



Youth Worker Preparation: Priorities and Opportunities for Cross-Sector Learning

Many conversations are under way about youth worker preparation and support across the country and in different settings. These conversations need to involve front-line youth workers, young people themselves, national leaders, researchers, and policy makers. Critical questions include:

- Who are today's youth workers? What kinds of young people do they work with? Do they include people in all sectors, in both formal and informal roles and in a wide variety of roles and relationships with young people?
- What do youth workers need to know and do to maximize outcomes for young people?
- What do we actually know about who does youth work? What do they do? What makes them stay?
- What systems are needed to equip and sustain youth workers, whether professional or volunteer?

This project does not attempt to answer these questions. Rather, it seeks to add another layer to the conversation: Today's youth worker preparation and support systems are largely parallel tracks. For the most part, faith-based youth workers turn to faith-based systems for preparation, credentialing, and ongoing professional development and networking. Community-based youth workers do the same in their parallel systems. The question to be asked is whether these systems are serving the best interest of young people by operating along parallel tracks or are there opportunities for and benefits to finding or creating intentional links between these two worlds?

Do community- and faith-based youth workers have shared professional interests or goals? Do they need the same kinds of skills or competencies? If so, then there may be common ground for professional development in addressing skills or competencies that are essential for each group.

As a starting point, we utilized the Youth Development Worker Competencies, which are approved by the National Collaboration for Youth (Appendix B). This framework identifies ten skills that leaders in national youth-serving systems (including some faith-based national organizations) see as essential for effective frontline youth work. (For a complete list of the 50 National Collaboration for Youth members go to: <http://www.nydic.org/nydic/about/members.htm>).

For the youth worker surveys (one with a broad sample of youth workers; one with camp directors), we developed a set of simple questions that focused on each of these youth worker competencies. In addition, we added two other potential competencies.¹ One focuses on

¹ The following additional items were added to the competencies in the camp study: "enhancing youth's moral and character development," "providing youth with experiences that are novel, stimulating, and challenging," "teaching youth about healthy life choices," "helping youth to develop environmental awareness," "providing a mechanism for youth and adult partnerships and shared decision-making," and "passing down your traditions and stories."

“respecting and honoring religious diversity” and the other focuses on “helping young people develop spiritually.” Respondents were asked to assess the level of importance for each competency in their work (“not important,” “somewhat important,” “very important,” or “essential”). Then they were asked to indicate their level of interest in training, resource, and/or educational opportunities to build their competencies—or if they “already feel prepared” in the area.

Similar Emphases in Each Sector

All groups of youth workers strongly endorsed at least half of the original competencies as “essential” and the rest were also broadly supported (Figure 2).

- Two-thirds of youth workers surveyed indicated that 5 of the original 10 competencies were “essential,” and about half believe the other 5 were “essential.” Almost none of those surveyed indicated that any of the original 10 competencies was “not important.”
- The community-based and faith-based youth workers were roughly equal in their level of affirming 6 of the 10 original competencies.
- All groups of youth workers (community-based, faith-based, and camp directors) were almost unanimous in endorsing developing positive relationships and communicating with youth as “essential.” All groups also endorsed being positive role models and involving/empowering youth as “essential.”
- Only 2 in 5 (38%) of both samples indicated that “respecting and honoring religious diversity” is an essential competency in their work with youth. Similarly, 47% of religiously affiliated camps and 42% of secular camps identified that “respecting and honoring religious diversity” is an essential competency in their work.

Thus, *faith-based and community-based youth workers see eye to eye on many of the competencies.* This commonality appears to hold true across a variety of settings as well as when we compare directors of both religiously affiliated and secular camps. This finding suggests that, at least in the area of competencies, there is significant common ground across sectors and settings.

ADDITIONAL CAMP INSIGHTS

Several other competencies were added in the camp director survey to the 10 core competencies for youth development professionals. Some highlights:

“Enhancing youths’ moral and character development” was widely endorsed, with 64% of secular directors and 69% of religiously affiliated directors identifying the competency as essential.

Although nearly one-third of the total camp sample felt that “providing a mechanism for youth and adult partnerships and shared decision-making” was an essential competency, there was a 19% gap between secular (35%) and religiously affiliated (16%) camp directors.

(For more information, see Appendix S.)

