A New Generation of Positive Youth Development:

Inclusive Opportunity and Contribution for All Youth through Critical Developmental Relationships

Peter C. Scales, Ph.D.

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The opinions expressed in this essay are solely mine, and are not necessarily shared by Search Institute.

I thank my colleagues at Search Institute over the last 30 years, and so many other colleagues in those years and long before, over my 50-year career in positive youth development. This is my final summative essay about what I have seen, what I have been a part of, and what I think needs to happen now, for positive youth development as a field to continue its march onward as a force for good in the world, to continue making life better for millions of young people around the world, across political, racial, religious, sexual and gender, disability, and economic lines.

It has been a privilege to be part of all this over the last 50 years.

Note: This is the final essay Peter C. Scales wrote for Search Institute upon his retirement from Search on June 1, 2025, on the occasion of his 30th anniversary with Search Institute.

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Peter C. Scales, Ph.D.

I write this essay having now worked for more than 50 years at various times and in various roles across the country as a scholar, researcher, practitioner, policymaker, and advocate for positive child and youth development, and upon my retirement as a staff member for the last 30 years as Senior Fellow for Search Institute.

I have had the good fortune to work on many teams, at Search Institute and other organizations, of incredibly talented and dedicated colleagues and with countless organizational partners around the world in those five decades, working together on meaningful issues that I believe it is accurate to say have made a positive difference in the quality of life for millions of young people—perhaps tens of millions—worldwide. It has been both exhilarating and humbling to be part of all that. We as a field have come so far in promoting equitable positive youth development for all young people. And yet there is such a great distance yet to go, as this paper highlights.

This essay reviews the origins of and key influences on the field of Positive Youth Development (PYD) and Search Institute's central role in the development of the field. I then narrow the focus to the role of developmental relationships within the broader PYD field, and highlight Search Institute's more recent creation of the developmental relationships framework for promoting youth thriving, and the role of youths' experience of those developmentally-influential relationships as the driving energy for the external and internal developmental assets all youth need to thrive. The essay ends by discussing several themes that can be key parts of a research and practice agenda for a new generation of PYD that places developmental relationships as a critical vehicle for promoting opportunity and contribution for all youth, and the thriving of both youth and society.

In 2025, policy changes and executive orders have significantly affected efforts to promote equity and developmental supports for young people. These shifts—well documented in national media—have included large-scale defunding of DEI initiatives and research, and new federal reporting mechanisms encouraging federal workers to report fellow colleagues (Shear, 2025), that have created a chilling effect on those working in youth development. In this environment, it is more important than ever for PYD researchers and practitioners to remain steadfast in communicating the long-term benefits of equitable, culturally responsive approaches to ensure that every young person is provided the developmental assets and relationships they need for a fair opportunity to succeed.

The perspective that animates this essay draws on the last 35 years of PYD work and on the conceptualizations of adverse childhood experiences (ACES) and protective and compensatory experiences (PACES), plus more recent discoveries from studies of adolescent brain development. Together, these data yield both an agenda for a new generation of PYD research and practice and an optimistic conclusion about what can be possible, if public and political will can be harnessed, to strengthen the youth support ecosystem so that every young person can thrive. For example, as the National Academies report extensively documented, the "defining characteristics of the adolescent brain are malleability and plasticity…[that] generate unique opportunities for learning, exploration, and growth" (National Academies, 2019, p. 19).

For more than three decades, the field of research and practice known as positive youth development (PYD) has had considerable influence in shaping how scholars and practitioners view and help adolescents (Benson et al., 2006). Since 1990, PYD has shifted the predominant emphasis about adolescence from focusing on youth deficits and preventing negative outcomes, to identifying youth strengths and assets and promoting positive outcomes. Rather than assuming that youth are empty vessels waiting to be filled with adult values and knowledge, PYD has elevated the potential, possibilities, and capacities of young people as actors and influencers in their own positive development and as contributors to the betterment of larger society. It has helped scholars and practitioners to see all youth through the lens of possibility and promise, including so-called "at-risk" youth (Damon, 2004).

In these ways, it has offered an optimistic perspective on both adolescents and adolescence. A contemporary definition of PYD shepherded by the Forum for Youth Investment captures some of this emphasis: "Positive youth development (PYD) is the process by which young people become active, engaged, and competent within receptive, supportive, and nurturing ecologies." To truly promote PYD, these ecologies must provide equitable growth opportunities, especially for historically marginalized youth[1] (Redmond et al., 2025)

Adolescent Thriving: Individual Purpose Plus Social Contribution

The ultimate outcome of all PYD, and in particular, of young people experiencing a rich array of developmental relationships, is for all young people to be able to realize both their individual purposes and positive contributions to their families, communities, and societies. Thriving is thus conceived as a combination of individual purpose plus social contribution. Social contribution can take many forms, and not all young people will be drawn to wider social change efforts. But one form of social contribution certainly is for youth to help other youth and adults to acknowledge and work to eliminate the structural foundations of marginalization-based trauma that are rooted most deeply in racism and all forms of discrimination.

In this light, I and my co-authors also have raised the question of whether social and political activism needs to be considered a fundamental part of how

adolescent thriving is conceptualized and measured (Scales, Redmond et al., 2023). Dill and Ozer (2019), for example, suggested that young people need "critical social capital" that not only helps them pursue their personal intrinsic interests and sparks but that also marshals political consciousness and positive racial identity to address racism, police violence, and neighborhood violence, among other issues affecting equity of opportunity. This is an especially pertinent question because the notion of thriving we have put forward (e.g., Benson & Scales, 2009) has always been "not only about the individual young person's optimal development, but also how that young person, embedded in relational webs that support them and their intrinsic interests, uses their gifts and passions together with others to make the world a better place" (Scales, Redmond et al., 2023, p. 16).

This linkage between individual purpose and social contribution has long been held up as the sine qua non of adolescent thriving (e.g., Benson et al., 1998; Benson & Scales, 2009; Damon, 2003; Lerner et al., 2003; Lerner et al., 2005): "Optimal development or thriving is not just about how youth are doing, but how their well-being and the well-being of the families, schools, communities, activities, and programs they are in are bidirectionally connected"—Scales, 2017, p. 27). This fundamental notion about thriving has been elaborated by the National Academy of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (2019) report on The Promise of Adolescence, in which NASEM repeatedly underscored the inevitable association between how adolescents develop, and the health and well-being of society, i.e., the connection between positive individual development and the quality of society.

