



Seeking Common Ground: Interests, Challenges, and Opportunities for Professional Development across Sectors

Although there are important differences between community-based and faith-based youth work, it is clear from the data on the core competencies of youth development professionals that there is, in fact, common ground. Both sectors of youth workers—including the sampled camp directors—see many of the same competencies as essential, and there are clearly topic areas where their readiness for professional development around particular competencies is high. For example, the three highest shared areas of readiness (described earlier in the section of this report on Youth Worker Preparation: Priorities and Opportunities for Cross-Sector Learning) could provide a focus for professional development that meets top needs in both sectors:

- Developing positive relationships and communicating with youth;
- Involving and empowering youth; and
- Interacting with and relating to youth in ways that support asset building.

We should not, however, leap to the conclusion that, if both groups see a competency as essential and both want growth opportunities related to that competency, then joint opportunities make sense and would be valued. After all, these topics may already be addressed through training, tools, resources, and other professional development systems in both sectors. The ability to do work across these two sectors is more than just a shared interest. Some questions that are raised include:

- In the minds of youth workers, would cross-sector training, professional development, and other support, resources, and structures add any unique value to their work?
- Are both sectors really interested enough in doing this work together?

Are the barriers too high to justify the effort it would take to break out of each sector's institutional comfort zone, language, jargon, and boundaries?

The online survey explored this issue through a single forced-choice question to gauge interest. Then youth workers were asked open-ended questions about what they saw as the advantages and challenges of cross-sector opportunities. Finally, they were asked to indicate places where they have seen cross-sector professional development in action. In addition, at the national consultation, participants were asked to identify the challenges as well as the opportunities. What emerges is fairly strong interest in cross-sector professional development between all groups of youth workers—with some important caveats and obstacles to address.

Interest in Cross-Sector Learning Opportunities

“Ultimately, we are all working to better the lives of youth. We have limited resources, so the more we work together, the further we can go.”

– Faith-Based Youth Worker

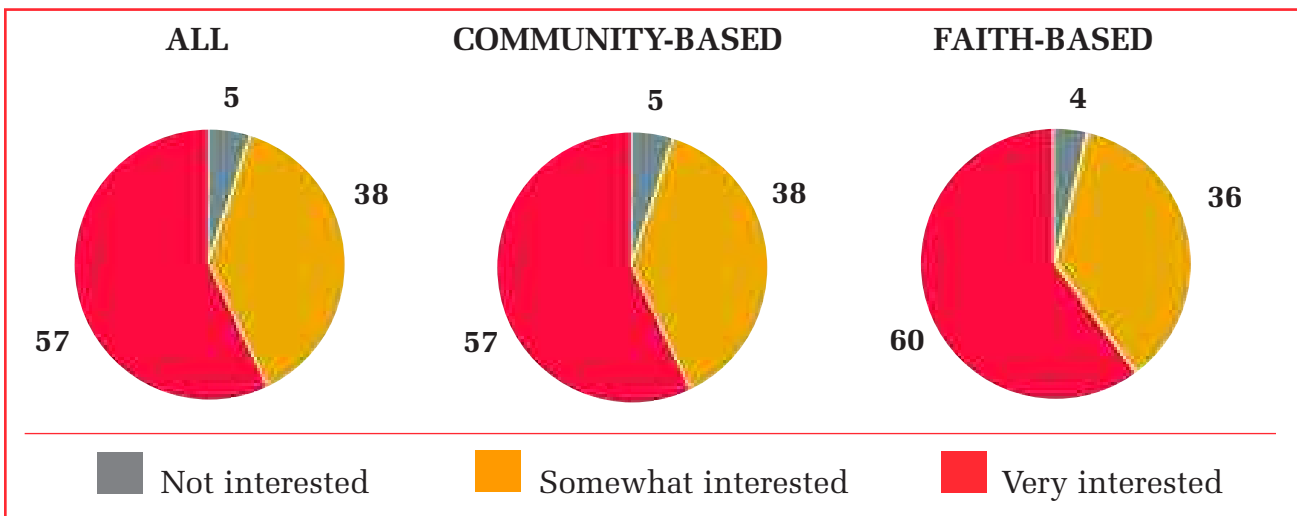
More than half of those participating in the youth worker survey said that they would be “very interested” in cross-sector training (Figure 6), with most of the rest being “somewhat interested.” Only a small percentage of youth workers in either group indicated that they were “not very” interested in such opportunities. This interest is remarkably consistent between community- and faith-based workers. It is also consistent for both female and male youth worker and for youth workers of all ages.⁶ Quotes from some of the youth worker survey participants surface some of the reasons for their interest:

- *“I think it would have a somewhat enriching effect [to] build networks of opportunities. At minimum, the youth workers would hopefully come to a fuller knowledge and respect of each other and their work and ways of working.”* –Faith-Based Youth Worker
- *“We all have a lot to learn from people in related but different fields, because our colleagues in different areas approach similar problems to ours in their own unique ways that can, in turn, help us see our problems in a fresh way.”* –Community-Based Youth Worker

FIGURE 6

Interest in Cross-Sector Learning Opportunities by Sector

If training, resources, or other professional development opportunities were offered that intentionally included both community-based and faith-based youth workers, how interested would you be in participating?