Different Emphases in Each Sector

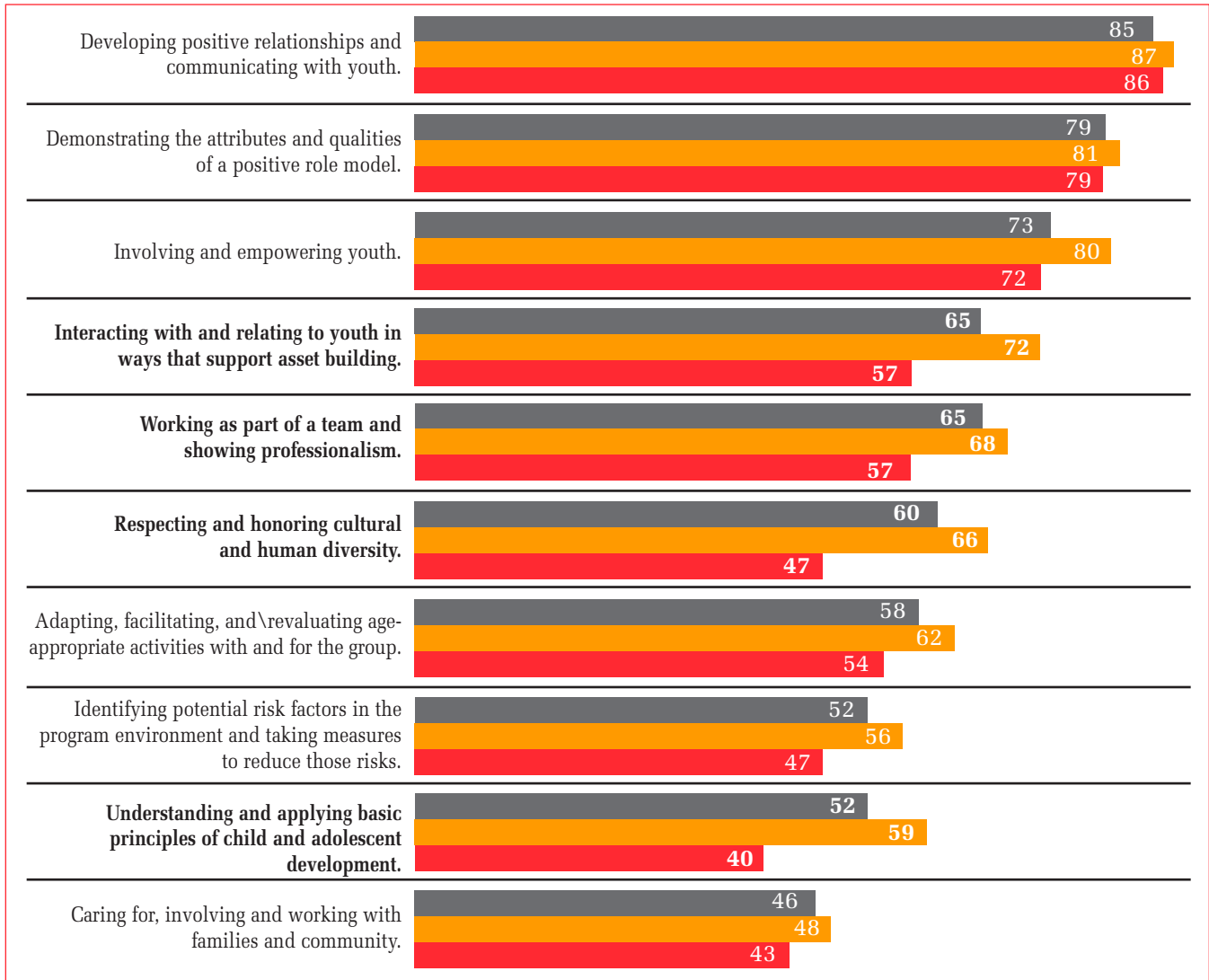
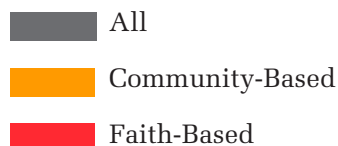
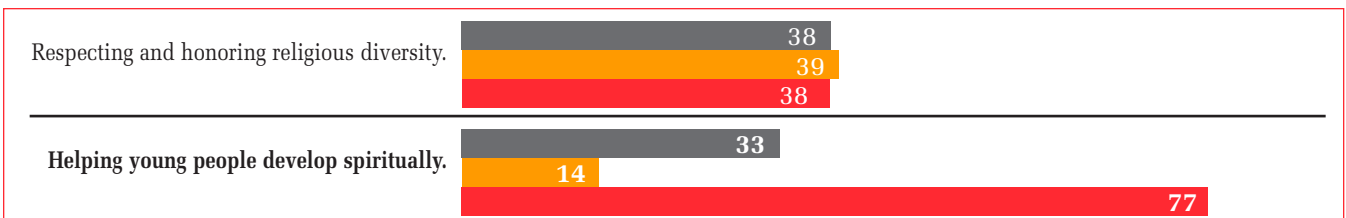
At the same time, there are important differences between groups. The greatest is on “helping young people develop spiritually.” Only 14% of community-based youth workers said this was “essential” to their work, compared to 77% of faith-based youth workers (a 63-point gap). The camp survey also found a similar gap. Twenty-three percent of secular directors and 85% of religiously affiliated directors (a 62-point gap) felt that this was an essential competency. Thus, faith-based youth workers are more than five times as likely as community-based workers to say that cultivating spiritual development is an essential part of their work with youth.