A Brief History of Positive Youth Development

The ideas of ACES, and more recently, PACES, or even of the concept of PYD as a youth support ecosystem, are not new, of course. The history of youth development as a field began with seeds planted in the 1890s and early 1900s by the YMCA of the USA and similar organizations meant to keep young men, and later women, on a moral path and away from negative influences. Youth development as a field of study and research, however, began in earnest with efforts in the 1940s to curb juvenile delinquency, i.e., it was focusing on the prevention of negative developmental outcomes and the risks that contributed to those undesirable outcomes (Benson et al., 2006).

The early attention by Michael Rutter, Norman Garmezy, Emmy Werner, and others to what Masten (2001) memorably called the "ordinary magic" of resilience also was about how people achieved adequate developmental outcomes in the face of risk, but not yet about how they could thrive despite those risk factors, with at least one relationship with a caring adult usually identified as the key to resilience. Still later, University of Washington researchers built on these strands in defining the Social Development Model that conceptualized both risk and protective factors working together to affect developmental trajectories (Catalano et al., 2021; Hawkins & Weiss, 1985), with the notion

of protective factors in resilience getting a further boost among researchers and practitioners in the early 1990s through the literature synthesis and writing of Bonnie Benard (2012). In the late 1980s, attention to positive youth development, and especially those who came from historically-marginalized backgrounds, got significant attention from two major reports, one on young adolescents and the institutions that serve them, from the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development (1989), and the other from the W. T. Grant Foundation's Commission on Youth and America's Future (1988), focusing on the challenges facing the "forgotten half" of youth ages 16-24 who were not going on to college.

In all of these efforts, the importance of relationships to resilience and successful development was underscored as the single most crucial environmental factor shaping development, but they placed relationships within an examination of how structurally, institutions were or were not meeting the needs of young people and their families. That critical examination was given significant impetus by the efforts of scholars such as Ron Edmonds in the field of education (1979), who championed "disaggregating" the data to get underneath whole-school averages to understand better how different demographic groups of youth had consistently different academic outcomes. He also showed that with equitable educational resources, such as teachers having high expectations of them, children from poor, urban backgrounds could succeed at school as much as more affluent children could.

PYD and Community Action

A watershed moment in the emergence of PYD as a field occurred in 1990, with the publication of Search Institute's Developmental Assets Framework (Benson, 1990), which was the first comprehensive framework to focus on promotion of positive development more than on prevention of negative development, and which over the subsequent 20 years became the most widely-cited PYD framework in the world (Benson et al., 2011), with developmental assets research having been conducted in more than 30 languages and more than 30 countries worldwide (Scales et al., 2017). The assets framework of Benson and colleagues initially named 30 and later 40 external (relationships and opportunities) and internal assets (values, skills, and self-perceptions) that the literature had consistently shown to be linked to positive developmental outcomes across diverse demographic groups of children and youth (Benson et al., 2011; Scales & Leffert, 2004; Scales et al., 2004; Syvertsen et al., 2019). Also around this period in the early to mid-1990s, Pittman and colleagues at the Academy for Education Development's Center for Youth Development and Policy Research were sharpening the argument that prevention of youth problems—the historical aim of most programs for youth—was not enough for successful youth development, captured most notably in Pittman's phrase "problem free is not fully prepared" (Pittman & Fleming, 1991).

Around the same time, Connell and Gambone were creating their Community Action Framework for Youth Development (Connell et al., 2001), which did not

articulate as comprehensive a set of assets youth need as did the developmental assets approach, but which greatly expanded the field's understanding of the role of community organizations and resources in providing the resources youth needed to learn how to be productive, healthy, and successfully navigate their worlds, and suggested metrics for assessing success. Simultaneously, Search Institute started its Healthy Communities-Healthy Youth initiative, which foreshadowed PYD as a youth support ecosystem by drawing on core principles of community development, social marketing, and organizational change to help hundreds of communities in the U.S. and Canada become "relational and intergenerational ecologies, with a critical mass of members and socializing institutions (e.g., families, schools, neighborhoods, youth organizations, religious communities) choosing to attend to the developmental needs of *all* children and adolescents" (Scales et al., 2023, p. 19, italics in original). The focus on the broader community responsibility for positive youth development was given considerable energy by the landmark 2002 National Academies of Science's still-influential report on Community Programs for Youth (Eccles & Gootman, 2002), which drew heavily on Search Institute's Developmental Assets Framework and other PYD conceptualizations.

Key tenets of this healthy communities-level approach to building a Developmental Assets ecology were developmental redundancy (children and adolescents experiencing asset-promoting people and environments across multiple contexts), developmental reach (nurturing most or all the assets young people need), and developmental breadth or inclusivity (purposefully extending asset-building energy to all children and adolescents). Later influential conceptualizations of PYD, such as the 5 promises of the America's Promise Alliance (Scales et al., 2008), or Lerner and colleagues' 5 C's of youth development (Lerner et al., 2015), or Search Institute's seminal work on adolescent thriving and sparks in a collaboration with Tufts and Stanford Universities and Fuller Theological Seminary (Benson & Scales, 2009), and more recently, its articulation of a framework of developmental relationships that I discuss further below (Pekel et al., 2018; Houltberg et al., 2023), owed their creation to the contributions of all those research, practice, and policy initiatives that came before.

Thus, the recent emphasis on PACES--protective and compensatory experiences rooted in relationships and resources—and on PYD as a youth support ecosystem is not a new idea, but a reframing of many of the key concepts and contributions of the last 35-40 years that have shaped the evolution of PYD. What is new is combining the concept of PACES—especially the notion that recovery from past harms requires relational healing—with recent advances in the neuroscientific understanding of the developing brain in adolescence. This combination of focusing on protective/promotive and compensatory experiences and the increasing demonstration from imaging studies of the capacity for change in the adolescent brain—its plasticity--provides a new

sense of the opportunity societies have to promote not only resilience but thriving in young people, especially with and for those young people who have suffered trauma, including the trauma of oppression and marginalization.

For the last few decades, despite the growth of the PYD movement, investment in children and youth has been more about investment in early childhood. The economic studies of James Heckman and others (Garcia et al., 2017; Heckman, 2024) have demonstrated that such investment in young children is wise, paying off many times over the investment, through better child development and adult education, earnings, and family stability, and less public money spent on remediation or punishment. Similar data are available showing investing in adolescents also pays off handsomely in these ways (e.g., Sheehan et al., 2017; and World Health Organization, 2024, showing worldwide economic returns of US$5-$28 for scores of interventions in adolescent health, education and training, and prevention of aggression). But there are fewer such studies and less public will to support these programs and policies than when it comes to investing in early childhood, in part because of a long-standing negative narrative and public image about who adolescents are and what they are capable of (see discussion in Scales, 2001), most especially a "deeply ingrained tendency to view adolescence as mainly a time of vulnerability and risk" (National Academies, 2019, p. 18).

