

HELPING NEIGHBORHOODS HELP THEMSELVES






**EVOLUTIONIST
STRIVES TO
UNDERSTAND
COMMUNITIES
IN A NEW WAY**

Wherever you live, take a moment and look around. Whether it's in a gated community, a neighborhood plagued by gang violence, a large urban center where the only broad divides are those between "the haves" and "the have-nots," or a small, tight-knit rural village where neighbors know each other by name, consider the influence the "environment" within your neighborhood has had on your development and the development of others in your community.

Now imagine taking the unlikely position that none of that has anything to do with how you and your neighbors view yourselves and the world around you — no impact on the choices you are likely to make, nor any effect on the major outcomes in your life.



**“YOU CAN’T JUST STUDY
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SOCIAL ENVIRONMENTS.”**

— David Sloan Wilson

That’s exactly what David Sloan Wilson thinks too many social scientists and researchers from across the disciplines have been doing — studiously divorcing their subjects from their social environment and relentlessly focusing on individuals, stripped of their communal context.

Wilson is a distinguished professor of biological sciences with a joint appointment in anthropology at Binghamton University and founder of EvoS, the University’s unique interdisciplinary Evolutionary Studies program. His latest project, which aims to understand and improve the quality of life in the city of Binghamton on a neighborhood-by-neighborhood basis, will emphasize the value of understanding people in the broader context of their communities. It’s an all-too-obvious point, he says, but one that unfortunately still has to be made.

“You can’t just study people, you have to study people in their social environments,” Wilson said. “These are such basic insights; it’s a scandal that they would need to be pointed out and that still a very small fraction of research is of this sort.”

Wilson’s project teams Binghamton University faculty members with city school district officials and Binghamton residents, with the goal of measuring variables that influence quality of life in the community, so that where needed, appropriate interventions can be designed with neighborhood leaders.

Working in collaboration with Search Institute, an independent nonprofit organization devoted to promoting healthy children, youth and communities, Binghamton researchers are collecting data on “developmental assets” that Search Institute has identified as requisite to the development of young people who are healthy, caring and responsible. Included among these qualities are “external assets,” such as caring neighborhood and school climates and family involvement and support, and “internal assets,” such as reading for pleasure, honesty and motivation to achieve.

Binghamton City School District Superintendent Peggy Wozniak said the idea of developmental assets isn’t a new one. Educators know that relationships with children are important. Though the district works with the University on a variety of initiatives, and Wozniak has worked with Search Institute for years, the district has never before brought this sort of neighborhood focus to the issue, she said.

“There’s a lot that goes into students achieving,” Wozniak said. “When you look at students in poverty... it’s this idea of resiliency. Why do some kids make it and some kids don’t when they come from these challenging environments? The difference can be relationships with adults. Relationships in the bigger picture is community, not just school.”

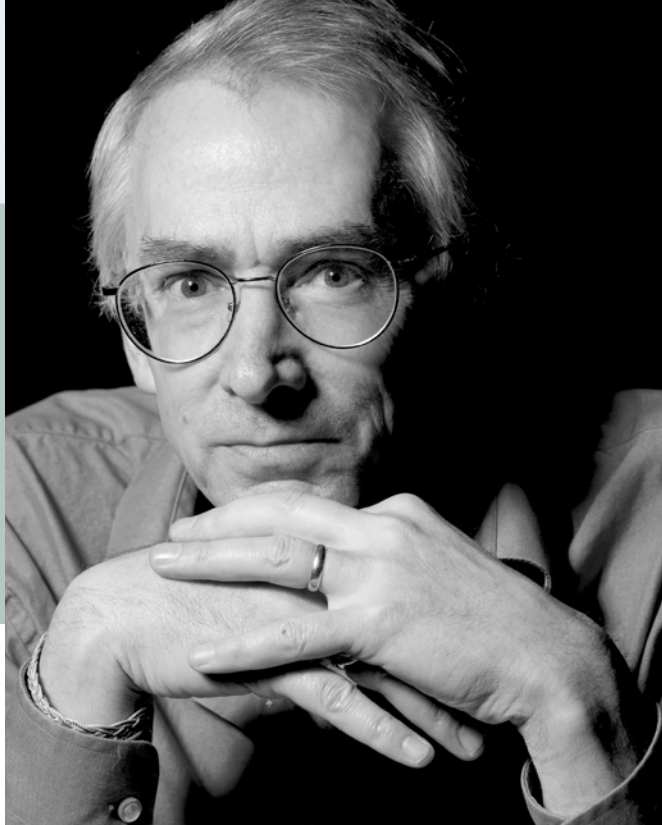
About 2,000 children in sixth through 12th grades in the Binghamton schools

