This brief report assesses the validity of applying the adolescent-based developmental assets model to emerging adults. Developmental assets are specific constructs which predict future success, including positive individual characteristics and environmental resources. The researchers developed a self-report survey based on a subset of the assets and outcome behaviors most applicable to emerging adults. Correlational analyses revealed significant relationships of moderate strength between the perceived level of developmental assets and thriving behaviors ($r = .40, p < .01$), risky behaviors ($r = -.36, p < .01$), and academic success ($r = .28, p < .01$). Furthermore, a path analysis yielded significant coefficients wherein assets influenced thriving, risk, and collectively, academic success. Results suggest that the developmental assets framework applies to emerging adults and warrants further investigation.

**Keywords:** emerging adults; developmental assets; college; academic success

Emerging adulthood, defined as the age range from 18 to the mid- or late-20’s, is an especially pivotal period of development, and recent research has shown that despite increases in college enrollment, drop-out remains very high (one fourth of all freshmen do not continue to their second year; Arnett & Tanner, 2006). This high rate of college drop-out produces burdens, including student loan debt, students moving back home, familial tension, and difficulties finding work in an increasingly competitive market. Although not all college attrition results from academic struggle, research investigating factors which may affect academic performance in college-enrolled emerging adults could assist in preventing these challenges and contribute to the positive development of this population.

To address the issues of non-success in college, the authors propose using a model initially designed for adolescents. According to the developmental assets theory developed by the Search Institute, there are 40 distinct constructs which can be present in the lives...
of adolescents and which predict future success (Leffert et al., 1998). The developmental assets model includes internal and external assets, which are positive characteristics of the individual as well as positive influences present in the individual's environment, respectively. Internal assets are characteristics such as commitment to learning, future planning, and a sense of positive identity. External assets include variables such as availability of support systems, opportunities for empowerment, and structure for the constructive use of time (Leffert et al., 1998).

In regard to using research to inform policy, the adolescent model has been very informative over the past several years. Perceived levels of assets have been consistently linked to a set of outcome factors categorized as thriving and risk behaviors. Findings from the work of Leffert, Benson, Scales, Sharma, Drake, and Blyth (1998) have shown that adolescents with more assets exhibit better physical health and stronger grades (i.e., "thriving behavior") and are less likely to use illicit drugs or drink and drive (i.e., "risk behavior"). Furthermore, this line of research has seen great success in its implementation to public health policy. Many neighborhoods and school systems have been assessed for asset-based strengths and weaknesses. As a result, programs have been developed that focus specifically on building assets in areas where particular improvements are needed. In addition, youth programs across the nation like the YMCA, the American Camping Association, National 4-H, Big Brothers and Big Sisters, and faith-based youth groups are beginning to adopt the developmental assets model as a way to positively impact the adolescents involved (Benson, 2008).

Considering the strength of the adolescent-based developmental assets model, the question is whether similar progress can be achieved when adapting the model to issues surrounding emerging adulthood. To date, there is a dearth of research investigating the utility of the developmental assets in college-enrolled emerging adults. Therefore, this project provides an initial step in validating the model for emerging adults in college settings, focusing on academic success as the main outcome.

**Developmental Assets Background**

The developmental assets framework was originally designed as a set of 30 developmental assets (Scales & Leffert, 2004). This initial model was developed for middle school to high school aged students and has been found to be an empirically supported predictor of factors such as: high-risk behavior, thriving outcomes, and resiliency. These assets were intended to reflect situations present in adolescent's lives that are crucial to positive development such as interpersonal relationships and social experiences and settings (Leffert et al., 1998). The developmental assets are also seen as "building blocks," because when assets are present it is suggested that adolescents' lives are enhanced in multiple ways (i.e., physically, academically, socially; Benson, 1997). Furthermore, these "building blocks" establish a solid foundation for a positive development through childhood and adolescence.

In 1996, the theoretical model was revised and expanded to include a total of 40 developmental assets (Benson, 1997). These are classified into 20 internal assets and 20 external assets. The external assets are comprised of four distinct categories. Assets concerning the presence of love and acceptance are accounted for under the "Support" category. Those regarding the ability to feel safe and valued fall under the "Empowerment" category. Assets related to the presence of appropriate rules, guidelines, and anticipations set in place by institutions (family, school, work) constitute the "Boundaries and Expectations" category. Finally, the presence and availability of activities that may stimulate positive growth are part of the "Constructive Use of Time" category (Scales & Leffert, 2004). Similarly, for
internal assets, four separate categories have been distinguished. Assets regarding intrinsic motivation to achieve knowledge and success are grouped under “Commitment to Learning,” while assets of personal character that guide judgment are part of the “Positive Values” group. Assets pertaining to social maturity make up the “Social Competencies” category, while those having to do with self-efficacy and self-esteem are captured in the “Positive Identity” category (Scales & Leffert, 2004).