⁶ Interestingly, among the camp directors surveyed, only 41% indicated being very interested in cross-sector learning opportunities, compared to 57% of youth workers in the general survey. Only 13% of camp directors said they were “not interested.”

Differences in Interest in Cross-Sector Opportunities

Though interest in cross-sector learning opportunities is widespread, it is helpful to delve a bit deeper to see if there are other subtexts to be considered.

- Does interest in cross-sector training reflect a general greater interest in training and development?
- Do only those community-based youth workers who are themselves personally religious want to collaborate across sectors, or do even those who are not personally religious see value in cross-sector learning?
- Are faith-based youth workers from different religious traditions equally interested in collaborating for learning with community-based youth workers?

Additional analyses shed light on these questions:

- **Overall interest in training**– The interest in cross-sector training may reflect a general interest in *any* training and development. In this survey, youth workers who were most interested in cross-sector training tended to also be those who were most interested in training in each of the competencies. Indeed, those youth workers who indicated that they were “very interested” in cross-sector training were more likely also to say that they were “very interested” in training in all twelve of the competency areas examined (shown in Appendix C). Thus, *those youth workers surveyed who were most likely to value any training or development opportunities were also those who were most likely to value cross-sector opportunities.*
- **Religious commitment**– Among the community-based youth workers surveyed, those who were personally more religious (“very” active or devout) were somewhat more likely to be interested in this kind of joint professional development than those who indicated that they were not religious (Figure 7). However, a majority of both actively religious and those who were not religious or were “not very” active (all working in community-based settings) said they would be very interested in such opportunities. Thus, *one could conclude that the desire to connect across sectors is not driven merely by one’s own religious commitment, but is more related to the youth worker’s sense of what will be important and engaging in their own professional development.*
- **Religious affiliation**– When we looked within the faith-based sample, the vast majority described themselves as “very religious.” Hence, level of religious commitment isn’t a meaningful marker within this sample. However, given the growing plurality of America’s religious community (and concerns within some communities about intergroup relationships), it is useful to examine data through the lens of religious affiliation. (There was not enough diversity in the community-based sample to do a similar analysis in that group.)

Among faith-based youth workers, Christian youth workers were almost twice as likely as Jewish youth workers to be very interested in this kind of collaborative training. (The sample did not include enough youth workers from other traditions to do meaningful

analyses.) It is not that the Jewish youth workers surveyed were more likely to be “not interested,” but were most likely to be “somewhat interested,” reflecting what may be a level of caution about the prospect.

On the surface, this difference is surprising, particularly given the deep engagement of the Jewish community in social justice issues as well as interfaith efforts. And though the difference may simply be a result of a small sample size (there are only 68 Jewish respondents within the faith-based sample), it may also point to a critical challenge that has surfaced anecdotally in interfaith youth work. This finding may reflect some hesitation among Jewish youth workers (and, in fact, youth workers who are from other minority religious traditions or are not religious) to engage in more events and opportunities where the predominant frameworks, language, and approaches are Christian, while often overlooking the diversity within the religious sector and the broader community. We saw this dynamic manifested in focus groups where a church and Christian context were presumed—even when Jewish youth workers were in the group. Hence, our preliminary interpretation is that this difference underscores a compelling need to address and build comfort and competence for inter-religious engagement as well as cross-sector engagement so that all religious groups can participate fully and comfortably.

“It only takes one Buddhist in the school for the people in Waco, Texas, to realize not everyone goes to church on Sunday morning ... Faith formation now is going to take place in the context of and relationship with people of other faiths. . . . You can have profound difference in theologies but you can work together, relate in some kind of enriching and positive way.” – Interfaith Youth Worker

Finally, it is worth noting that we are not, in this preliminary study, able to distinguish the participating youth workers by their philosophical or theological orientation toward other religious traditions. For example, are those who are more exclusive in their understanding of faith within different religious traditions less likely to support cross-sector learning?

