and cultivate these strengths show increased retention and engagement rates as well as overall student success (Soria & Stubblefield, 2015). According to Lopez and Louis (2009), there are five fundamental practices in the *asset-based approach*: measurement of strengths, individualization to student needs/interests, networking with those who affirm strengths, deliberate application inside/outside of the classroom, and intentional development of strengths through novel experiences. In order to assess an organization's adherence and commitment to the *asset-based approach*, it's essential to evaluate their practices against these fundamental principles.

SOS Outreach

A non-profit that promotes inclusion and leadership, SOS Outreach matches underserved youth with mentors who bring them to the slopes to develop their strengths and leadership skills through skiing and snowboarding. This group of underserved youth are identified based on a subset of risk factors the organization has identified as potential obstacles to academic success. In order to identify their risk level, parents of nominated students are asked to complete an *Inventory of Strengths and Needs* for their child. The survey consists of a series of questions that evaluate the child's relationships, lifestyle, home life, anger management skills, history with the juvenile justice system, among other indicators. While some questions aim to understand the child's tenacity ("Youth shows interest or commitment to school."), others inquire about influences that might negatively impact the student's behavior or academic performance ("If ever, when did youth start using drugs or alcohol?," "Youth is diagnosed with a learning disability.") The survey, which intends to identify whether the child fits within the "at-risk" student demographic, focuses on the factors—at home and in school—that might pose a threat to their success. The information gathered from this survey is not shared with mentors or program administrators; it is simply a tool to evaluate students' risk level.

To evaluate program goals and effectiveness, SOS Outreach asks every student participant to complete a pre- and post-program survey. The "Pre/Post Test" asks students to evaluate their individual values, desires and strengths. At the beginning and end of each program cycle, students rate their agreement with statements such as "A lot of adults think that I am an interesting person," "Teamwork is important," and "I am

interested in participating in programs in my community." The survey encourages students to identify their interests and talents and critically reflect on their growth through participation in the program. Student responses are recorded over time and inputted into a collated database. SOS Outreach does not adapt their intervention approach based on a student's response to this survey; the organization simply aggregates the data, making it available to stakeholders and the general public to demonstrate the overall impact and outcomes of their program.

Following Lopez and Louis' (2009) framework, the SOS Outreach program effectively employs four of the five core principles of the *asset-based approach:* measurement of strengths, networking with those who affirm strengths, deliberate application inside/outside of the classroom, and intentional development of strengths through novel experiences. As student evaluation tools are not used to design or customize the intervention, SOS does not "individualize to student needs/interests." Despite their adherence to the majority of asset-based principles, the organization continues to struggle advancing their internal rhetoric. Abbey Eddy, a Program Manager at SOS Outreach, said the organization aspires to adopt more positive language to describe the selection criteria for their student demographic (Eddy et al., *On-site Perspective: SOS Outreach*). In an interview, Eddy disclosed that the *deficits-based approach*—that demonstrates how the program has reduced "risk" and filled student gaps—has historically produced the most compelling results and persuasive metrics for donors and program benefactors (Eddy & Echelard, *Informational Interview*). Thus, SOS Outreach, like many educational organizations, must continue to advance internal and

external educational stakeholders' perceptions of underserved youth identities with an eye towards strengths to embrace versus risks to overcome.

UC Santa Cruz: Study Abroad Profile

Recognizing that their Gen Z students have unique needs and identities, UC Santa Cruz recently launched their Study Abroad Profile to not only collect comprehensive demographic data about their student body but also better tailor their advising to prospective students. Any student interested in global learning programs is required to complete the Study Abroad Profile, an online account that invites students to share their complex, intersectional identities. The first section of the profile, "Your Information," begins by asking students about their motivations, barriers, and anxieties to education abroad. In the same section that requests their name and student ID number, individuals are prompted to consider their unique aspirations, the factors that might impact their ability to participate, and the fears that may create imagined barriers to transformative learning.

The second section of the profile dives into students' identities. The first half of the page addresses gender and ethnicity; while providing a comprehensive and inclusive list of options, the profile also allows students to describe their own interpretation of their gender and ethnic identity in a blank text field. In the second half of this section, students are prompted to share their "Other Identities." Through a series of binaries, students may disclose whether they are an international student, a first-time international traveler, a first-generation college student, undocumented, religious or spiritual, among other characteristics. Based on their selection, the profile generates

relevant information and resources. For instance, should a student select that they are undocumented, text appears explaining "As someone with a different migratory status, you can still participate in intercultural educational experiences off-campus" and lists a number of potential programs, pro-bono consultants, and legal services (UCSC, Study Abroad Profile). Corresponding resources are provided for students that disclose their disabilities, religious or spiritual considerations, or financial concerns.

UC Santa Cruz's Study Abroad Profile, in conjunction with their other portfolio of inclusivity initiatives, meets all five of Lopez and Louis' principles of the *asset-based approach*. Their intervention strategies facilitate the measurement of strengths, individualization to student needs/interests, networking with those who affirm strengths, deliberate application inside/outside of the classroom, and intentional development of strengths through novel experiences. By acknowledging the unique aspirations, apprehensions, and intersectional identities of each individual, UC Santa Cruz invites students to explore and express their individuality. UC Santa Cruz leverages the Study Abroad Profile to identify students' unique attributes and suggest immersive learning experiences that capitalize on the distinctive, intersectional identities of each student.

Conclusion

Both SOS Outreach and UC Santa Cruz, organizations commitment to increasing access and fostering inclusivity, demonstrate dedication to embracing their students' strengths and individuality. Nevertheless, despite their impressive strides towards innovation, there is significant advancement needed to advance the rhetoric around student identities, especially in underserved populations. As an unprecedentedly

diverse generation enters higher education and the workforce, it's imperative that educators, administrators, and donors advance their understanding of learning and student development. Instead of filling student gaps, education must evolve to capitalize on students' assets and reinforce their individual strengths. As one Gen Zer explains,

> I think experiences really craft a person. And those experiences normally occur due to the all encompassing intersections of identity (Race, Gender, Sexuality, Class, Disability, Religion, Age). I could've been in this same body and had vastly different experiences …. despite the same hypothetical genetic makeup.
> (Hay-Chapman et al., 2020)

It is these complex, intersecting identities and exceptional experiences that affords this generation with a novel understanding of self and of "other." By actively fostering the cultivation of such identities, Gen Z can help us move beyond the constraints of labels and limiting social constructs and build the bridge towards a better, more united future.

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