

2015

Promotion of Thriving in Youth: The Intersections of the Positive  
Youth Development Perspective and Challenge Course  
Programming

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# Promotion of Thriving in Youth: The Intersections of the Positive Youth Development Perspective and Challenge Course Programming

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Honors Thesis

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## Abstract

This paper's intent is to explore the Positive Youth Development (PYD) perspective, its applications, and the growing research topics pertaining to it. I will demonstrate the importance of developmental assets and PYD centered programs in the human journey towards "*Thriving*," which is understood as the ultimate state of being achieved by the systematic promotion of positive development across time in a youth's life (Lerner et al, 2005). My paper also explains challenge course programming and its relationship to the Positive Youth Development perspective. Upon demonstrating this relationship, I offer a few ideas for future challenge course programming that would foster new dimensions in relationship dynamics for participating youth that can increase indicators that they are *thriving*.

## Introduction

It is the third day of sleepover summer camp. A cabin's worth of boys, all rising fifth graders, are hustling up a big hill to get to their next activity. The boys are still getting to know one another, and they are beyond excited to check out the Challenge Course, which thus far had been kept off limits to them. Their excitement is palpable. It brings them together in a shared moment.

The boys arrive at the challenge course. The Facilitator welcomes them and invites them to sit on the grass. He goes over safety concerns, telling the boys that it is each person's responsibility to make sure he is being safe and that others around them are being safe. He asks the boys to be open to new tasks and ideas. Importantly, Facilitator explains the difference between extending their comfort zone by trying new things while feeling safe and unpressured,

and stepping entirely outside of their comfort zone, and potentially pushing themselves too far (Rohnke, 2007). Many other items of business are discussed during this introduction session. The Facilitator encourages the boys to be optimistic and flexible, to respect different opinions than their own and even to learn from ideas they come up with that don't end up working out.

With that, the boys begin the challenge course session with a game of Island tag, a simple, silly and extremely fun game that promotes teamwork (and also gets everyone's heart beating!). Next the boys are escorted to a low, broad object on the challenge course proper which resembles a much larger, wooden, unbalanced teeter-tatter (see Appendix A.). It is called the Whale-watch. This low element can be utilized to promote many positive values and indicators. In this case, the facilitator will utilize it to promote Confidence, Connection and trust within the group. After discussing specific safety concerns and proper ways of using the element, the boys are tasked to see if they can balance the beam for 30 seconds. One by one, they mount the Whale- watch and, once all are on, proceed to balance themselves together for 30 seconds, with ease.

The facilitator congratulates them and then has everyone off. He relates an elaborate story (describing how a magical beast named Jeffery can only be assisted when it is balanced) to demonstrate why it is so important to balance the whale watch. Now the boys will try again. However this time only one person among them will be able to talk during the execution of the "operation", and, now, even more difficult, the participants will need to keep it balanced as they mount it, one by one. If the Whale-watch touches the ground they will need to start over (because losing balance will startle Jeffery). The facilitator gives them a minute to discuss their

plan, and then he nominates David (a boy having a bit of a harder time jumping into the activity), as the “chief communicator extraordinaire” for this round. They agree and then they are off.

It definitely takes longer (it is a much harder task), but the boys after many failed attempts (all good learning opportunities from the facilitator’s stand point) are able to balance the Whale-watch for 30 seconds, then for 45 seconds, then even for one whole minute! It is a tremendous feat. The boys cheer themselves, letting out roars of success, even David.

After everyone had slowly dismounted the Whale-watch, the facilitator debriefs the event. He puts questions to the boys like, “What do you think worked really well?” and “What are some things you learned?” He goes on to ask, “Are there things you learned from this activity that are applicable to your life at camp, maybe even to your life outside of camp?” In this way, he helps the boys to see the applicability of the day’s experience to their lives. The boys discussed how the task became easier when they communicated, and how it was harder when everyone was yelling at the same time. They acknowledge that it even might have become easier when David was the only one allowed to talk because “he was really good at it” and no one could interrupt. They talk about how once they found a technique that worked everyone knew what to do, and how on their second try they did not really need to talk a lot since they trusted one another to understand the process. They begin to think about the cabin as a team and they discuss the importance of trusting one another.

After a couple more activities (and debriefs), the cabin of boys leaves the challenge course. Later, the cabin’s counselors will tell the facilitator how the boys began “act more as an inclusive unit, how they shared ridiculous stories and chatted about their adventure with Jeffrey the magical beast.

If this two hour session of challenge course can create a dynamic change in behavior and even assist in showing the cabin of boys how they can better meld as a unit, then what could be the limit to the benefits of such a program? Surely, the challenge course programming could have a dynamic impact of broader scope? But, specifically in what arenas could this program be best utilized? These are the concerns of this paper.

This paper will explore the Positive Youth Development Perspective (PYD), a newly established, yet extremely utilized perspective in the contemporary Developmental Psychology field, and challenge course programming (CC) to better understand their similarities and overlaps. Additionally this paper will demonstrate that challenge course programming has the potential to become a developmental asset as a PYD program, a key tool supporting youth on the journey towards the forming of identity associated with *Thriving*. In conclusion, this paper offers additional programming that will further develop this relationship between PYD and CC as a developmental asset that continues to promote development, growth, and, yes, *Thriving*, in youth.

### **Perspectives in Developmental Psychology:**

To accomplish these tasks outlined earlier, one must first have a working knowledge on how the field of Psychology and more specifically Developmental Psychology arrived to its present state. It is understood that philosophical discussion of adolescences and categorization of life span periods are thought to have begun with Aristotle, however it was not until many years later that this line of philosophy was picked up in an academic setting (Lerner, 2005). Since then, there have been many large contributors that have assisted in the advancement of the present day

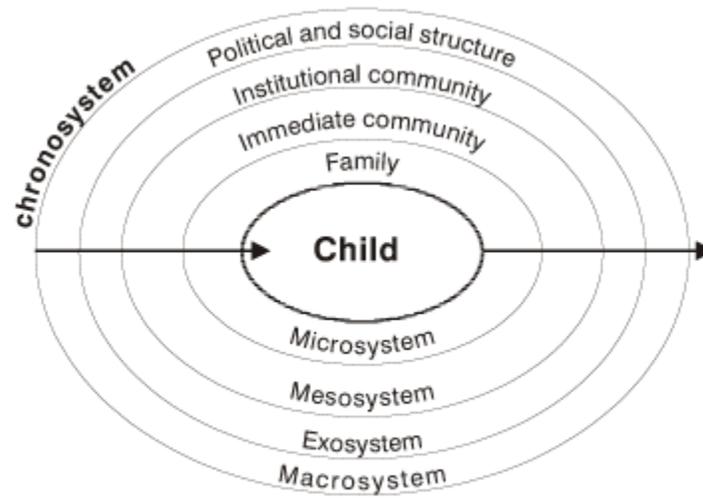
literature of child/developmental psychology or life span psychology. In this section I will highlight a handful of the most prominent theories and theoreticians in this realm.