The developmental assets model also assesses a wide array of outcome factors categorized as either thriving or risk behaviors. This theory posits that individuals who possess a higher number of developmental assets are more likely to exhibit success, or thriving behavior, in the future. Thriving is defined by one’s overall success in school, commitment to helping others, valuing diversity, maintaining good physical health, delaying gratification, and overcoming adversity. These thriving indicators allow researchers to investigate the predictive strength of developmental assets and provide insight for interventions which help young people succeed (Benson & Scales, 2009).

Scales, Benson, Leffert, and Blyth (2000) investigated the ability of the developmental assets to predict one’s thriving behavior. In a large sample of 6,000 adolescents ranging from middle school to high school (grades 6-12), approximately 10% to 43% of the variance in thriving indicators was accounted for by developmental assets. These findings suggest that the more developmental assets that are present in an adolescent’s life, the more likely he or she will be to experience and report positive and successful behavior. Specifically, Scales et al., (2000) found that higher levels of developmental assets were positively associated with success in school, overcoming adversity, maintaining physical health, and delaying gratification.

One integral component of thriving behavior is achievement in school. A longitudinal study followed 370 students from grade 7 to grade 12 in order to investigate the relationship between developmental assets and an individual’s GPA (Scales et al., 2006). It was found that the more developmental assets present in middle school (grades 7-9), the higher one’s GPA was in high school (grades 10-12). Furthermore, the relationship between number of assets and level of GPA was found to be stable; an increase in developmental assets was significantly related to an increase in overall GPA.

Conversely, the developmental assets model suggests that individuals with fewer assets may be more likely to engage in risk behavior, such as drug and tobacco use, multiple sexual encounters, legal trouble, physical altercations, and skipping school. One study investigated the developmental asset’s ability to predict risk behavior in a group of adolescents (Leffert et al., 1998). It was found that older adolescents (grades 9-12) exhibited more risk behaviors than younger adolescents (grades 6-8); however, both age groups reported less alcohol consumption when more developmental assets were present. In addition, the researchers found that those with higher assets reported being involved in fewer violent situations (Leffert et al., 1998).

Despite the empirical strength of the developmental assets model, it is possible that an individual can exhibit a high number of assets but engage in risk behavior; conversely, it is possible that one with fewer developmental assets is able to thrive and succeed. The assets of course do not account for all of the variance in life trajectories; the theoretical model is not meant to be a comprehensive or exhaustive. However, the established assets are meant to highlight the factors most potent in providing young people the means to succeed. Although the developmental assets model was originally developed for adolescents, it has strong implications for emerging adults as well.
For this investigation, the authors hypothesize that the adolescent-based developmental assets model provides an appropriate lens through which to view successes or difficulties in adapting to college. Further, the authors specifically hypothesize that the number of assets will be significantly related to thriving behavior, risk behavior, and academic success. Finally, it is hypothesized that the number of assets, thriving behavior, and risk behavior will be collectively predictive of academic success.

**Methods**

In order to collect data, approximately 200 self-report items were embedded into a broader study conducted at a large public university in the Midwest, which investigated a variety of issues pertinent to student development and learning. Specific to this study, items assessed students’ endorsement of specific characteristics within a truncated version of the developmental assets model. Chosen for being the most applicable to emerging adulthood issues in college, the scale assessed 12 internal assets and 12 external assets, with several items used to create a composite for each. The scale also briefly assessed a set of thriving behaviors, risk behaviors, and academic success. This self-report measure was administered to a convenience sample of students who were offered extra credit for class. Table 1 shows the assets and outcome factors chosen for inclusion.

After data collection, SPSS Version 17.0 was used for data storage and analysis, and AMOS version 19 was used for path modeling. Matching the data analysis used for the studies on adolescents (Scales & Leffert, 2004), self-report scores from the Likert-scale items were collapsed to form a dichotomous value for each asset; this constructed an Assets Scaled Score ranging from 0 to 24. Thriving and Risk Behavior scores were constructed using collapsed Likert-scale parcels. GPA was used to measure academic success and was scored to two decimal points with a maximum of 4.00. Pearson Correlations and Step-wise Regression procedures were conducted to test relationships and to test a path model.