But our increasing scientific understanding of the developing adolescent shows there is promise and opportunity in this period. For example, the National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine (2019) noted that "improving developmental trajectories in early adolescence (e.g., through health, education, and social development) can be an effective strategy for preventing many of the behavioral and emotional health problems that typically emerge in late adolescence—including the increasing rate of substance use, depression, anxiety, suicide, and school failure" (p. 355). The simplest message of the last few decades of research in PYD and especially in the last decade of neuroscience about adolescence is that, when it comes to adolescence and adolescents, it is not too late.

Limitations in the Field of Positive Youth Development

And yet, for all its contributions, PYD as both a field of research and a discipline of practice has had limitations. Chief among these is that the emphasis on positive youth development has unintentionally given less attention to the large proportion of adolescents whose developmental experiences have been anything but positive, who have lived through adverse childhood experiences and trauma, including being the targets of historical oppression, that require not just resilience but deep healing (Infurna et al., 2024). Inevitably, this requires a profound understanding of the cumulative impact of such trauma and the larger socio-political context in which it is experienced. As Bryant (2024) noted, "each act or incident of the manifestation of oppression, whether it be on the form of an insult, invalidation, dismissal, stereotype, or discrimination, should not be looked at in isolation but

in the context of living in a society of pervasive, repeated, normalized, and often excused, violations" (p. 685). Or, as Infurna et al. (2024) observed, "...adversities and trauma often arise from multiple levels, compound over time, and persist without clear boundaries. This perspective challenges the traditional view of adversity as discrete events with definite start and end points" (p. 990).

Relatedly, while PYD has always intended to be inclusive in terms of its attention and relevance to all youth regardless of race, ethnicity, socioeconomic background, gender identity, sexual orientation, or history of marginalization because of those social markers, it has often been about providing equality of opportunity more so than providing equity of opportunity that can meaningfully reduce disparities in opportunity and in important educational, psychological, social-emotional, physical, and civic outcomes. Equal opportunity incorrectly assumes all children begin at the same starting line; however, differences in historical background continue to ensure that some youth start their opportunity journey far ahead with extensive privilege, while other youth start far behind with extensive exclusion from privilege.

Similarly, that principle of universalism—that all youth have potential and that all youth need similar kinds of external and internal assets, such as supportive relationships, social-emotional competencies, and a sense of agency—can prevent researchers and practitioners from better understanding and contextualizing diverse cultural responsiveness in how PYD concepts are framed, how that youth potential is fostered, and how those assets are provided, not only in the diverse U.S. context but more globally. For example, personal self-identity is the core conceptualization of identity emphasized in the great majority of PYD research, but the "self" is not centered in that same way in the development of youth worldwide, with, for example, national and political identity having been found to be a critical part of Latin American adolescents' identity development (Gibbons, 2024). Likewise, the importance of racial socialization practices for the well-being of African-American youth (e.g., Umaña-Taylor & Hill, 2020), is often not well-represented in broad and popular PYD frameworks intended to describe universal aspects of human development (see Redmond et al., 2025 for further discussion of emerging frameworks that broaden cultural representation).

Relationships as the Oxygen of Human Development

To this point of the essay, the focus has been on PYD broadly. But an additional limitation of PYD is how it has, until very recently, defined positive relationships. The attention of the rest of this essay is on those relationships.

PYD has always identified positive relationships as the heart of what young people need to thrive—the "oxygen of human development" as PYD pioneer Peter L. Benson called it (2008)—yet too often PYD scholars have relied on an insufficiently comprehensive conceptualization of those relationships as needing mainly to be "supportive" or "caring." While obviously important, emphasizing those qualities that define

"caring" can overlook other elements of developmentally-influential relationships that can shape PYD for all youth and that may be especially relevant for youth who have experienced ACES, particularly those experiencing historical marginalization.

These other aspects of relationships include providing various instrumental and emotional supports for young people, sharing power with them and promoting their agency, and expanding young people's sense of what is possible in their life course. Ultimately, developmental relationships can help young people see and develop the capacities to use their interests and skills and the assets of their families and communities to develop a sense of purpose and contribute to their families and communities, now and in the future (Osher et al., 2020).

The relational elements beyond "caring" add meaningfully to adolescent well-being. For example, the positive effects of developmental relationships are stronger and/or more pervasive when using the comprehensive construct of all five elements of developmental relationships as a predictor than when using Express Care + Challenge Growth, or Care alone (Scales et al., 2023; Scales et al., 2020). Additionally, students who reported high scores on a more expanded measure of relational "social capital" with teachers also reported significantly higher academic motivation and better GPAs than students who reported low to moderate level of social capital. Here, high relational social capital encompassed high levels on all five elements of developmental relationships (i.e., express care, challenge growth, provide support, share power, and expand possibilities), plus high-levels of these students' teachers connecting students' interests and sparks to learning, and being culturally affirming to students (Scales et al. 2021).

Particularly in application with youth from historically marginalized communities, a more comprehensive view of "caring" relationships may also need to include a critical perspective (e.g., Dill & Ozer, 2019 on critical social capital). A critical perspective that examines larger social structures, systems, and norms beyond the individual's talents and gifts can help every young person, not just those from marginalized communities, not only adapt and adjust to majority culture norms when needed but also can enable them to contribute to efforts to lessen and eliminate structural roots of marginalization and oppression, including through community and political action.

In their discussion of the tensions preventing authentic adult-youth relationships with youth of color, for example, one ecological strength that Medina et al. (2020) noted was that community-based youth organizations within communities of color often focus on youth participation in precisely such "empowerment and resistance" as part of promoting equity in educational and career preparation and opportunities. The National Academies' Promise of Adolescence (2019) report also highlighted that youth contributing to family, school, and community is a potent means of promoting adolescents' meaning, purpose, autonomy, identity, and ability to form intimate relationships. They described how contribution

activates the same reward systems in the developing brain as do risky or rebellious activities. NASEM specifically recommended more opportunities for every young person to offer ideas and help to create wider social changes that promote fairness of opportunity and quality of life in their worlds.