In the late 1930s Jean Piaget became intrigued as to why children answer test questions in the way that they do, from that point Piaget began to observe hundreds of children to formalize a theory on children/human development. Piaget theorized that there are four distinct stages in development: the Sensorimotor stage (from ages 0-2), Preoperational (from ages 2-7), Concrete Operational (7-11 years old) and lastly Formal Operational (from 11 years on) (Piaget, 1972). Each of these stages is categorized by a key feature. Object permanence for the Sensorimotor stage, Egocentrism for Preoperational, conservation for the Concrete Operational stage and lastly abstract reasoning for the Formal Operational stage. Piaget also theorized that humans developed schemas, which are a script which one automatically acts upon for certain situations (Piaget, 1972). Schemas could be changed within the person if a held schema was not beneficial. Piaget also believed that the development of these social scripts were key in developing positive outcomes.

Erik Erikson also theorized a set of developmental stages similar to Piaget. Instead of four distinct developmental stages Erikson theorized that there were eight. Erikson's stages were infancy, early childhood, play age, school age, adolescence, young adulthood, adulthood and lastly maturity (Erikson, 1968). Erikson focused on more of a life-span approach than Piaget had. Meaning that development occurred throughout the whole lifetime instead of just one period of time like adolescents. Erikson's theory of developmental stages also differed from Piaget's since each stage is not categorized by a key feature; rather each life stage is categorized by a virtue vs. a non-virtue. For example in the first stage of our lives in infancy the virtue and the non-virtue is

trust vs. mistrust, if a developing person is unable to achieve this virtue it directly effects the positive growth and development of that person.

An American developmental psychologist, Urie Bronfenbrenner, theorized that child development was a product, of the interpersonal interactions that a developing person has. Bronfenbrenner (1979) theorized that there are five ecological systems that shape an individual's perspective and growth (figure 1). The first system is the individual. The second system in Bronfenbrenner's Ecological system model is the microsystem; which encompasses the family of the individual as well as peers, schools and religious platforms. This can be understood as what interacts immediately and constantly with any given child. The next system is the mesosystem which is characterized by the relationship and interactions of the entities in a person's microsystem. The exosystem is the next layer of the model. It encompasses the intrinsic link or human attachment we have to the people around us even with limited interactions. Beyond the exosystem lies the macrosystem; the macrosystem is the culture that we live in, it is also the shared values that a society holds. It is even the programs that express those values in a society such as social security or free public schools in for the United States. Urie Bronfenbrenner's theory of ecological systems is almost entirely reliant on interpersonal interaction for development otherwise known as nurture, and seems to discount biology utterly (Lerner,2005).



**Figure 1 - Ecological theory of development<sup>15</sup>**

Although some developmental psychologists such as Piaget included both viewpoints he believed that they were separable (Lerner,2005).These theories for many years laid in gridlock. The respective models and researchers supporting each view were unable to reach consensus or common ground in this dichotomy between the theories that conjectured that external forces and human interactions were the key to development or that biology was the most significant (Lerner, 2005).

Beyond the Nature vs. Nurture dichotomy, when looking at the study of adolescents in this time period (1904- early 1980s), the main mode of understanding and study was through a deficit model (Lener,2005). These models included the storm and stress model or also known as, ontogenetic time of normative developmental disturbance (Freud, 1969). These models of understanding resulted in youth being described as endangered or dangerous (Steinberg & Lerner, 2005). Even when positive development was mention in this literature before the 1990s , Lerner (2005) asserts that “A youth who was seen as manifesting behavior indicative of positive

development was depicted as someone who was not taking drugs or using alcohol, not engaging in unsafe sex, and not participating in crime or violence”(23). While there is no question that engaging in risky behaviors in these critical times can have a negative impact on positive development, the focal point of a development perspective or approach should not be on these actions but on the individual strengths that each youth possesses or will develop (Lerner,2005).

Following this first phase of the study of developmental Psychology, The next phase (also known as the second phase) (Lerner, 2005), of the literature in this field in the 1990s generally was characterized by an interest in developmental plasticity, diversity, and the implication on science in the real world (Steinberg & Lerner, 2004). This segment, in the scientific study of adolescence is categorized by the level of empirical work, regarding the development of individuals across the second decade of life.

This work elicited increasing interest in and enthusiasm about the study of adolescents and in enhancing their lives (Lerner & Almerigi, 2005). Simply, there was much more interest by professionals in the study of this time in the lifecycle (Lerner & Almerigi, 2005). The second phase is also characterized by beginning the empirical studies that looked into this time period in the terms of a larger life span development lens also known as an ontogenetic laboratory setting (a precursor to the lifespan development model) (Lerner, 2005).

The third phase of the scientific study of adolescence in Psychology is characterized by the focus on utilizing developmental systems ideas as a frame to approach research and application (Lerner,2005). One of the features of this phase was that youth development research was finally not limited to psychologist but other interested and caring bodies including practitioners and policy makers (Lerner,2005). This change in emphasis most likely occurred

when two researchers Hamburg & Takanishi (1996), proposed that quality of life for adolescents, and their future contributions to civil society, could be enhanced through collaboration among scholars, policy makers, and key social institutions. An example of these social institutions are, community, youth serving organizations, schools, and even the media. This model of thinking truly laid the ground work for present research in the field of youth development research.

Opening the channels of information for cross discipline collaboration has sparked a new age of research, so much so that leaders in this realm stated “that it is difficult to overestimate the importance of the synergy between the growing influence of developmental systems theories within developmental science and the elaboration of a strength-based approach to the study of adolescent development within the third phase of the development of the field of adolescence” (24) (Lerner & Almerigi, 2005).