In addition to the difference in emphasis on spiritual development, faith-based workers in the broader survey were at least 10% *less likely* to say that 4 of the original 10 competencies are “essential”:

- Understanding and applying principles of child and adolescent development (20-point gap)
- Respecting and honoring cultural and human diversity (19-point gap)
- Interacting with and relating to youth in ways that support asset building (15-point gap)
- Working as part of a team and showing professionalism (11-point gap)

FIGURE 2**Essential Competencies for Youth Workers by Sector**

Percent of respondents in the youth worker survey who say each theme is “essential” to their work. **(Boldface indicates items for which the difference between community- and faith-based workers is 10 percentage points or greater.)**

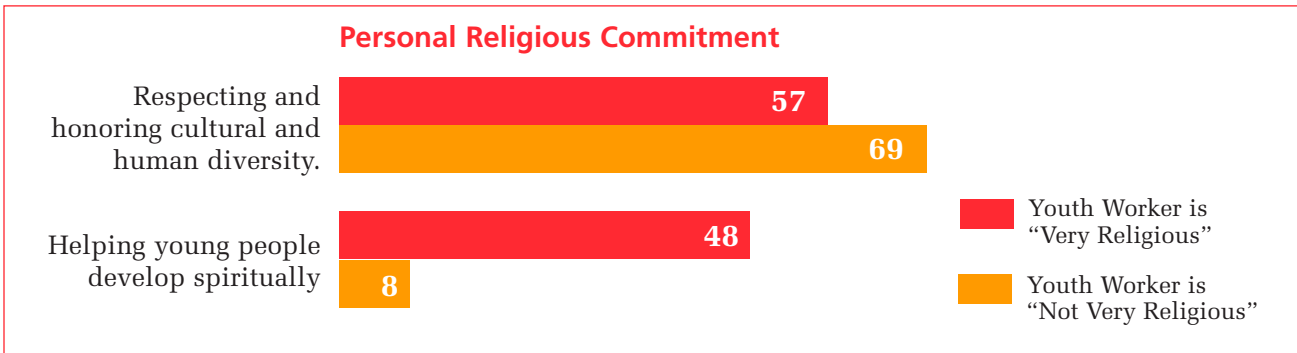
**ADDED COMPETENCIES**

Other Patterns and Differences

Beyond just comparing community- and faith-based youth workers, it is helpful to examine other characteristics of the sample to see where there might be other meaningful differences in support for the competencies. Do younger or older youth workers see them differently? What about urban or suburban or rural? And does the personal religious commitment of the youth worker affect how he or she views the competencies? Here's what we found:

Personal Religious Commitment

Given the focus on cross-sector perspectives, it is also important to examine whether youth workers' religious commitments (in both sectors) play a role in the priorities that youth workers place on the various competencies. When we analyzed data on the basis of youth workers' self-reported levels of religious commitment ("How active or devout are you in your own religious beliefs, participation, and practices?"), relatively few differences emerged. There were, however, two notable exceptions:



The camp sample showed greater differences on several competencies than did the larger sample when viewed from the camp directors' personal religious commitment. "not very religious" camp directors were more likely than "very religious" directors to identify these competencies as essential:

- Understanding child-adolescent development
- Adapting, facilitating, and evaluating age-appropriate activities
- Identifying-reducing risk factors
- Providing challenging activities

On the other hand, "very religious" camp directors were more likely than their "not very religious" counterparts to rate the following competencies as essential:

- Developing positive relationships
- Helping young people develop spiritually

Thus, across sectors, youth workers who are most committed to a religious tradition are much more likely to endorse “helping young people develop spiritually” as an essential part of their work with youth, but are somewhat less likely to endorse “respecting and honoring cultural and human diversity”—though, it is important to note that a majority of religiously devout youth workers still see this competency as “essential.”