The final sample after data cleaning consisted of 308 students. The sample was divided relatively evenly between men \((n = 157, 51.0\%)\) and women \((n = 151, 49.0\%)\) in the emerging adulthood age range \((M = 20.20\) years old, \(SD = 1.90\)\), and the majority of students were Caucasian \((n = 193, 62.7\%)\). Other racial backgrounds represented in the sample included African Americans \((n = 44, 14.3\%)\), Asian Americans \((n = 31, 10.1\%)\), Other \((n = 27, 8.8\%)\), and Multi-Racial \((n = 13, 4.2\%)\). In regard to year in school, the sample consisted of Freshmen \((n = 86, 27.9\%)\), Sophomores \((n = 75, 24.4\%)\), Juniors \((n = 54, 17.5\%)\), Seniors \((n = 78, 25.3\%)\), and 5th-year seniors \((n = 15, 4.9\%)\).

**Results**

To investigate the internal reliability of the assets scale used, Cronbach’s Alpha was utilized for the external assets’ branch score \((\alpha = .34\) across 12 assets), the internal assets’ branch score \((\alpha = .42\) across 12 assets), and the total assets’ scaled score \((\alpha = .56\) across 24 assets). Although these internal reliability values are somewhat low, these results do not necessarily discourage the use of the assets model. As has been previously explained in the literature regarding the assets in adolescents, many of the assets and asset categories do not vary together soundly enough to show psychometric internal reliability (Leffert et al., 1998). However, the assets are arranged and conceptualized such that they make sense for the purposes of communicating to schools and communities about the characteristics and contexts of their youth. Thus it seems that a similar pattern may take place with emerging adults.

The remaining analyses pertain to hypothesis-testing. As predicted, the Assets Scaled Score was significantly positively correlated with Thriving Behavior \((r = .39, p < .01)\),
Table 1. *Assets and Outcome Factors Assessed*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>External Assets</th>
<th>Internal Assets</th>
<th>Outcome Factors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Family Support</td>
<td>Achievement Motivation</td>
<td>GPA (Academic Success)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive Family Communication</td>
<td>School Engagement</td>
<td>Leadership (Thriving)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Adult Relationships</td>
<td>Homework</td>
<td>Volunteering (Thriving)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent Involvement in Schooling</td>
<td>Reading for Pleasure</td>
<td>Diversity Appreciation (Thriving)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youth as Resources</td>
<td>Equality and Social Justice</td>
<td>Alcohol Use (Risk Behavior)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Service to Others</td>
<td>Interpersonal Competence</td>
<td>Tobacco Use (Risk Behavior)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Safety</td>
<td>Cultural Competence</td>
<td>Fighting (Risk Behavior)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Boundaries</td>
<td>Peaceful Conflict Resolution Skills</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive Peer Influence</td>
<td>Personal Power</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Expectations</td>
<td>Self-Esteem</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creative Activities</td>
<td>Sense of Purpose</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youth Programs</td>
<td>Positive View of Personal Future</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Results are significantly negatively correlated with Risk Behavior \(r = -0.36, p < 0.01\), and significantly positively correlated with academic success \(r = 0.28, p < 0.01\). Overall, the Assets Scaled Score, Thriving Behavior, and Risk Behavior variables contributed to a significant path model in predicting academic success \(F = 11.334, df = 3, p < 0.001\). The path model accounted for approximately 10% of the variance in academic success and approximately 15% and 13% of the variance in Thriving Behavior and Risk Behavior, respectively. In addition, the path model was analyzed using AMOS and Figure 1 displays the model with parameter estimates. The presented model yielded an adequate model fit as assessed by root mean square error of approximation \(\text{RMSEA} = 0.035\), where values less than 0.05 indicate a strong model fit (Byrne, 2010).

**Discussion**

Results support the broad hypothesis that the developmental assets theory is applicable to emerging adults. Findings suggest that the developmental assets are important factors for the success of college students.

Knowledge gained from this study may help inform the renovation of university policies and programs, with the aim of augmenting students' assets by bolstering strong character and providing a variety of inspiring activities. This brief report is only a first step toward investigating the benefits of utilizing the assets model for emerging adult research. Further research is needed to address many remaining questions about the implications of the assets model. For instance, can the full 40-asset model be restructured to apply to emerging adults; and if so, how should those assets be assessed in that population? Once a psychometrically stable measure has been developed, it should be used to investigate the possibility of other relationships with important criterions such as mental health and life satisfaction. If results show that the assets are indeed related to a wider array of outcomes, it is then important to investigate if the assets can be taught in individual settings, such as psychotherapy, church ministry, mentoring, or student counseling.
Figure 1. Assets Path Model to Academic Success

References


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