Steinberg & Lerner (2004) suggest that the proposition from Hamburg & Takanishi, is presently being actualized. Meaning that youth development research is not limited to psychologist but is including other interested and caring bodies; such as practitioners and policy makers. Importantly one of the leading modes for this actualization, due to its inclusionary mode of operation, is occurring through the Positive Youth Development Prospective (PYD), thus establishing PYD as a valuable model of scientific study of adolescence (Steinberg & Lerner, 2004). Also imperative to this paper, this transformation of thought from being purely researcher led to collaborative, has created space for previously un-researched disciplines and domains within the general realm of youth development, that may assist in the facilitation of *Thriving*, to finally be able to showcase those benefits for youth. It is the goal of this paper to begin this

scholarly look into the benefits of challenge course programming in the promotion of youth *Thriving*; presently, and the potential this program has in the future.

### **Positive Youth Development (PYD):**

The Positive Youth Development (PYD) perspective grew out of the grassroots efforts of youth workers who were interested in promoting programs and policies to support healthy child development (Lerner et al., 2005; Lerner, Dowling, & Anderson, 2003). The most basic assumption in PYD is that youth possess important resources within themselves. Thus, PYD intervention strategies seek to generate positive behavior by helping young people recognize and apply these resources to their daily lives (Lerner et al., 2005). PYD proposes that internal resources and assets bolster positive values, responsibility, and connectedness in children and youth. PYD approaches typically target individual and social characteristics or behaviors that are hypothesized to lead to healthy child and adolescent development (Catalano et al., 2004; Jenson et al., 2013).

PYD assumes development is person-centered (Lerner and more, 2005). Positive changes take place in the relationship between a developing person who is committed, able, and acting to contribute and positively support themselves, their family, their community or even society, and these same establishments that reciprocate that support (Lerner and more, 2005). In this way, PYD is an inner-active and an intra-active development perspective.

The ultimate goal of PYD is to assist youth in assuming roles as healthy and productive members of society where *Thriving* becomes the catalyst. *Thriving* can be understood as the ultimate point of the systematic promotion of positive development across time in a youth's life

(Lerner et al, 2005). It should be understood, however, that varying cultures and societies may have varying conceptions of what an individual is required to become or what it means to develop functional values of society and ultimately to attain structurally valued personhood. (Lerner et al.,2005). For instance, some indicators of PYD are typically thought of as good indicators for positive growth in American society (Lerner,2005). Interestingly, there are ways to create and maintain Positive Youth Development outcomes pan-culturally (Lerner & more 2005); what follows, however, should be understood as culture specific.

While research within developmental psychology points to specific indicators in the promotion of PYD towards youth *Thriving*, there is no one correct way for youth development to occur, at least in terms of the attempt to create an ideal adult member of civil society (Lerner,2005). Youth may exhibit a great amount of one indicator and none of another and still have positive growth (Lerner,2005). As research in this field is still in its infancy (Lerner & Lerner, 2002-2013), there may prove to be other general indicators that assist in youths' journey in development. There remains a general consensus in the literature today that certain entities, such as the 6Cs of PYD, developmental assets (including youth centered programs and positive adult figures), avoidance of risky behaviors, and plasticity are all indicators of Positive Youth Development that can lead to youth *Thriving*. What follows is an exploration into these known indicators, as well as into PYD's underlying assumptions.

Positive Youth Development Perspective Flow Chart

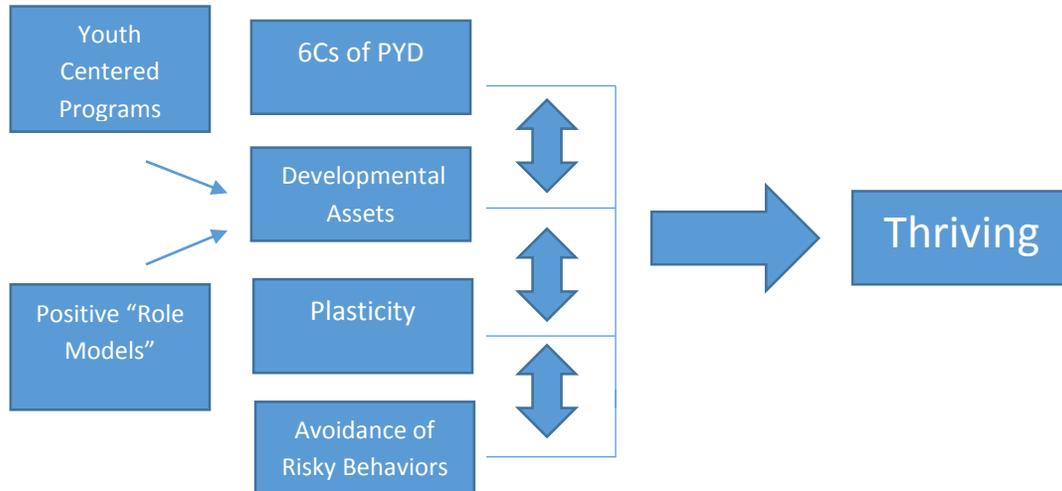


Figure 2

**Thriving:**

*Thriving* is understood as the ultimate state of being achieved by the systematic promotion of positive development across time in a youth's life (Lerner et al, 2005). It involves a young person who within the context of his or her individual set of physical and psychological characteristics and abilities takes action that serves his or her own well-being and, at the same time, the wellbeing of parent, peers, community, and further (Lerner,2005). A youth who has achieved *Thriving* has strong indicators of positive youth development, such as developmental assets and or plasticity. A *thriving* young person is on a life path that eventuates in his or her becoming an ideal adult member of civil society (Lerner,2005). While this process and outcome look different in each society and community, *Thriving* youth embody the next change factors of positive growth for their respective communities (Lerner,2005).

## **Plasticity**

One key component of PYD is the concept of plasticity. Plasticity can be understood as the potential in a young person for systematic change throughout development (Lerner et. al.,2005). It is also known as “elasticity.” Plasticity is the mysterious variable in human lives that lets humans even in the worst conditions bounce back or keep persist. In fact, it may advance prospects and opportunities for an individual, whether they are facing restriction or not.