The Creation of a Framework of Developmental Relationships

Strong relationships are at the heart of promoting PYD, and are grounded in larger theories of human development. The framework of developmental relationships that drove Search Institute's research from 2013 to the present is most deeply rooted in the tenets of self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000)—specifically, its identification of fundamental human motivational needs for autonomy, relatedness or belonging, and competence and their association with adaptive functioning. In this conceptualization, relationships that are caring or generally positive but that do not satisfy those three basic motivational needs are not as likely to have meaningful influences on well-being as are those that do contribute more substantially to autonomy, belonging, and competence. Thus, Search Institute has defined developmental relationships (adapted from Li & Julian, 2012, and Pekel et al., 2018) as close connections through which young people satisfy those needs for autonomy, belonging, and competence, by helping them discover who they are (their identity), cultivate abilities to shape their own lives (agency), and engage with and contribute to the world around them (contributions and connections to community).

This definition, and the conceptualization and measurement of developmental relationships, evolved over decades. In 2013, building off more than two decades of work creating, studying, and applying the Developmental Assets Framework (Benson et al., 2006; Benson et al., 2011) and a decade of work studying young people's development of deep personal interests or sparks and their relation to youth thriving (Benson & Scales, 2009; Scales et al., 2011; Scales, Redmond et al., 2023), Search Institute launched its work on developmental relationships. The studies on developmental assets, spiritual development, sparks, and thriving were foundational for the focus on developmental relationships for several reasons (see more in Scales, Hsieh et al. 2023).

First, the developmental assets framework was at its core always about how young people's relationships and opportunities ("external" assets) interacted with their values, skills, and self-perceptions ("internal" assets) to promote positive youth development (risk reduction, thriving, and resilience in the face of adversity). That is, relationships were not a new emphasis for positive youth development and the work at Search Institute, but a central part of the history of applied developmental science.

Second, the work on sparks and thriving led Search Institute to understand more fully how key relationships nurtured, or hindered, the expression and development of young people's deep personal interests, and how this process could promote or stifle personal and social identity, purpose, and the flourishing of both young people and the contexts they inhabit. That is, the focus

of Search Institute researchers and that of other scholars of applied developmental science (e.g., Lerner & Overton, 2008) has always been about how the fusion of relational opportunities and individuals' intrinsic interests and passions bidirectionally can produce not just positive youth development but positive adult, community, and societal development.

Finally, inherent in the decades of these applied research efforts toward understanding and building youth developmental assets, and sparks and thriving, was a commitment to equity, that all young people deserved and needed these relationships and opportunities in order to develop positively and contribute beyond themselves. The developmental relationships framework grew foremost out of this long and comprehensive history of studying and promoting relationships that would help all youth identify and nurture intrinsic interests and talents that could benefit themselves and their worlds. It was within that formative context that Search then more specifically built on Li and Julian's (2012) seminal paper on developmental relationships (which built on Bronfenbrenner's (1979) and Bronfenbrenner & Morris's (2006) work on the bioecological model of human development).

In more than a decade of Search Institute studies, the effects and correlates of developmental relationships on PYD are pervasive across demographics and domains of development, but too few young people experience strong developmental relationships, and there are disparities in who does (see Houltberg et al., 2023 for summary).

The linkage between developmental relationships and PYD is observed in both cross-sectional (one-time) studies (reviewed in Roehlkepartain et al., 2017; Scales, Roehlkepartain et al., 2022) and longitudinal research that follows the same youth over time (e.g., Scales et al., 2019; Scales et al., 2020; Syvertsen et al., 2016). Longitudinal studies also show that when developmental relationships increase over time, so do positive youth development outcomes (Scales et al., 2019; Syvertsen et al., 2016; 2022). However, in the school setting, only a minority of students (12%-40% depending on the study) say relationships with teachers get better over the school year (Scales et al., 2019; Scales et al., 2020), absent a special emphasis to strengthen those relationships. That is, student-teacher relationships do not appear to "naturally" get stronger over the school year in the absence of an intentional effort to strengthen them.

Context matters, too. In another study of more than 7,000 middle and high school students conducted over the first two years of the Covid-19 pandemic, we found that only 20% of students said relationships with teachers or OST staff had gotten stronger since before the pandemic, with 30% saying they'd gotten weaker (Scales, Ross, & Roskopf, 2025). But the perceptions about relationship quality change differed greatly by school and OST program setting. Our school sample had 12% reporting stronger relationships with teachers, in contrast to the OST program sample, where 2 1/2 times as many—31%--reported relationships getting stronger than they

were pre-pandemic. An even bigger difference was in perceptions of whether those relationships had gotten weaker over the pandemic: 4 in 10 students in the school sample (41%) said relationships with teachers had gotten weaker, compared with only 6% of students who said relationships with OST program staff got weaker.

Over more than a decade of research and practice on developmental relationships (building on another two decades of research and practice on the developmental assets youth need to thrive), Search Institute researchers put forward various heuristic sketches of a developmental relationships theory of change, drawing on numerous theories of development and bodies of relationships literature (see citations in Pekel et al., 2018, and Scales, Roehlkepartain et al., 2022).

The influences on that evolving theory have included positive youth development, bioecological theory, social learning theory, attachment and bonding, resilience, parenting and family relationships, student-teacher relationships, peer relationships, mentoring and other nonparent adult relationships, youth programs, community and social capital, and the central aspects of the understanding of human motivation and behavior put forth in self-determination theory (Jones et al., 2021; Ryan & Deci, 2000), most notably the motivating power of autonomy, belonging (called relatedness in the original), and competence. Although the name of "self-determination theory" sounds individualistic and ego-centered, the originators of self-determination theory have noted that "in both the scientific research and applied practices stemming from it, [it] is *centrally concerned with the social conditions* that facilitate or hinder human flourishing" (Ryan & Deci, 2017, p. 3, emphasis added).

Key Priorities for a New PYD/Youth Support Ecosystems Research Agenda

The key priorities discussed below enable the field to further posit and test the predictive associations between relationally-rich settings (including families, organizations, and peer groups), experiences of developmental relationships, and critical positive youth development outcomes.

Each of the following priorities for research and practice contributes to fleshing out our understanding of how a positive youth development ecosystem really happens (Pittman, 2023), specifically, how organizations commit to promotion of developmental relationships as a fundamental way to achieve their missions, and how youth who experience intentional, inclusive, and equitable developmental relationships achieve a variety of short- and long-term PYD outcomes, for themselves and for society.

Deepen understanding of the opportunities, challenges, resources, and dynamics of becoming a more relationally-rich organization

The field knows a good deal about the kinds of organizational structures, features, and climates that promote positive youth development, informed by a rich literature on effective schools and youth-serving organizations. For example, the National Research Council 2002 report on Community Programs for Youth

(Eccles & Gootman, 2002) has for more than 20 years been the single most comprehensive consensus statement about the features of youth development program quality. It reflected not only the consensus of scholars and practitioners at the time, but influenced the major program quality themes of other researchers and practitioners in the years since its publication, especially the emphasis on the centrality of relationships.

