

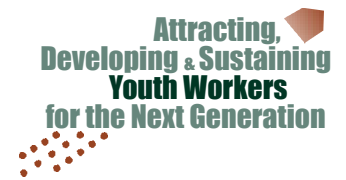
**Attracting,
Developing & Sustaining
Youth Workers
for the Next Generation**



A Collaborative Strategy for Creating a National System

**Wingspread
Conference
2004**

A Collaborative Strategy for Creating a National System



The future belongs to those who believe in the beauty of their dreams.

-Eleanor Roosevelt

Introduction

A persistent challenge in the youth development field is the lack of a systemic approach to attracting, developing and sustaining its workforce, particularly its direct service workers. While serious efforts to address workforce development have dotted the youth work landscape over the last century, gaining momentum over the past 15 years, much of this progress was organization-specific rather than field-wide or systemic.

In mid-November of 2004, a group of 35 youth development professionals representing diverse sectors of the field (direct service workers, national youth-serving agencies, local and national intermediary organizations, Federal agencies and corporate and foundation philanthropies) came together to generate ideas for the design of a youth development workforce system. Held at the Wingspread Conference Center in Racine (WI), the conference was sponsored by the National 4-H Headquarters, the National Collaboration for Youth and the University of Arizona School of Family and Consumer Sciences. Through a series of large- and small-group work sessions, the group agreed on several specific ideas, including the vision for and core components of a professional development system. In addition, the group committed itself to pursuing several next steps to enact the vision and begin creating the system.

Vision

The work started by establishing a shared definition of “youth worker” as an individual *who works with or on behalf of youth to facilitate their personal, social and educational development and enable them to gain a voice, influence and place in society as they make the transition from dependence to independence.*

This common definition served as a platform for developing subsequent agreement around a vision of a systemic approach to attracting, developing and sustaining youth workers. The group agreed that their vision revolved around: *Creation of a practice-, research- and evaluation-informed learning and professional development system that enables and reinforces continuous learning and development as a professional standard and a component of professional self-definition.* This vision provides a framework for existing work in the field, for new work yet to be undertaken and for the connectors that can bind all of these components.

Component Parts

The group next tackled the issue of what major components would be needed to enact this vision. Specifying and elaborating these “pieces of the puzzle” constituted the bulk of the conversation at the meeting, as small groups tackled the subject of what exactly would be involved in fleshing out each component. In the final analysis, there was agreement that the component parts of the work ahead were four content areas and four sets of responsibilities or tasks in developing each of the content areas. The four content areas are:

Standards and competencies: *Agreement on the knowledge, skills and attitudes needed in youth work at various levels of the system.* The intent here is not to create something new but, rather, to work with and leverage competency models that exist within and across organizations. This definition of competencies would serve as the foundation for development of standards, certification and other credentialing efforts that might result.

Training and delivery system: *Aggressive development of a learning system that attracts, develops and sustains youth workers.* This work would involve substantial expansion of existing efforts, development and coordination of training and other kinds of professional development, and expansion of peer networks that can reinforce ongoing learning and career advancement.

Career ladders and compensation guidelines: *Explicit mechanisms for attracting workers to the field, and for ensuring fair and adequate pay along the continuum of their careers.* This component should be inextricably linked to the others—for example, by building in mechanisms to ensure increased compensation for participating in professional development and for demonstrating agreed-upon competencies.

Evaluation: *Creation of basic evaluation approaches that address key questions, including whether and how professional development improves practice, and whether and how improved practice leads to improved youth outcomes.* This work would involve developing and launching a proactive research and evaluation agenda that is integrated into and guides the transformation of the youth work professional development system and that assesses its progress and effectiveness.

In order to develop these four content areas, four major areas of work need to take place:

Knowledge development: There is a crying need to synthesize existing research that would address each of the content areas. For example, initial research is needed to synthesize existing youth work competency frameworks and to identify gaps in the existing conceptual work. Similarly, knowledge about the nature and needs of the current workforce is fragmented (e.g., who enters and who leaves, turnover rates, compensation patterns). Creation of the learning system itself would build on existing work but would also involve substantial expansion, since there was general agreement that there are many gaps in what is currently available. Determining what is currently available and conducting a gap analysis would be major components of knowledge development.

Consensus development: The timeframe for this work might be as long as 10-15 years. During this entire period, it would be important to involve representatives from the many sectors of the field, to elicit both their input and their feedback. Of particular importance is the ongoing involvement of direct service workers. The Wingspread group envisioned several approaches to consensus development, including surveys of the field, formal and informal consultations, and the formation of advisory groups.

Adoption: A national system will only be as strong as its implementation and as it affects daily local practice. An effective system will require explicit support mechanisms at all levels—national, regional, state and especially local. Youth workers and their employers will need compelling answers to the WIIFM (What’s in it for me?) questions.

Strategic communication and support: The group agreed that the time is right to craft a self-regulating system within the youth work field. Strategically, the timing is propitious because the United States Congress is monitoring the work of the non-profit sector through legislative vehicles such as Sarbanes-Oxley. Rather than waiting for Congressional mandates to tell us what we must do, the youth development field should take a proactive approach by agreeing on, supporting and enforcing standards of professional practice. These standards and the resulting supports should be clearly communicated throughout the youth development field and to all of the stakeholders in the vast operating context (including funders and policymakers).

Next Steps

Toward the end of the conference, ten participants agreed to establish a Guiding Group that would take responsibility for moving this agenda over the next year. Their work will involve documenting and publicizing the results of the conference and creating a proposal for a planning grant, which will be marketed to several national funders (with a view toward approaching them for subsequent long-term implementation funding). In closing, each participant shared a reflection on the work of the past two days. One idea that seemed to resonate for the whole group was that the shared conversations and the jointly-created vision represented “a dream come true—personally and professionally.”