This potential for plasticity exists as a consequence of mutually influential relationships between a developing person and his or her biological, psychological, ecological (family, community, culture), and historical context (Lerner,2005). It is also assumed that when these contextual relationships are mutually beneficial and healthy positive individual and societal development should occur (Lerner,2005). Relative plasticity or the potential for it on all levels of context in life is understood as a strength of all human beings (Lerner et. al.,2005). Plasticity can be a powerfully beneficial variable in any youths’ journey towards positive development, which lends a sense of optimism (that all youth have the ability to achieve *thriving*.) to the developmental narrative.

## **PYD is Comprised of Six Cs**

As previously mentioned, another set of indicators for Positive Youth Development are the six Cs of PYD. These “Cs” are prominent terms used by practitioners, adolescents involved in youth development programs, and the parents of these adolescents to describe the characteristics of a “*thriving* youth” (King, et al., 2005). What is key is that the six Cs of PYD are accessible to practitioners and researchers alike, further enhancing collaboration between

them. Not only are these indicators accessible, they have been demonstrated to be genuine describers of youth *Thriving*. These indicators include: Competence, Confidence, Connection, Character, and Caring (Lerner, 2005), followed by Contribution (Bowers & more, 2010). While Contribution is the newest developed indicator, it is prevalent in the literature (Lerner, 2005; Phelps et. al., 2009; Lerner et al., 2014). While no youth is required to demonstrate any of these indicators to make progress towards *Thriving*, the 6Cs of PYD are hypothesized to be good indicators of ways to promote *Thriving*.

Competence refers to capacities for action in the individual, including in the social, academic, cognitive, and vocational realms (Lerner et al., 2005). Competence itself is split into distinct categories. Social competence pertains to interpersonal skills such as conflict resolution; Cognitive competence pertains to cognitive abilities such as making decisions. School grades, attendance, and test scores are part of yet a third type of competence, Academic competence. Lastly, Vocational competence involves work habits and career choice explorations, including entrepreneurship (Lerner, 2005).

Next, Confidence is described in the literature as an internal sense of overall positive self-worth and self-efficacy. It differs from Competence because this indicator is not specific to select portions of life areas, but rather one's global self-regard (Lerner, 2005). Connection, the next indicator within the five Cs of PYD, can be understood as reflecting the positive relationships and bonds which are bidirectional (Lerner, 2005), meaning that they are reciprocated. The self, peers, family, school, and community are all parties to the development of Connection (Phelps et. al., 2009; Mariano & Damon, 2008). Character is described as respect for societal and cultural rules, the possession of standards for correct behaviors, the sense of right and wrong (possessing

a “moral compass”) (Mariano & Damon, 2008), and integrity. The fifth C, Caring, is defined as demonstrating sympathy and empathy for others (Lerner,2005). Contribution (known as the 6<sup>th</sup> C) can be understood as the influences and impacts that reinforce one’s self; this is realized by an adolescent’s being an active agent in their own development) (Damon,2008) and in their relationships with family, community, and the institutions of civil society that are time and context specific (Lerner, 2005). Ultimately, it is through the combination and unique interplays of developmental assets, plasticity, the avoidance of risky behaviors, and the 5 C’s of PYD, that youth may achieve a path of Positive Youth Development and a state of well-being, of *Thriving*.

Lerner (2005), reflects that PYD is an initial model of the development, integrating mutually influential person context relations, the development of the 6 Cs, and the attainment in adulthood of an idealized status involving contributions to self, family, community, and civil society. Another factor to the success in achieving *Thriving* in youth are Developmental Assets.

### **Developmental Assets:**

Presently there are eight broad categories of what are classified as Developmental Assets. Support, Empowerment, Boundaries and Expectations, and Constructive Use of Time constitute the four “external” assets, the relationships and opportunities that adults (and peers) provide for young people. Commitment to Learning, Positive Values, Social Competencies, and Positive Identity are the four “internal” assets, the values, skills, and self-perceptions young people develop to gradually guide and regulate themselves (Scales et al.,2006). Developmental assets can be understood in terms of the metaphor of financial health. In this metaphor, each varying asset type within one’s portfolio (such as bonds, stock, property, retirement funds,) is a

developmental asset. There is no correct financial asset; all contribute in varying ways to the progression of the portfolio, which in this example is comparable to a youth moving towards *Thriving*. Research shows that the more young people experience a variety of Developmental Assets, the fewer high-risk behaviors they engage in and the more they thrive (Benson, 1997; Leffert et al., 1998; Scales, Benson, Leffert, & Blyth, 2000).

All youth centered programs or positive relationships have the potential to assist in positive development of youth. Those that promote the other indicators of PYD, like the 6 Cs of PYD, have a greater chance to promote and sustain positive development in youth (Benson, 1997). Recent research has demonstrated that such program contexts have the chance to provide involved youth with a much broader and potentially more developmentally advantageous kind of adult engagement that may especially bolster young people's sense of support, empowerment, and boundaries and expectations (Scales et al., 2006). Because these developmental contexts promote young people's pro-social orientations and behaviors, they also can promote the growth of a civil society in which contributing to the common good is at least as important as promoting one's individual success (Lerner, Brentano, Dowling, & Anderson, 2002). Thus, to develop or discover further Positive Youth Development programs to add to the variety of existing Developmental Assets is in the best interest for developing important strategies for promoting both positive youth development and positive community development. (Scales et al., 2006). It is the goal of this paper to demonstrate that challenge course programming has the potential to serve as a developmental asset in a Positive Youth Development program capacity for youth in their journey towards *Thriving*.