It named eight features of positive youth development settings that are as relevant today as when first released: Physical and psychological safety; appropriate structure; supportive relationships; opportunities to belong; positive social norms; support for efficacy and mattering; opportunities for skill building; and integration of family, school, and community efforts.

Often using differing language, all these features have appeared in numerous subsequent recommendations for organizations, programs, and training of those who work with youth (e.g., Bouffard & Little, 2004; Every Hour Counts, 2014; Smith et al., 2012; Vance, 2010; Wimer, Bouffard, and Little, 2005; Yohalem, Wilstrom-Ahlstrom, Fischer, & Shinn, 2011, and a more contemporary volume forthcoming: Arnold & Ferrari, 2025). Search Institute's own quality survey for OST positive youth development programs measures each of those eight features, for example (Search Institute, 2015).

Putting all this research and practice wisdom together, the broad summary of what organizations do (including schools, although more challenging in that setting) to promote PYD through high-quality programs is this (elaborated in Scales, 2017):

- Provide sustained developmental relationships that are both caring and challenging (Scales, 1999) but that also provide support, and opportunities for young people to share power with others and expand their sense of life possibilities (Pekel et al., 2018);
- Offer freely-chosen opportunities for youth to identify and have the support to pursue intrinsically motivating personal interests—sparks (Benson & Scales, 2009), combining the experience of flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) and the exercise of initiative (Larson, 2000);
- Facilitate acquisition and growth in cognitive, social-emotional, psychological, and behavioral skills that empower young people to use the pursuit of their sparks to develop noble purpose (Damon et al., 2003) and to contribute [the "6th C" of PYD, which is seen as the result of competence, confidence, connection, character, and caring--as articulated by Lerner and colleagues (2005)]—in life domains that are both personally and societally valued, that is, that enable both young people and their settings to thrive and flourish (Benson et al., 2006; J. V. Lerner et al., 2013).

So, the field knows a great deal about all this. The challenge is that we know more about what relationships and opportunities organizations should offer young people, and less about how organizations can do that. Exactly how should organizations implement the

processes and procedures needed in order to become relationally-rich places that are able to intentionally provide all those features of high-quality positive youth development settings in ways that are inclusive and fair for all youth?

This has implications for research designs, as well. Larger-scale quantitative, "variable-centered" approaches will always be needed in order to understand which elements and actions of developmental relationships and which features of organizational climate best predict particular outcomes on average. But understanding better how that occurs for particular youth, how it is experienced in specific contexts, and therefore how to encourage this to happen more in practice across a great diversity of settings and contexts, will take a greater investment in more ecologically-valid "person-centered" research designs (Lerner & Schmid, 2014). This also includes using more mixed-methods approaches that blend the "what" answers quantitative studies can provide with the "how" answers that can often come best from qualitative work.

Key research questions for helping organizations become more relationally-rich places include:

- Which organizational culture-creating, relationship-supporting structures and staff/volunteer mindsets, skills, and behaviors best contribute to organizations changing from being relationship-supportive to relationship-rich or centered places, in which the building of developmental relationships is intentional, includes all youth in the organization, and is fair and equitable across a diversity of lived experiences?
- What do organizations need to do, and how do they need to do it, to promote *adult* well-being, so that adults can be more effective partners in creating and sustaining developmental relationships with youth?
- What tools do differing organizations (e.g., schools, OST programs) need to measure and build their capacity to become more relationally-rich places, and how might this vary across contextual features (e.g., geographic setting, program structure, communities served)?
- How does changing the relational culture of an organization or setting help contribute to enhanced social capital and reduced unfairness of opportunity across multiple youth outcomes?
- What barriers to greater fairness in opportunity within organizations remain, even if an organization becomes more relationally rich?

Deepen understanding of the ways in which sociocultural and sociohistoric factors shape interpretations, experiences, and impacts of developmental relationships

The extensive literature reviews, focus groups, cognitive interviews, and pilot studies Search Institute did to create and shape the framework of developmental relationships (Pekel et al., 2018) suggested and then provided empirical support for the validity of the framework across sex, gender identity, middle and

high school levels, socioeconomic groups (generally designated on the basis of eligibility for free and reduced price lunch), multiple racial group designations, and Hispanic/Latina/o and non-Hispanic/Latina/o ethnicity (e.g., Syvertsen et al., 2025). Search's analytic samples have been reasonably to extremely large (ranging from hundreds of youth in a sample to more than 25,000) and diverse as well, ranging from 30%-60% students of color, and similar proportions of students eligible for free and reduced price lunch and/or feeling financial strain. The findings summarized earlier in this paper that higher levels of developmental relationships are correlated with and predict a variety of key positive youth outcomes, including academic motivation and better GPAs, have been replicated across all those sample diversities.

Nevertheless, despite the attentiveness to cultural representation, the developmental relationships framework was created by a group of researchers who until recently have been (mostly) White, non-Hispanic/Latina/o, relatively affluent, and cisgender. Much deeper examination of how each of the five elements and 20 actions in the framework is manifested in young people and communities of greater diversity is needed, initially at a descriptive level. In addition, more study is needed of how experiencing different accents among the five relational elements may have differing effects in shaping PYD outcomes for youth from differing racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds, among other diversities.

For example, Search Institute's research in middle and high schools suggests that young people growing up in poverty, young people of color, and/or youth who face discrimination in society may particularly benefit from relationships with teachers that feature high levels of the elements of Sharing Power and Expanding Possibilities, because those elements are associated with important components of social capital (Scales, Boat et al., 2020). That possibility is reinforced by studies that show positive and supportive relationships with teachers seem to have an even greater impact for students from low-income backgrounds (e.g., Pianta, 2016; Wentzel & Wigfield, 2009). Most studies of OST programs that address socioeconomic influences also report that students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds benefit even more from participation in after-school and extra/co-curricular activities, but that their participation in OST programs is markedly lower than that of youth from more affluent backgrounds, because of both availability and affordability issues (Aspen Institute, 2024; Barber et al., 2014; Heath, et al., 2018; Vandell et al., 2015). Future studies should investigate associations between elements of developmental relationships, accumulation of social capital, and outcomes in school and in OST programs with sufficiently large samples to have the power to detect possible differing paths of influence across varied demographic groups.