FIGURE 7
Interest in Cross-Sector Learning by Religious Differences

<i>Interest in cross-sector professional development</i>	a. Community-Based Workers		b. Faith-Based Workers	
	“Not Very” Active	“Very” Active	Christian	Jewish
Not very interested	8%	4%	2%	8%
Somewhat interested	39%	31%	30%	57%
Very interested	54%	64%	68%	36%

(Shaded areas indicate the item for which the difference between community- and faith-based workers is 10% or greater.)

These additional analyses confirm that the interest in cross-sector learning is widespread, and the interest goes beyond individual youth workers' personal religious commitments. It appears that many youth workers see such cross-sector cooperation as an important part of their work with youth. However, it is also important to address the growing diversity of the faith communities, and, in the process, establish expectations for appropriate inter-religious relationships and dialogue. In addition, the differences by religious affiliation need to be examined more deeply and broadly to determine whether other differences (such as theological orientation) would also be an important distinguishing variable for whether faith-based youth workers see value in cross-sector learning.

Challenges in Finding Common Ground

To say that youth workers are interested in cross-sector learning opportunities does not imply that they do not also see significant challenges or barriers. Respondents to the two online surveys, focus group members, and national thought leaders identified a number of challenges one might encounter in cross-sector professional development opportunities.

Exclusiveness, Proselytizing, and Dogmatism

“The key issue would be establishing a training session where all persons of faith could feel like they are respected and acknowledged as well as establishing such a session as a safe place for collaboration and learning—not for proselytizing.”

– Community-Based Youth Worker

Focus group members, survey respondents, and national thought leaders suggested that a key obstacle could be organizations being strident about their own perspective and not being open-minded. This was mentioned most frequently regarding faith-based youth workers, who are viewed as recognizing only one belief system and expecting to be able to proselytize.

Perceived Differing Goals and Training

“The greatest obstacle I see is the perception, whether accurate or not, that faith-based workers have their own agendas and that community-based workers lack a strong moral base. [This should be recognized] in order for the two groups to establish common ground.” – Camp Director

Many people mentioned that an obstacle or challenge would be the differing goals, missions, values, agendas, and belief systems of the two types of organizations. Though they may actually be different, one challenge that was mentioned was there really was lack of knowledge of missions, goals, assets/resources, staffing and what hinders us from working together. It was proposed that if we could hold our gaze long enough to understand our differences, we may actually find common ground.

SUMMARY OF OBSTACLES IN FINDING COMMON GROUND

- Exclusiveness, proselytizing, and dogmatism
- Perceived differing goals and training
- Fear of judgment
- Discomfort with religious/spiritual issues
- Legal issues
- Lack of mutual respect
- Too little time
- Different languages

Fear of Judgment

“We need to be careful to encompass faith in such a way that everyone is welcome and no one feels left out or wrong in their belief.” – Survey Participant

Youth workers in both sectors point toward fear of judgment from many places—harassment, political correctness, hostility, stereotyping, aggressive challenges to perspectives—as obstacles that keep them apart. Community-based youth workers indicated concerns that faith-based youth workers could be judgmental of youth and families who do not live within the moral constructs of a particular faith, and thus would be less open to allowing anyone to participate. A number of focus group participants indicated that they had felt ostracized by faith-based organizations.

Lack of Mutual Respect

In a related theme, there is a sense within both sectors of polarization, alienation, and mutual prejudice. On each side, there is a lack of understanding of each other’s values and backgrounds. Each sector may have a tendency to devalue the other’s work. In addition, there seems to be a lack of understanding of what work can be done collectively that can not be done separately.

Discomfort with Religious/Spiritual Issues

“The challenge would be to remove all aspects of religion/faith from the training. I’m willing to learn alongside anybody who is interested in the same topic, but I’m not willing to have their religious views or perspectives imposed on me or my work.”
– Youth Worker

Community-based youth workers are less comfortable with the language of spirituality and religion—which is the primary language utilized by many faith-based youth workers. Some focus group participants indicate that religious and spiritual concepts could be intimidating to them.

Legal Issues

A number of survey respondents noted legal issues or the need to separate church and state as a key obstacle or challenge. A community-based youth worker sees this challenge: “We operate pretty strictly with the ‘church and state’ thing around here – but that doesn’t preclude being trained together. I think you would just have to be sensitive to how you worded the training...My town board might be less apt to allow me to attend something billed for ‘faith leaders,’ for instance.”

Too Little Time and Resources

“[It] takes time, costs money, it is only one of a million other things we have to do.”
– Youth Worker

One issue that emerged was the fact that youth workers had no additional time to focus on trying to work across these two sectors. Already over-extended with multiple priorities, many mentioned that neither the time nor level of priority in their work would enable them to do this work with those from the other sector.