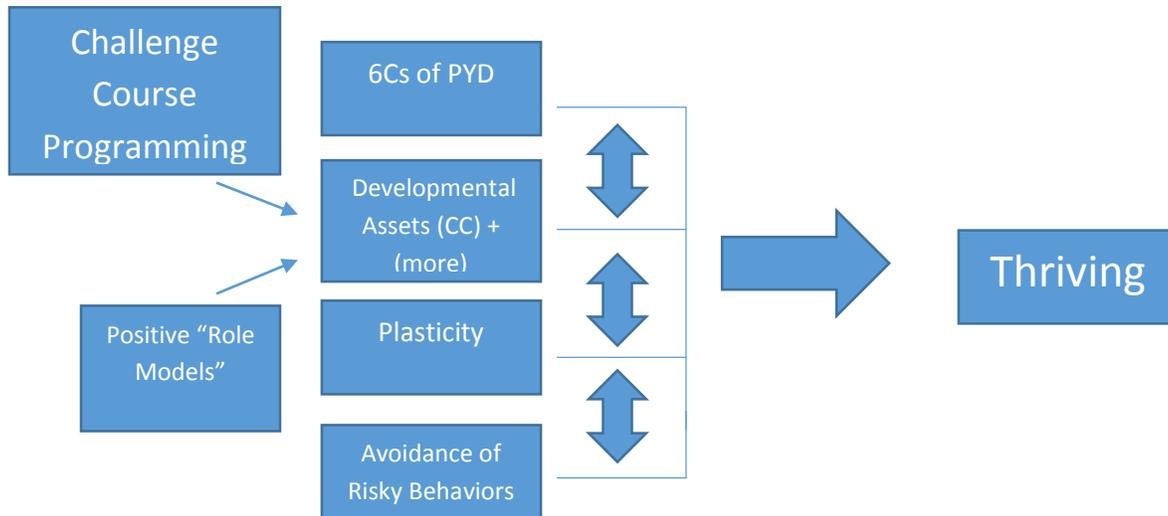


Figure 3

### PYD Program Criteria

To this point, I have explored the nature and structure of Positive Youth Development. I have also stressed the importance of developmental assets (including PYD centered programs) in the journey of youth towards *Thriving*. The next question is how one knows if a program promotes PYD effectively. One answer, outlined by Roth and Brooks-Gunn (2003) concludes that specific program activities, atmosphere, and goals are the three defining aspects of youth development programs that differentiate them from other programs for adolescents.

The goals of these youth development programs, Roth and Brooks-Gunn (2003) establish, go beyond prevention measures to include promotion of actual positive development. They are characterized by an atmosphere of hope, caring, safety, cultural appropriateness, and respect for adolescents' abilities to make choices and bear responsibility. Moreover these programs' activities provide opportunities for active involvement and for meeting new challenges.

Catalano and team (2004) add that to be effective the program has to demonstrate that it has taken measurements of positive and problem outcomes. In this way the field can gain more applicable information on what is working, so the discourse community can in turn research and understanding. Catalano et al. (2004) also argue that the programs need to have a structured curriculum to be more effective. It is also understood that the careful and thoughtful implementation of this curriculum is a key factor in an effective PYD program. Following up to ensure the implementation is successful is also critically important. The program must have a significant duration, meaning that even if a one day program did a wonderful job of fulfilling all other criteria to be an effective PYD program, it unfortunately would not qualify. The effective minimum time for a specific program to operate to be effective has been found to be at least at least 9 months (Catalano, 2004). In this scenario, “effective” simply means the program was able to create space for the promotion of the indicators. Lastly, it is critical to reflect on the demographic served for an administrative team to better understand how it can best serve the particular youth in its program (Catalano, 2004). If all of these criteria are met, a program is understood to be a PYD promoting program.

All PYD programs must be led by or at least facilitated by an adult. This figure is of tantamount importance to a program’s successes. As outlined previously, a program must follow guidelines after its forming and implementation. Further, Yohalem (2003) shows that the most successful youth development professionals, and by extension programs, are facilitated by professionals who are optimistic, consistent and passionate about their work. Perhaps the initially most undervalued quality by professionals in this field was be consistency; however consistency is of the utmost importance. Being able to set goals and firm expectations of programmers, and

hold them to it, over a significant amount of time, is a key indicator in successful professionals (Yohalem, 2003). Lastly, the development of an adult/youth positive relationship is a key indicator of positive youth development in children, as described previously.

### **Applications of PYD**

Now we move on to show how these theories associated with PYD are being applied in our society. In this section, I will examine one contemporary research topic in the literature, as well as an actual application of the PYD approach.

Perhaps the largest and most deeply researched example of the PYD model in action is the *The 4-H Study of Positive Youth Development*. This longitudinal design study began in 2002. In sum, this 8-year study surveyed (through a student questionnaire and parent questionnaire) more than 7,000 adolescents from diverse backgrounds across 42 U.S. states. This study measured several individual characteristics of the interviewees, which included their scores on the Five Cs of PYD, their career goals relating to science, engineering, computer/ technology, as well as their levels of school engagement and achievement. The study also assessed youth civic identity and civic engagement, sexual behavior, exercise, healthy eating, risk/problem behaviors such as smoking, drinking, bullying, and also some characteristics of depression (Lerner & Lerner, 2013).

The first wave of research began with fifth graders during the 2002-2003 school years and ended with twelfth graders in 2010. At the end point of this longitudinal study Lerner & Lerner (2013) and the Tufts research team examined data from all eight years of the study. This team conducted more rigorous analysis and created a comprehensive report to demonstrate the

findings.

To better understand the results, one must first be aware of exactly what the 4-H program is and what its intentions are. Its website describes it as the nation's largest youth development organization, empowering six million young people throughout the United States. The information states that there are 611,800 volunteers, 3,500 professionals, and more than 25 million alumni. The mission of the staff is to empower youth to reach their full potential, working and learning in partnership with caring adults. This is done through programming that promotes Head, Heart, Hands and Health which are the four Hs in 4-H.

This longitudinal study found that the 4-H program was exhibiting PYD in three distinct ways (Lerner & Lerner, 2002-2013). The first is through positive and sustained relationships between youth and adults. The second is through activities that build important life skills. The third and final way PYD was expressed through opportunities for youth to use these skills as participants and leaders in valued community activities.

As for actual results, the research demonstrated that school engagement is higher in youth with more individual and ecological assets and that these high levels of school engagement predicted greater academic achievement. Another highlight of these findings was that they support the idea that the acquisition and development of self-regulation skills place youth on a positive developmental trajectory.

Further, in terms of contributions to respective communities, this study found that 4-H participants were almost four times more likely to make positive contributions to them. This study also found that 4-H members are almost two times more likely than their non 4-H member associates to be civically active.