Similarly, both the broader field and Search's own research have reported mixed findings about the extent of positive, supportive, and developmental relationships with adults among different racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic groups of youth. For example, in one large

Search Institute study, African American (and Asian American/Pacific Islander) students reported *stronger* developmental relationships with teachers than other students (Search Institute, 2020). But in other studies of student-teacher developmental relationships, Search found no relational differences by race. In addition, family income sometimes is a differential predictor of developmental relationships, with students from lower-income backgrounds reporting less (e.g., Scales et al., 2020; Scales et al., 2021), but sometimes no differences have been found by income levels (e.g., Scales et al., 2019). Given such mixed findings, more research is needed with nationally representative samples to clarify where the true "gaps" in developmental relationships really are across the sociocultural spectrum, so that efforts to attain fairness of relational opportunity across groups of youth are accurately and sensitively targeted.

In the same way, to build more on strengths already present in young people's environments, the field needs to have a better understanding of how differing cultural norms affect both access to developmental relationships, and how they work to promote positive youth development. This may include variation in norms around how "family" and "community" are defined and experienced (Quimby et al., 2018; Scales et al., 2010; Stewart, 2007), which can shape openness to positive influence from non-familial adults.

Moreover, more attention needs to be given in both research and practice to ensure that the goal of cultivating developmental relationships does not inadvertently ignore or contribute to the perpetuation of long-standing racial, ethnic, socioeconomic, and other forms of systemic discrimination, and that, instead, a focus on building developmental relationships, in research and practice, serves as a force for promoting fairness and equity of opportunity. At its most basic, this means continued research through partnerships with schools and youth-serving organizations to understand what organizational policies, procedures, and practices lead most strongly, and over what time frames, to no demographic group of youth any longer reporting significantly less experience of developmental relationships than any other group of youth in that setting.

In this light, it is encouraging that a study Search Institute did of an aggregate sample of nearly 13,000 middle and high school students and more than 1,200 staff in schools, OST programs, and school-based student support programs (Search Institute, 2020a) found that settings that were high in reported developmental relationships also were high on an index of diversity, equity, and inclusion indicators (DEI). The DEI indicators included students feeling that all people were treated fairly in the setting no matter who they are, students being encouraged to share their culture or background, and students being encouraged to get to know others with differing cultural backgrounds. Specifically, only 6% of students with weak developmental relationships said those DEI indicators were mostly or completely true in their school or youth program, versus 30% who had moderate developmental relationships, and a

whopping 77% of those who had strong developmental relationships also reporting that their schools and programs supported diversity, equity, and inclusion in those ways.

These considerations lead to naming some key research questions for enhancing the cultural responsiveness of the developmental relationships framework and measures:

- Does experiencing different accents among the five DR elements have differing effects on PYD outcomes for youth from differing racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds, among other diversities?
- How are the associations between elements of developmental relationships, accumulation of social capital, and outcomes in school and in OST programs similar or different across varied demographic groups?
- Because results so far are mixed, what are the true "gaps" in youth experiencing developmental relationships across the sociocultural spectrum?
- How do differing norms within different cultural groups around how adults and youth "should" interact affect both youth access to developmental relationships, and how developmental relationships work to promote positive youth development within specific cultural settings?
- How can cultural strengths in differing cultures of intersectionality be built on to promote young people's opportunity to cultivate plentiful developmental relationships?

Better understand and activate young people themselves as drivers of developmental relationships

Relational and developmental systems theory, as well as family systems theories, have long held, and research has amply shown, that developmentally meaningful relationships are bidirectional, with each party influencing the other (Lerner, 1998). Both the literature and Search Institute's own studies have acknowledged as much, but other than the field of family studies, where research has shown for many decades how deeply children and parents influence each other, there is far less research in other settings in which the central question is about youths' effects on the relationship with adults.

Children's reciprocal effects on their caregivers has been a core topic in the early childhood and parenting literature for many decades, such as classic studies showing that "fussy" infants elicit less warm responses from caregivers. Emmy Werner and colleagues, for example, showed that over time, infants on the Hawaiian island of Kaua'i who smiled more had more extensive relationships with non-kin in the middle childhood years, and were more engaged in and did better at school as adolescents, among other positive long-term patterns (Werner & Smith,1992). The analogue in studies of student-teacher relationships may be the research showing that students who are well-behaved in the classroom are perceived as more capable by teachers, and then given both more challenging work and more support to succeed at it (Reeve, 2009). Likewise, the long-standing imbalances in school

discipline that African-American/Black students experience as compared to White students, even for comparable infractions (Del Toro & Wang, 2021; Skiba et al., 2002), is another example of how not only students' behavior, but non-malleable youth characteristics such as skin color clearly have an impact on teachers' relational and instructional behaviors.

Nevertheless, the bulk of research on student-teacher relationships, and youth-adult relationships in non-family settings, prioritizes what teachers and other adults do, not what young people do, to make a positive relationship "happen." This even extends to the nomenclature used: My impression from deep analysis of the literature is that the terms "teacher-student relationships" and "adult-youth relationships" are more often used than the terms Search has intentionally used, "student-teacher relationships," and "youth-adult relationships."[1] This emphasis on the teacher/adult side of the relationship has meant that most of the lessons from the research are about what adults can do to promote better relationships with youth. My and my colleagues' research in schools, for example, has put this same emphasis on teachers and teacher behaviors, despite our good intentions to rectify this imbalance by putting "student" first in the term. How all this research gets translated into practice thus has often overlooked a critical lever: the role of youth themselves as drivers of developmental relationships.

Lessons from studies of Youth-Initiated Mentoring (e.g., Schwartz et al., 2013), as well as service-learning and youth civic engagement more broadly (e.g., Wray-Lake et al., 2016), show that young people can indeed be trained to raise their skills in seeking out people who can mentor and guide them, and that their interest and engagement in authentic, community problem-solving activities is not only substantial, but can have equity-promoting effects. In one Search Institute study, for example, it was found that low-income students who engaged in service-learning opportunities to deal with real community issues had levels of engagement with school that were significantly better than the school engagement (and grades) of their low-income peers without service-learning. Even more striking was that the school engagement of low-income students who did service-learning was statistically indistinguishable from the school engagement of affluent students who did not do service-learning (Scales et al., 2006). Service—social contribution within a relational web of other youth and adults also doing service to make their communities better places to live—made the difference in their engagement with school and their grades, overcoming their economic disadvantage.

Among the key research questions for promoting more youth initiative in constructing developmental relationships are:

- If young people are introduced to the concept of developmental

[1] For example, a Google search in December 2022 yielded 542,000,000 hits for "teacher-student relationships," versus less than half that total, 242,000,000, for "student-teacher relationships."

relationships in schools and OST programs, can and will they take initiative and actions to build relational social capital in these settings and in other areas of their lives that helps them achieve their goals for education, work, and life?