took a survey in May 2006. On a scale of 1 (not at all or rarely) to 4 (almost always or extremely), they responded to statements such as “I take responsibility for what I do,” “I feel good about the future” and “I have adults who are good role models for me.”

The questions were divided into five categories representing the contexts of a child’s life: personal, social, family, school and community. A single score was calculated for each context. There was substantial variation among individuals as well as among neighborhoods when the data was plotted in terms of the students’ residential locations.

While Search Institute collaborates with many communities, the Binghamton Neighborhood Project is the first to use Geographic Information Systems (GIS) technology to visualize and study variations in developmental assets on a neighborhood basis. GIS is a collection of computer hardware and software for capturing, managing, analyzing and displaying all forms of geographically referenced information. A method known as kriging extrapolates among the data points to produce a continuous surface of hills and valleys representing variation in the developmental assets.

“The patterns illustrated on the maps reflect very complex social processes that we do not yet fully understand,” Wilson said. “Before something can be understood, it must be visualized. These maps provide a first step toward understanding and



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improving the welfare of our community by helping us visualize how the underlying parameters vary on a neighborhood-by-neighborhood basis."

GIS allows the information about developmental assets to be combined with any other spatially based information, such as U.S. Census statistics or information about the physical landscape. Working with Binghamton University's GIS center, Wilson has also developed a user-friendly Web interface that enables anyone to create maps of Binghamton.

"This information can be analyzed from any theoretical perspective, but evolutionary theory is especially well suited for studying organisms in relation to their environment, including the human organism," Wilson said. "The important thing is to study people from all walks of life in the contexts of their everyday lives."

EvoS establishes a multidisciplinary framework for studying evolution in biology and all human-related subjects. Wilson's own research focuses on cooperation and altruism as behaviors that can be evolutionarily successful under certain conditions. The Binghamton Neighborhood Project dovetails perfectly with his prior interests, he said.

But EvoS and its intellectual community of more than 50 faculty members are

also well positioned to address a range of other important issues with the same database. And the University's innovative Center City Coordination program, or C3, has the community partnerships to take the data and help residents act on it, said Allison Alden, director of C3.

"When we look at community development, we like to consider from the residents' perspectives what are their priorities, their goals, their strengths," she said. "And it's very difficult to get that information."

She sees the Binghamton Neighborhood Project as an important first step in bringing together comprehensive community information. It's also an unusual chance to ask young people directly about what they want and need.

"Youth in particular is an interesting age group to focus on right now, and this will help us do that," Alden said. "I'm interested in looking at meaningful opportunities for young people to become engaged in their community. Not just a volunteer project, but a way to really use their own talents." ■



Search Institute has compiled the following list of 40 assets it considers essential for young people to be healthy, caring and responsible.

EXTERNAL ASSETS:

Family support, positive family communication, other adult relationships, caring neighborhood, caring school climate, parent involvement in schooling, community values youth, youth as resources, service to others, safety, family boundaries, school boundaries, neighborhood boundaries, adult role models, positive peer influence, high expectations, creative activities, youth programs, religious community and time at home

INTERNAL ASSETS:

Achievement motivation, school engagement, homework, bonding to school, reading for pleasure, caring, equality and social justice, integrity, honesty, responsibility, restraint, planning and decision making, interpersonal competence, cultural competence, resistance skills, peaceful conflict resolution, personal power, self-esteem, sense of purpose and positive view of personal future