The 4-H study (Lerner & Lerner, 2002-2013) is the largest, longest lasting and most comprehensive study to date on the Positive Youth Development perspective. The main function of this undertaking was to begin to illustrate the effectiveness of youth centered programs (within the larger category of developmental assets) in relation to positive development. While the importance of this study cannot be stressed enough, since it has laid the foundation for many other research topics in this discourse community, it should be noted that not all contemporary research within PYD gravitates within the orbit of this study. Not limited to this study's data, current research within PYD also has varying branches of interest, including the discovery of new Developmental Assets.

### **What is Challenge Course?**

Challenge course (CC) can be understood as comprised of a series of events triggered by encounters with obstacles, whether suspended from trees or built as other kinds of structures. It includes activities that provide participants with unique problem solving opportunities for self-discovery, physical challenge, and group support (Attarian, 2005). Both historically and at present, challenge course programming is a group facilitated experience that lasts for between a few hours and a full day. It should be noted that challenge course programming includes individualized experiences as well group experiences. Both types of experience contribute to individualized development, acting differently as catalysts. As laid out in physical space, challenge courses, are split into two partitions. The first section is known as "low elements" and the second as "high elements" (Rohnke, 2007). Each element within both high and low can be

thought of as a stations that emphasizes and targets a different area of potential growth (Gillis & Speelman, 2008).

Low elements are those that are simply low to the ground. They describe a series of physical structures that usually require from participants group problem solving and team work (Rohnke, 2007). High elements most always are suspended from trees and therefore most always inaccessible without special equipment, such as ropes and safety equipment, thus necessitating increased individual self-development (Rohnke, 2007). It should be understood that every element has safety concerns, which places stress on the importance of knowledgeable and effective facilitators. Each challenge course is unique; each has varying elements, both high and low. However the one thread that makes any challenge course effective and connected is the group facilitator. Beyond the physical aspect of the course, challenge course programming can only be successful when it exhibits the purpose, strategies, people, and tools to support it (Rohnke, 2007).

A challenge course facilitator must undergo heavy training, usually in the form of a five day intensive full day certificate course or more (ACCT guidelines). The facilitator is the person who dictates the program for the day and therefore shapes the overall experience. Its flexibility and adaptability are two of the key factors in making challenge course an effective program (Stanchfield, 2007). The facilitator has the freedom to be adaptable and he or she should always mold the challenge course experience around the specific group needs (Stanchfield, 2007).

Ever since the 1960s, challenge course has been utilized mostly in at risk youth serving spheres. Since the early days of its adoption, challenge course has been utilized in a multitude of

areas including the U.S army, in youth hospital settings and even on occasion for therapeutic needs, again mostly in at risk spheres (Attarian,2005 & Autry 2001). More recently challenge course has become much more standardized in practice and more prevalent outside of those domains specific to its early implementation (ACCT, 1993).

### **Does it Work?**

There is much research demonstrating the effectiveness of one day challenge course sessions in areas such as group cohesion; research also demonstrates individual benefits, such as promotion of belief in self (Clem,2012, Dattilob, 2007, Hatch,2005 Chakravorty et al., 1995; Priest 1998). Clem (2012) for instance, focused on a group of coworkers who were participating in a one day session of challenge course. This one day group event had a focus on team work and camaraderie. The findings showed that the participants believed that the concepts during the day were identified, and an enhanced sense of camaraderie was acknowledged as well. This data has been replicated several times over many years (Chakravorty et al., 1995; Priest 1998, Kupritz & Powers, 2003) for many different types of groups, including coworkers, youth classmates, and afterschool programs, all with similar success.

The type of group participating, such as a work group or a school club, also drastically changes the benefits of the effectiveness of the program (Anderson,1995). If a group comes into a challenge course session already high in group cohesiveness, they have less room to develop positively in that realm (Anderson,1995). Similarly if a group comes into a session with no or little prior experience with one another and then does not maintain the group moving forward, the effectiveness on an individual and group level of the challenge course session will slowly

over time become mute (Hatch,2005). Subsequently, one way in which challenge course programming is most effective is when group members come into a program as acquaintances, or even strangers, and maintain contact following the challenge course programming in some capacity, such as at school or at work (Hatch,2005).

Ultimately, due to the limited actual time participants spend in a challenge course experience (being typically a single day), some benefits of the experience have a waning impact over time (Clem,2012). This question then follows: if a challenge course one day experience has a drastic effect on the targeted areas, in the short term and even some lasting effects, does it not stand to reason that the longer duration of a challenge course experience should have more lasting positive effects?

### **Similarities between CC and PYD**

Competence, Confidence, Connection, Character, Caring and Contribution (Lerner et. al., 2014) are collectively known as the 6 Cs of PYD. Central to the Positive Youth Development Perspective, they are understood as the indicators of overall positive youth development that ultimately lead to *Thriving*. What is striking about the 6 Cs of PYD and challenge course Programming is that each of the 6 Cs are utilized as key building points in facilitation, and are enacted through physical manifestations to build other positive values in a supportive atmosphere. How the elements are built, coupled with how the facilitator leads a group, will determine how these indicators of Positive youth Development can be promoted.

Participants of CC have many opportunities to develop cognitive competence within the programming. Since making personal and group decisions in games and in the high and low

elements are essential, cognitive competence is manufactured. Competence in areas such as decision making and communication is within challenge course programming.

Connection and Caring in the challenge course setting can be seen as interlocked and development in these areas to occur conjointly. Many activities within CC programming are specialized to engage participants in a group setting. As these activities and challenges are conducted on this group level, a natural connection between group members is built, especially over time. Further, features of caring are also within CC programming. Challenge course programming is not competitive; rather, it is based within group and personal exploration, allowing room for participants to care about the well-being and personal successes of those around them.

Character development is heavily encouraged in challenge course programming. Elements both high and low, and even CC games, can be utilized to effect situational boundaries that offer the participants a laboratory to navigate these regulations. These situational boundaries could be the heightened expression of societal rules, or perhaps community expectations in game or activity form. It is true that these expressions are manufactured simulations of larger entities, however they offer the participants real development opportunities within the indicator of Character.

Similar to Character development in CC programming, growth within the category of Contribution happens in this laboratory setting. The facilitator must adjust programming to leave room for the expression and manifestation of particular values that promote Contribution. The development of Confidence within challenge course programming is accomplished through the

combination and repetition of the other Cs of PYD, as well as through general CC programming.