- What needs to be done in schools and OST programs to accelerate youth initiative-taking in establishing and maintaining youth-adult developmental relationships, while maintaining protection of youth from inappropriate relationships with unscrupulous adults who would take advantage of such initiative on the part of young people?
- Are the conditions and actions needed to activate youths' initiative in relationship-making different in differing organizational contexts (e.g., school or school-sponsored v. religious organization v. community sports club)?

Deepen understanding of how young people experience and cultivate developmental relationships with their peers

The scientific study of peer relationships in childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood is a vast field, involving thousands of studies around the world over at least the last 60 years, and yielding numerous well-documented conclusions about the importance of positive peer relationships to well-being (e.g., Brown & Larson, 2009; Bukowski et al., 2020). Search Institute's own research and practice interest has occupied a quite narrow niche within that large space, exploring how peers within schools and youth-serving programs promote the specific five elements of the developmental relationships framework, with what effects and outcomes.

In one of the institute's early studies of peer relationships (Sullivan et al., 2016), four school-based peer programs were deeply examined. The conclusion was that the success of these programs was rooted in them "creating comfortable, safe spaces for young people to gather and learn from each other, take risks, and lead," and "curricula at all four sites [that] emphasized relational and skills-based activities...to strengthen and deepen trust and connections among participants" (p. 3). Among the key organizational supports that made this possible were frequent, sometimes daily interactions among staff and students, and among the youth themselves, recruiting diverse students, and providing intensive training for staff and student leaders.

Building on that work, there is a need to understand better the actions young people take that result in youth feeling that their peers are expressing care to them, challenging their growth, providing support to them, sharing power with them, and expanding their possibilities, and how to help youth activate those behaviors in various types of peer program settings. There is a need to know how valid the five elements and 20 actions in the developmental relationships framework are for describing what youth experience in their relationships with peers. Are there elements and/or actions that make sense within a youth-adult focus (the original developmental relationships framework), but that miss the mark in looking at

youth-youth relationships? Is something missing?

For example, in almost any youth-adult interaction, the adult typically has the greater power and status, and while there are almost always at least implicit negotiations for power going on in those interactions, it is the adult who almost always has been bestowed the greater formal influence by laws and social norms. But with peers and peer groups, status and power, acceptance and rejection, in-group and out-group are up for grabs, and are dynamic and evolving. The dance of peer competitiveness for status, prestige, and power is a central part of the ongoing crafting of personal and social identity (Brown & Larson, 2009). How do differences in those dynamics change what Share Power, or Challenge Growth, for example, look like in a peer-peer relationship as compared to a youth-adult one?

Similarly, does the theory of change look the same for how peer developmental relationships affect specific PYD outcomes as for how adults do? Having differing resources than adults do, peers can offer very different kinds of social capital than adults can. For example, adult social capital usually can link youth to more valuable resources for pursuing educational or occupational goals. But peer-provided social capital can provide more opportunities for youth to try new experiences and be treated more as a grown-up than a child, and to be introduced to possible romantic or sexual partners, and so on. In other words, peers can promote autonomy, belonging and mattering, and competence in differing domains than adults can, in differing ways than adults can. This might have differing effects not only on which PYD outcomes they can influence but how that influence occurs.

In one of Search Institute's applied research projects, it was also found that near-peers (e.g., slightly older, recent graduates of a program, etc.) might have even more impact than same-age peers, depending on the setting and the goals of youth and the program. The Social Capital Assessment and Learning for Equity (SCALE) Project worked with six youth and young adult-serving organizations to develop practitioner-friendly measures of social capital and other important constructs for advancing the educational and occupational prospects of low-income African American/Black and Hispanic/Latina/o youth. Most partners who participated in the SCALE project emphasized three relational targets: program peers, program near peers (often serving in mentorship or coaching roles), and educators. The study concluded that "of all of these relationships, near peers emerged as the strongest developmental relationship and the relationship that provided program participants with the most resources such as valuable information, connections to others, and useful skills needed to reach education or employment goals" (Boat et al., 2021, p. 3). For example, 46% of the program participants reported receiving high levels of social capital from program near-peers (developmental relationships, and education and career-relevant information and connections), compared with 31% from program peers, and just 22% from teachers or professors outside these programs.

Key research questions around developmental relationships with peers include:

- How valid are the five elements and 20 actions in the Framework for describing what youth experience in their relationships with peers?
    - Are there elements and/or actions that make sense within a youth-adult focus, but that miss the mark in looking at youth-youth relationships? Is something missing?
    - How do differences in peer power dynamics change what Share Power, or Challenge Growth, for example, look like in a peer-peer relationship as compared to a youth-adult one?
- Does the theory of change look the same for how peer developmental relationships affect specific PYD outcomes as for how adults do, or is it different? How is it different?
- How do peers within schools and youth-serving programs promote the specific five elements of the developmental relationships framework, with what effects and outcomes?

Leverage in practice a deeper knowledge of how single relationships have their effects within a larger web of developmental relationships

Current systems and ecological theories of development are most proximally the descendants of Bronfenbrenner's seminal work on the influence of the wider ecology in human development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). However, the scholarly origins of systems thinking more broadly go back to the 1920s in physics and biology, and then expansion over the decades to philosophy, economics, and computer science, all of which influenced the ecological ideas of Bronfenbrenner and the subsequent evolution of systems thinking in applied developmental science (Laszlo & Krippner, 1998; Lerner & Schmid, 2014). From the outset of Search Institute's focus on developmental relationships, the rhetorical emphasis was that young people are influenced by more than one 1-to-1 relationship. And yet, with some exceptions (Roehlkepartain et al., 2017; Sethi & Scales, 2020), both Search's work and that of other scholars have mostly been research on one dyad per study, such as child-parent, student-teacher, peer-peer, mentee-mentor, and the attendant effects of those relationships on various youth outcomes. But those dyadic relationships, of course, unfold within a much broader web of relationships in students' lives -- with teachers, coaches, siblings, friends and classmates, immediate and extended family, adults and other children in the neighborhood, youth programs, religious congregations, part-time workplaces, and other community settings (Varga & Zaff, 2018).