Age

At some level, all ages of youth workers endorsed the 10 original competencies. However, 5 of the 10 original competencies were more likely to be endorsed as “essential” by older youth workers. (None of the competencies were more likely to be seen as essential by younger workers than older workers.) Comparing twenty- to twenty-nine-year-old youth workers with those aged fifty to fifty-nine years, we found that older youth workers were more likely to endorse these competencies as essential:

- Understanding and applying basic principles of child and adolescent development (61% vs. 40%, a 21-point gap)
- Working as part of a team and showing professionalism (74% vs. 55%, a 19-point gap)
- Interacting with and relating to youth in ways that support asset building (72 % vs. 58%, a 14-point gap)
- Respecting and honoring cultural and human diversity (66% vs. 52%, a 14-point gap)
- Adapting, facilitating, and evaluating age-appropriate activities with and for the group (68% vs. 56%, a 12-point gap)

The camp sample showed similar age-related patterns, but in slightly different areas. A comparison of twenty- to twenty-nine-year-olds and fifty- to fifty-nine-year-olds showed that the older directors placed more importance on:

- Adapting, facilitating, and evaluating age-appropriate activities
- Respecting religious diversity
- Enhancing moral and character development²

However, 77% of young directors viewed involving and empowering youth as “essential” compared to 60% of older directors (a 17-point gap).

Though we do not have data that explains the greater emphasis on many competencies, some may reflect differences in roles and perspectives, with older youth workers likely to have moved into leadership roles within their organizations. These areas may suggest opportunities for cross-age collaborative learning between seasoned and newer youth workers.

2 This competency was added to the camp director survey; it was not part of the youth worker survey.

Gender

There were potentially important differences between men and women in how they view several of the competencies. In all but one case (spiritual development) women were more likely to view each of the following competencies as “essential” to their work with youth:

- Respecting and honoring cultural and human diversity (64% females vs. 46% males, an 18-point gap)
- Adapting, facilitating, and evaluating age appropriate activities with and for the group (63% females vs. 50% males, a 13-point gap)
- Interacting with and relating to youth in ways that support asset building (70% females vs. 58% males, a 12-point gap)
- Identifying potential risk factors in the program environment and taking measures to reduce those risks (56% females vs. 45% males, an 11-point gap)
- Involving and empowering youth (77% females vs. 67% males, a 10-point gap)

As said above, spiritual development was the one instance where men were more like than women to view the competency as “essential” to their work:

- Helping young people develop spiritually (30% female vs. 42% male, a 12-point gap, *with males being higher*)

Location

For most of the competencies, youth workers’ perspectives were fairly consistent across geographic settings (urban, suburban, rural/small town/reservation, and regional/national/ international). However, the youth workers working in urban areas were more likely than those in small towns to say that respecting and honoring cultural and human diversity was “essential” (66% urban vs. 53% rural/small towns).

Those who work in suburban settings were more likely than other groups to indicate that helping young people develop spiritually was “essential” (50% for suburban youth workers compared to 28% for both those who work in urban and rural/small town areas). This finding may reflect, in part, that the faith-based youth workers in this sample were more likely than community-based youth workers to work in suburban settings.

ADDITIONAL CAMP INSIGHTS

Even more differences by gender were evident in the camp director survey. The following list shows ten essential competencies that were rated higher (>10-point gap) by women when compared to men:

- Developing relationships
- Respecting cultural/human diversity
- Respecting religious diversity
- Empowering youth
- Working with families
- Teamwork-professionalism
- Asset building
- Providing challenging activities*
- Developing environmental behaviors*
- Shared decision-making*

Consistent with the broader survey of youth workers, the only essential competency rated higher by male than female camp workers was to help young people develop spiritually.

* These competencies were added to the camp director survey.

Interest in Ongoing Learning and Development

Knowing priorities is an important starting point for finding common ground as well as distinctions. However, if the focus is on training and professional development, it's also important to understand the areas where youth workers might be most interested in educational opportunities. Where might there be common interests that could be addressed in cross-sector learning?