Different Languages and Guiding Approaches

Respondents indicated that currently there is no language that avoids division and brings people to the table. There would need to be careful and clear definitions of the words and concepts agreed upon by both groups. In addition, people would need to be mindful of using words that have judgmental or negative connotations, like “brainwashing,” “agenda,” “secular,” “saved,” and so on.

Benefit and Opportunities of Finding Common Ground

“To use training in the broad sense to organize, inspire, and equip a large number of loosely connected adults who are youth workers to tap an even larger number of youth into their power for them to go on and write a major chapter of American history.”

– National Thought Leader

Although there are significant and important challenges in finding common ground, the opportunities are just as significant—particularly given that most youth workers say they would value cross-sector learning opportunities. Among the respondents to the two online surveys, the participants in the focus groups, and the thought leaders, there was a widespread sense of readiness to tackle the difficult challenges and seek innovative ways to finding common ground.

Through the process, we have asked people to reflect on the benefits and opportunities they see in finding common ground for professional development between faith-based and community-based youth workers.

Enrich the Lives of Youth

For many participants in this project, the bottom line for collaboration is improved work with young people. People commented on the opportunity to better serve youth holistically and across the community. Some participants’ perspectives:

- *“Whether it be faith-based or community-based, people who work with kids all have the same passion in mind. We all need to work together for the betterment of our youth. And working together we have a better chance in reaching out and helping our youth!”*
- *“We all work in isolation from one another. Knowledge of resources would enable us to provide the highest quality of care to our youth.”*
- *“The more resources, assets, and perspectives that we all . . . can bring to the table, the more likely we are able to offer rich programs that resonate with youth and allow us to meet our ultimate objective of supporting the developmental needs of youth as they transition from adolescence to adulthood.”*
- *“There is a desperate need to collaborate in the urban setting. We are missing significant segments of youths’ lives due to our “silo” mentality and unwillingness to network with each other. There would be the opportunity to share resources and eliminate doubling in some areas.”*

Tap into the Unique Strengths within Each Sector

Focus group participants and thought leaders in the national consultation consistently emphasized that both groups of youth workers want what is best for all youth and have much to teach the other. Focus group participants suggested that each sector has unique strengths that could be shared with the other sector through cross-sector learning opportunities between community-based and faith-based youth workers. This may be a very simplistic list, but it provides another area that could be pursued for a better understanding of what unique strengths each sector could offer. Here are some examples of what they saw:

<i>What faith-based organizations offer</i>	<i>What community-based organizations offer</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discipline and structure 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Skilled in time management and organization
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A realization of a bigger mission 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The credibility of research and research-based explorations
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The idea of a systematic approach to producing adherents – systematic teaching 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Professional development workshops, classes and learning opportunities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Address the spiritual and the needs of the whole person. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Education
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Youth workers can bring a lot more of themselves into the situation. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Experience in using community resources
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An understanding of spirituality and a belief system 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community-based orgs have a larger reach in a community
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mobilizing volunteers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Training of volunteers

Increase Opportunities through Shared Learning and Resources

“There are so many resources in both community and faith-based groups. Sharing should mean that all would have access to more opportunity, therefore being more enriched.”
 – Youth Worker

Learning information, sharing resources, learning about each other, and broadening diversity were among the major advantages of shared professional development between community- and faith-based youth workers. *“To ignore collaboration and sharing with this group seems close-minded,”* said one camp director.

“It would help these youth workers form networks that might not have been formed otherwise. I think our society really separates out the spiritual and the secular to the point that the community organizations don’t necessarily see the faith-based workers as a resource and partner. I think both can learn from each other and can support each other’s work.” –Youth Worker

Developing a Community-Wide Approach

“If change is going to happen in our communities, it has to be a joint effort. If we are all working separately to achieve peace in our world-communities, then we are not using our resources wisely and, in turn, separating the community even more.” –Youth Worker

As in the above example, some respondents spoke about how the connections between faith-based and community-based youth organizations provide an opportunity to develop a more systemic, community-wide approach to working with youth. Two youth worker responded:

“It is a systemic approach that works. You cannot truly separate faith from community: faith is an integral part of every community, and attempts to segregate faith from community are futile.” –Youth Worker

*“We already see the advantages,” said a faith-based worker who has been involved in cross-sector collaboration. “At a base level, the networking of the two is invaluable for fundraising, community spirit, and to give the youth an idea how life works.”
–Youth Worker*