Each young person needs this web or root system of developmental relationships, available at different times, emphasizing different relational elements, in the service of differing youth needs and goals as they change and grow over time. Collectively, such dynamic networks of relationships can produce the most enduring positive outcomes for young people. The web of

relationships does this through helping young people construct a strong autonomous identity that is integrated across time and the spaces of their lives (Nagaoka et al., 2015). This includes a sense of agency and competencies to shape their life's direction, and a firm belief that they are truly connected to communities of others who both care for them and for and with whom the young person desires to make meaningful contributions (Scales, Roehlkepartain et al., 2022). For example, social responsibility (commitment to contribute to community and society) has been found to decline significantly from elementary to high school, but young people with a stronger web of relationships, including a more democratic and compassionate climate in their families, having trusted friends, and feeling connected to school and community, have stronger commitments to acting in socially responsible ways (Wray-Lake et al., 2016).

These considerations lead to identifying several key research questions for better understanding young people's webs of developmental relationships:

- How do developmental relationships with peers, parents, and non-family adults work together as a relational system or web of relational influences?
- How do relationally-rich organizations within a network or coalition of other relationally-rich organizations in a community shape character development and help youth and their families construct a broader web of developmental relationships and social capital?
- Is there something that happens in organizational change/growth within such a network or coalition that is different from what an organization does without participation in a broader network of similarly committed organizations?
- How does strengthening of a community of practice where multiple organizations learn from each other enhance organizational leaders' capacity to cultivate webs of character-nurturing developmental relationships across multiple community sectors?

Conclusion

By 2000, 10 years after the developmental assets framework was introduced—the forerunner of the developmental relationships framework—it had already become a highly influential approach for PYD worldwide, broadly and profoundly affecting theory, research, and practice (Scales, Hsieh et al., 2023). The framework of developmental relationships may be on a similar trajectory. This is all the more remarkable because there are more alternative/competing theories and approaches to PYD today than 35 years ago when the assets framework was introduced, and 25 years ago, when it tipped over from being highly influential, to becoming the most widely-cited PYD framework in the world (Benson et al., 2011), and one that ended up helping to shape all the newer PYD frameworks that have come after (Roehlkepartain & Blyth, 2019).

In the large streams that feed the ocean of PYD and applied developmental science, these emphases that Search Institute and its partners made, first on developmental assets, then thriving and sparks, then spiritual development, and now on developmental relationships and social capital, have made and continue to make large contributions to theory, research, and the practice of working with and serving young people and their families and communities across the globe.

The next decade of work on developmental relationships with supportive ecological systems has to accelerate acquiring new knowledge and applying what we already know to PYD practice.

I end this essay speaking for both myself and on behalf of my colleagues over all these last 30 years at Search Institute, when I use "we," because what I have written here inevitably contains the wisdom and influence of all my colleagues, at Search Institute and all the places beyond, over the last 50 years, with whom I've had the great pleasure to work.

So, "we" write this as persons, scientists, and practitioners, living our own relationships, and studying and trying to promote developmentally-influential relationships near and around the world. We write feeling that we know a great deal about how relationships become truly developmental. They get developmental when they materially affect the arc of a person's growth and maturation, their understanding of their personal and social identity, and how they see their place and purpose in the larger scheme of things.

And yet, we write with humility as well, more aware than ever of the agenda that lies before us, as scientists, as practitioners, as influencers of policy, as actors in our own lives, for how to activate better developmental relationships for every young person.

We know, the field knows, a great deal. And yet the scope of the call to action based on what we already know is matched by the scope of what we still have yet to understand, what we still have to know how to do at scale in practice, and especially, how to leverage all this knowledge of developmental relationships to help overcome

opportunity unfairness by race, ethnicity, gender identity, age, sexual orientation, and wealth.

As I conclude this essay, we find ourselves in a time of significant challenge for those committed to fairness and opportunity for all young people. The pace and scope of recent shifts—widely documented in national media—have created new barriers to the essential work of Positive Youth Development. Major funding cuts to research and social service initiatives, the closure of DEI offices, and new federal reporting mechanisms have introduced a climate of uncertainty, caution, and fear among those working to support youth and communities. These developments make it more urgent than ever for our field to advocate for the developmental relationships, opportunities, and environments that allow every young person to thrive, regardless of background.

This essay has been somewhat about what Search Institute and the broad field of PYD know about positive youth development and developmental relationships. But especially in the current political climate it is far more about what lies ahead. In my opinion, there is a clear research and practice agenda before us that leads us onward toward what should be a unifying goal in any democratic society:

To promote youth and society thriving by ensuring that every young person, no matter who they are, can achieve their individual purpose and contribute to the betterment of society by being rooted in intentional, inclusive, and equitable developmental relationships across all the spaces of their lives.

The political environment in which we now live makes achieving that noble goal harder than ever, but also more important than ever.

We as a field of Positive Youth Development have done a lot, and I am grateful beyond measure to have been a part of that for the last 50 years. And, there is so much more to do. As the poet Longfellow said, “let us, then, be up and doing.”

About the Author

Peter C. Scales, Ph.D., was Senior Fellow at Search Institute for 30 years, from 1995 until his retirement in June 2025. In his 50+-year career in positive youth development he was nationally-known in each of several fields as a leading sexuality education researcher and advocate, child abuse prevention executive and policymaker, researcher and advocate for young adolescents and middle school reform, researcher in developmental assets, thriving, spiritual development, and developmental relationships, and most recently, known nationally as a thought leader in the youth sports world. At Search Institute, Dr. Scales became one of the leading researchers and authors in the world on the Developmental Assets Framework and approach, helped create Search's Developmental Assets Profile survey and led international teams in its translation into more than 30 languages in more than 30 countries around the world. He co-led the institute's ground-breaking work on adolescent thriving and sparks, helped create and conduct Search's landmark research on youth spiritual development around the world, and helped create Search's Developmental Relationships Framework and surveys used by thousands of schools and youth organizations across the United States and internationally. He has been the author of hundreds of articles, chapters, and books, including more than 110 peer-reviewed papers, 43 scholarly books and policy reports, 38 scholarly book chapters, been a peer reviewer for dozens of scholarly journals, and consultant and speaker for hundreds of state, regional, and national organizations. He also became a certified tennis teaching pro at age 58, continues to serve as a long-time high school tennis coach, known as Coach Pete, and is an award-winning author and speaker on the mental game in youth sports, especially on the Compete-Learn-Honor™ approach he created for youth sports person-player development and coaching, that places effort, learning, and high character under adversity ahead of winning as markers of success in youth sports (competelearnhonor.com). In 2025, he and his wife Martha established the Compete-Learn-Honor Scholarship for tennis students at his Missouri high school who exemplify the values of Compete, Learn, and Honor. His future focus in positive youth development is to bring the Compete-Learn-Honor approach to every youth sports coach in America. He can be contacted at coachpetementalgame@gmail.com.

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