Beyond the 6 Cs of PYD, challenge course programming mirrors PYD because of the flexibility assumed in both experiences. For challenge course, this flexibility is expressed by the facilitator being able to shape events based on the needs of the group, as well as their having a great many of options to utilize in relation to the actual physical and non-physical resources on the course. The expression of flexibility within Positive Youth Development comes in various forms. The main mode of this flexibility comes from the assumption of human plasticity within the perspective. This potential for systematic change throughout development (Lerner et. al.,2005), is the principle which determines that there is no “one size fit all” path towards *Thriving*, rather an unlimited number of pathways with common guidelines. In fact is it this assumption in PYD that heightens the importance and effectiveness of challenge course.

CC and PYD stress that there should be an inherent optimism shared by programmers that all youth have the ability to succeed. Within the Positive Youth Development Perspective this assumption can be expressed because plasticity exists and can be the variable for positive change in any person (Lerner et. al.,2005). Within challenge course programming, it is assumed that all participants are capable of achieving the challenges they develop for themselves.

### **Challenge Course as a PYD Program:**

Before offering further PYD and challenge course (CC) programming intersections, this paper will examine if challenge course in its most utilized form meets the criteria for a PYD program.

According to Roth and Brooks-Gunn (2003), specific program activities, atmosphere, and

goals are the three defining elements of youth development programs that differentiate them from other programs for adolescents (Roth & Brooks-Gunn 2003). Specifically, Positive Youth Development programs are characterized by an atmosphere of hope, caring, safety, cultural appropriateness, and respect for adolescents' abilities to make choices and bear responsibility. Moreover these programs' activities provide opportunities for active involvement and for meeting new challenges.

Hope is a main factor in challenge course. Each element (both high and low), is designed to keep one's comfort zone expanding in various arenas (Rohnke, 2006). Development in areas such as team communication assist participants' ability to feel like they are growing in these aspects of their lives that they may have believed they have had trouble in previously, creating room for self-efficacy and hope (Constintine,1993).

Next, caring and safety needs are the great concerns of any modern challenge course facilitator, program and course (ACCT Guidelines). Since challenge course programs have out grown their inception in the military years ago (Attarian, 2005), and owing to a prior lack in standardized safety requirements, a regulatory agency across all challenge course facilitators called the Association for Challenge Course Technology (ACCT),has been created (Rohnke, 2006). This entity has created guidelines that all practitioners in utilizing challenge course must abide by. In this way any future growth in this field will always be characterized by the same concern and steps taken to in challenge course to assure for safety.

Caring for the participants' emotional well-being and potential growth is also a key concern in challenge course programing. Developing a safe space to encourage communication,

and overall growth during programming is key to any CC event (Rohnke, 2006). Not addressing concerns of care in a challenge course space may result in more damage to participants than growth indicators (Gordon & Lewis, 2000). Understanding the negative impact that could occur if practitioners did not have safeguards in place, challenge course training must focus on the prevention of such risk factors (Rohnke, 2006).

Cultural Appropriateness, arrived at by reflecting on the demographic a program serves, is another criteria for a positive youth development program. Nowhere in the literature nor in my personal training has there been training specifically on cultural appropriateness or the reflection of the demographic CC serves. However, it is standard practice for practitioners to design the challenge course session based on group need (Attarian, 2005). Since it is typical to form the activities of the day based on the group members' needs, challenge course programming becomes not only dynamic but proves extremely versatile. At-risk youth (Combs, 2001), college students (Breheny, 2000) and many other groups have benefited from challenge course programming. With proper preparatory information, a facilitator should be able to mold CC programs and elements to be beneficial for any group of participants (Stanchfield, 2007).

Respect for adolescents' abilities to make choices and bear responsibility is also required in a PYD program. Challenge course programming centers on this ideology. In fact, the "challenge" in challenge course stands for ability the participants have to challenge themselves in these physical elements which engage and strengthen specific values and skills (Attarian, 2005). One can visualize challenge course as a "choose your own adventure book" experience where the participants are given choices in programming and where each participant, and only the participant, is master in choosing in which ways of engagement is appropriate for themselves.

Thus, while participants are provided with many opportunities for active involvement in the elements and for meeting new challenges, the level in which they feel safe and comfortable with engaging in said activities is the guiding every PYD program has to demonstrate that it has taken measurements of positive and problematic outcomes. While there is no requirement for practitioners of CC to have formal measurements at the beginning and end of the CC session, it is within good practice (Rohnke, 2006) to engage in a debrief session at the conclusion of the session. The whole of the session is to be reviewed and usually the facilitator asks the participants to apply what they had learned during the session to their lives outside of the program. While this is not a method to gather data, it does act as a powerful tool in reflection for the participants and even the facilitator.

Structured curriculum is to varying degrees another indicator of an effective PYD program within current challenge course programming. By utilizing the same set of elements on any specific challenge course, the facilitator has a set of choices to utilize for programming. However this “curriculum” changes naturally based on the group need and session. In the traditional sense however there is not a structured curriculum. The last of the PYD program criteria is that the program must have a significant duration, usually around 9 months (Catalano, 2004). In its current form, challenge course does not meet this criteria.

*Positive Youth Development Program Indicator*      *Does current CC Programing Engage Indicator*

<i>Hope and Safety needs</i>	YES
<i>Caring for participants' emotional well-being</i>	YES
<i>Cultural Appropriateness</i>	YES
<i>Adolescents' abilities to make choices and bear responsibility within the program</i>	YES
<i>Measurements of positive and problem outcomes</i>	NO
<i>Structured curriculum</i>	Yes and NO
<i>Significant duration</i>	NO

Figure 4

Unfortunately, challenge Course in its current form does not meet the criteria outlined to be regarded as a Positive youth Development program as it does not meet all of the requirements (Figure 4). That is not to say that CC in its current form cannot or is not presently contributing to the positive development of youth as a youth centered program. However if CC could make a few programming changes, it could meet the requirements to be a PYD program. Thus challenge Course programming has the potential to become a Positive Youth Development program.