Survey participants were asked how much they would be interested in training, resources, and/or educational opportunities related to each of the 12 competencies (including the two added items on religious diversity and spiritual development). We found that, *with a few exceptions, youth workers in both sectors were equally interested in training and professional development on specific competencies.*

Figure 3 shows the percentages of youth workers (total sample as well as each sector) who said that they were “very interested” in training, resources, and/or educational opportunities related to each of the competencies. Here are the highlights:

- The highest levels of interest in learning opportunities were *youth involvement/empowerment* and *asset-building approaches to working with youth*. About 3 in 5 youth workers in the total sample said they were “very interested” in opportunities to learn more about these topics. About half of the youth workers surveyed are also “very interested” in the next six competencies (Figure 3).
- Fewer than half of the youth workers surveyed indicated being “very interested” in the remaining four competency areas, including the two items that were added to the original set of 10 competencies (Figure 3).
- Levels of interest among community-based and faith-based youth workers in ongoing learning and development were comparable (less than 10 points difference) on seven of the 12 areas highlighted.

However:

Community-based youth workers were more likely than faith-based youth workers to be interested in professional development related to asset building, relationships with youth, cultural and human diversity, and working as part of a team.

Faith-based youth workers were more interested than community-based workers in professional development in the area of spiritual development.

ADDITIONAL CAMP INSIGHTS

The highest levels of interest in learning opportunities for camp directors were in *youth involvement/empowerment (69%)* and *moral/character development** (67%).

The areas of least interest were in *passing down traditions** (31%) and *respecting religious diversity (41%)*.

However, when viewed from the perspective of secular and religious camps, several differences (>10 points) in training interest emerged. More directors in secular camps than in religious camps wanted training in *respecting cultural and human diversity (55% vs. 38%)* and *asset building (67% vs. 48%)*. More directors in religious camps wanted training in *helping youth develop spiritually (66%)* than did those in secular camps (47%).

*These competencies were added to the camp director survey.

FIGURE 3**Interest in Professional Development on Youth Worker Competencies**

<i>Percentages of respondents who would be “very interested” in training, resource, and/or educational opportunities in the following areas.</i>	<i>All</i>	<i>Community-Based</i>	<i>Faith-Based</i>
Involving and empowering youth.	65	67	63
Interacting with and relating to youth in ways that support asset building.	60	63	53
Developing positive relationships and communicating with youth.	56	62	50
Caring for, involving and working with families and community.	56	56	57
Adapting, facilitating, and evaluating age-appropriate activities.	54	57	50
Identifying potential risk factors in the program environment and taking measures to reduce those risks.	52	55	51
Respecting and honoring cultural and human diversity.	49	55	42
Understanding and applying basic principles of child and adolescent development.	46	48	47
Working as part of a team and showing professionalism.	39	42	32
Demonstrating the attributes and qualities of a positive role model.	39	43	35
ADDED COMPETENCIES			
Helping young people develop spiritually.	37	31	56
Respecting and honoring religious diversity.	35	38	39

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

Already Feel Prepared

One factor that may reduce interest in additional training and development opportunities is that people already feel prepared in a given area. Therefore, when asked about their interests in ongoing development, youth workers were given the option of indicating that they “already feel prepared.” Figure 4 summarizes these responses. Several notable findings include:

- No more than 2 out of 5 of the youth workers surveyed indicated that they “already feel prepared” in any of the areas examined. (This finding should not be over-interpreted; youth workers may desire additional training and development while already being effective in working in that particular area.)
- Youth workers surveyed were *most likely* to “already feel prepared” to be role models and to work as part of a team.
- The two areas where youth workers were *least likely* to say they were “already prepared” related to caring for, involving and working with families and community (18%), and helping young people develop spiritually (14%).

In general, youth workers in both sectors said they “already feel prepared” at similar levels. The only area of substantial difference between faith-based and community-based youth workers related to spiritual development. Faith-based youth workers surveyed were almost three times as likely as community-based youth workers to indicate that they “already feel prepared” (27% vs. 8%).

There were relatively few differences by gender or age (shown in Appendix C) in the proportions of youth workers who indicated that they already feel prepared for each of the competencies.