## **Conclusion**

In its current form challenge course programming does not have the qualities outlined to be considered a Positive Youth Development program. However this does not exclude CC programming from future growth in the PYD program indicators that it presently lacks, such as measurements of positive and problematic outcomes, a more structured curriculum, and a significant duration(Roth & Brooks-Gunn 2003,; Catalono et al., 2004). In fact, if alterations to the present challenge course form in the indicators highlighted did take place, challenge course would meet and in many indicators, exceed the necessary requirements to be a Positive Youth Development Program. Below, three distinct and potentially beneficial future programming ideas that integrate PYD and challenge course programming are explored. Each includes a differentiation in target demographics as well as methods in which to engage the missing indicators.

## **Future Programing**

### *Proposal #1*

The first proposal is to shift challenge course programming into a standalone afterschool program. As an afterschool program, CC would be able to maintain most everything that makes it unique and a powerful tool for development while also satisfying the remainder of the PYD program indicators. Perhaps most powerfully, the duration of programming would vastly grow, moving CC programming from a singular day program to a seasonal, semester or even yearlong program. As a byproduct of a longer duration, a more structured curriculum would naturally be required. Similarly, because of the longer duration, taking measurements of the outcomes of the

programming would be much easier and would provide further content to be extremely useful for future development in this field of knowledge. Further still, as a long-term program, the group facilitator and staff would become longer term coach-like figures. This would promote the positive adult/youth relationships that have been indicated as a key factor in PYD literature.

Present literature has explored which ways challenge course programming is most effective. It has been found that the programming is especially effective when a group comes into a program as acquaintances or even strangers and maintains contact following the challenge course programming in some sort of capacity, such as at school or at work (Hatch,2005). If CC programming in a one day setting is extremely effective in creating positive outcomes on persons that maintain contact or work with one another in some fashion, having participants in this new form of CC who all attend the same school and who may even be in the same grade or classroom for an extended duration would create lasting and powerful positive growth in participants.

Another proposal for ensuring all indicators for a PYD program are being employed is a challenge course centered afterschool program that would be interwoven with social justice learning and initiatives. Through current CC programming bolsters the development of qualities and skills such as trust, leadership and teamwork. Extending these features to the larger society and world through a lens of social justice may also create powerful and lasting positive effects on the program's youth. This idea would engage the development in multiple indicators of the Positive Youth Development perspective including, Character, Connection and Contribution (see page16).

*Proposal #2*

Alternatively, another potential future beneficial collaboration that would best promote positive development in youths' lives would be to integrate a challenge course agent within an already existing youth development program or model. By being incorporated into an existing program like 4-H, Boys and Girl Clubs of America, and many other youth programs, challenge course programming would be able to showcase physical manifestations of the values being promoted in a certain established youth centered program. In this way the PYD program requirements that are currently not being met would be addressed. The program would already have a significant duration since the majority of these youth centered programs are specifically tailored for longer periods of time. In this scenario, there would be an established umbrella curriculum that could be better fitted with the integration of challenge course programming. Also there would be ample time to create and test for measurements of successes of the program. For this approach to be successful, the established program would need to heavily conjoin with challenge course programming. For larger extremely established youth centered programs like the 4-H program, this would be improbable, since the F-H program already meets the requirements for a PYD program and would already have established a unique identity.

*Proposal #3*

Challenge courses were mostly utilized to facilitate positive growth in mostly youth 'at risk' or rehabilitation spheres (Attarian,2005 & Autry 2001). While more contemporary uses of challenge course programming may include work in these domains, utilization is not restricted to them. However, while perhaps not a deliberate transition from current CC programming to a PYD

program, it seems that the utilization of challenge courses and programming in a therapy setting has been effective. It has shown to be effective in spheres that are commonly attributed with extremely high need. Therefore it stands to reason that utilizing challenge course programming in youth therapy settings outside of ‘at risk’ or rehabilitation therapies could be extremely effective. While this specific idea for the promotion of the relationship of PYD and CC is strong, there are a few limiting factors.

The first is that the practitioner, in this case a mental health professional, would also have to be a certified challenge course facilitator with many hours of training. Another limitation (which is also a limitation that is shared for all of the proposed applications outlined in this section), is that challenge courses are expensive to build and require a large outdoor physical space to be effective.

Even with the limitations examined above, the three proposals I have outlined are each distinct and potentially beneficial future programming ideas that integrate PYD and challenge course programming. Each is differentiated in target demographics, as well as methods in which to engage the missing indicators and even strengthen the already rich interplay between the Positive Youth Development perspective and challenge course programming.

This paper has explored what the Positive Youth Development (PYD) perspective is, the applications of it, and even the growing research topics within this model in the contemporary state of the discourse community. This paper has also demonstrated the importance of developmental assets and PYD centered programs in the human journey towards *Thriving*. This paper was also concerned with the explanation of challenge course programming, its strengths,

the literature behind supporting them, and the merits of challenge course as a PYD program.

Once the merits and limitations of challenge course were established and explored, this paper offered a few ideas for future challenge course programming that would meet the requirements for becoming a Positive Youth Development centered program. Finally, this work has been completed as an initial step to assist ultimately in the implementation of a joint PYD-CC program that has the potential to promote the development of youth *Thriving*.

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Figure 1.\* [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ecological\\_systems\\_theory](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ecological_systems_theory)

## Appendix

### Appendix A.



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[http://www.grafton.k12.wi.us/picture\\_yourself\\_in\\_grafton/grafton\\_school\\_district\\_challenge\\_course\\_\\_\\_d\\_r\\_a\\_f/whale\\_watch](http://www.grafton.k12.wi.us/picture_yourself_in_grafton/grafton_school_district_challenge_course___d_r_a_f/whale_watch)

## Acknowledgements

This paper would have never come to completion without assistance from a couple of hardworking, caring and extremely knowledgeable people. I am deeply grateful to Dr. Tina Burdsall, who took me and this project on with a smile. Her continued belief in it and me were key in this projects completion. Dr. David Wolf was also of extreme importance. His mastery of the English language and his deep care for students' well-being are so admirable. I cannot stress enough or thank him enough for how far and beyond the call of duty he went for this project. I would also like to thank DeAnna Pickett and the Synergo team whole heartedly for their continuous assistance in this project. Their knowledge and skills were tantamount to the quality of this work. Thank you also to the PSU Urban Honors College including Dr. Ann Marie Fallon and Nora Quiros!