ADDITIONAL CAMP INSIGHTS

The majority of camp directors did not feel particularly prepared in most of the competency areas. The areas that had at least 20% of the directors indicating they felt prepared were:

- Teamwork-professionalism (29%)
- Being a positive role model (27%)
- Identifying-reducing risk factors (27%)
- Passing down traditions* (23%)

The directors were least likely to say they are already prepared in the following areas:

- Empowering youth (11%)
- Asset building (11%)
- Helping young people develop spiritually (11%)
- Adult-youth shared decision-making* (10%)
- Working with families and communities (7%)

* These competencies were added to the camp director survey.

FIGURE 4
Areas Where Youth Workers Say They “Already Feel Prepared”

<i>Percentages of respondents in the youth worker survey who said they “already feel prepared,” when asked about interest in professional development in the following areas</i>	<i>All</i>	<i>Cmnty-Based</i>	<i>Faith-Based</i>
Demonstrating the attributes and qualities of a positive role model.	40	39	41
Working as part of a team and showing professionalism.	36	36	38
Developing positive relationships and communicating with youth.	28	24	32
Understanding and applying basic principles of child and adolescent development.	25	24	22
Involving and empowering youth.	23	24	22
Respecting and honoring cultural and human diversity.	22	21	20
Interacting with and relating to youth in ways that support asset building.	21	22	20
Respecting and honoring religious diversity.	21	17	23
Identifying potential risk factors in the program environment and taking measures to reduce those risks.	20	22	17
Adapting, facilitating, and evaluating age-appropriate activities with and for the group.	20	19	22
Caring for, involving and working with families and community.	18	19	14
Helping young people develop spiritually.	14	8	27

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

Readiness for Competency-Focused Learning

The above three perspectives on the competencies (how important; interest in training; and existing preparation) are all important factors in setting priorities for professional development opportunities for youth workers, with each touching on a different part of what might motivate youth workers to actually seek and participate in learning opportunities. (We have not factored in other critical variables, such as the cost and quality of available learning opportunities or the levels of institutional support that allows, encourages, or mandates training participation.) Any single perspective (such as how important a competency is perceived) is helpful, but inadequate on its own.

Using the data we have available, we created a simple formula to estimate “readiness for learning”—knowing that other factors also play a role in readiness. First we calculated the “felt need” by subtracting those who say they “already feel prepared” from those who said the competency is “essential.” Then we averaged the “felt need” with the level of interest (“very interested”) to reach a score for “readiness for learning.” Though the specific numbers are not meaningful in themselves, they suggest a priority ranking for professional development across the competencies.

For the total sample, the areas with the highest overall readiness for learning are:

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

For the total sample, the areas with lowest overall readiness for learning are the two competencies that were added:

- Helping young people develop spiritually
- Respecting and honoring religious diversity

Using this calculation, some of the competency areas that are viewed as most “essential” remain areas where there may be a high readiness for learning—including the top three areas of readiness. But it is important also to note that some competency areas become more or less important when these multiple perspectives are combined.

For example, 4 out of 5 youth workers indicated being a positive role model is seen as “essential,” making it the second the

ADDITIONAL CAMP INSIGHTS

For the camp sample, the areas with the highest overall readiness for learning were:

- Developing positive relationships and communicating with youth.
- Involving and empowering youth.
- Enhancing youths’ moral and character development*

The areas with the lowest overall readiness for learning were:

- Helping youth to develop environmental awareness and an ability to demonstrate environmentally friendly behaviors.*
- Providing a mechanism for youth and adult partnerships and shared decision-making.*
- Passing down traditions and stories.*

* Items added to the camp survey.

most important competency in the overall sample. However, it’s also the area where youth workers are most likely to be “already prepared,” and their interest in more professional development is lower. Thus, this competency falls to eighth place in terms of overall readiness for additional professional development. On the other hand, the competency on caring for, involving and working with families and community ranked as the lowest priority among the original 10 competencies in terms of whether it is “essential” to youth work. However, relatively few youth workers already feel prepared in this area (1 in 5), and many are interested in learning more. So the family and community competency rises from tenth to seventh place in the overall ranking of readiness for learning.

Similarities and Differences across Sectors

Using this “readiness for learning” calculation, we see more clearly **potential readiness for professional development** within each sector and across each sector. How similar and different are youth workers in the two sectors when all these pieces come together?

Figure 5 summarizes the calculations of readiness for learning for the total sample as well as each of the two sectors. (The detailed calculations for the broad youth worker survey are included in Appendix C. Findings from the camp directors survey are included in Appendix D.) Some of the highlights are as follows:

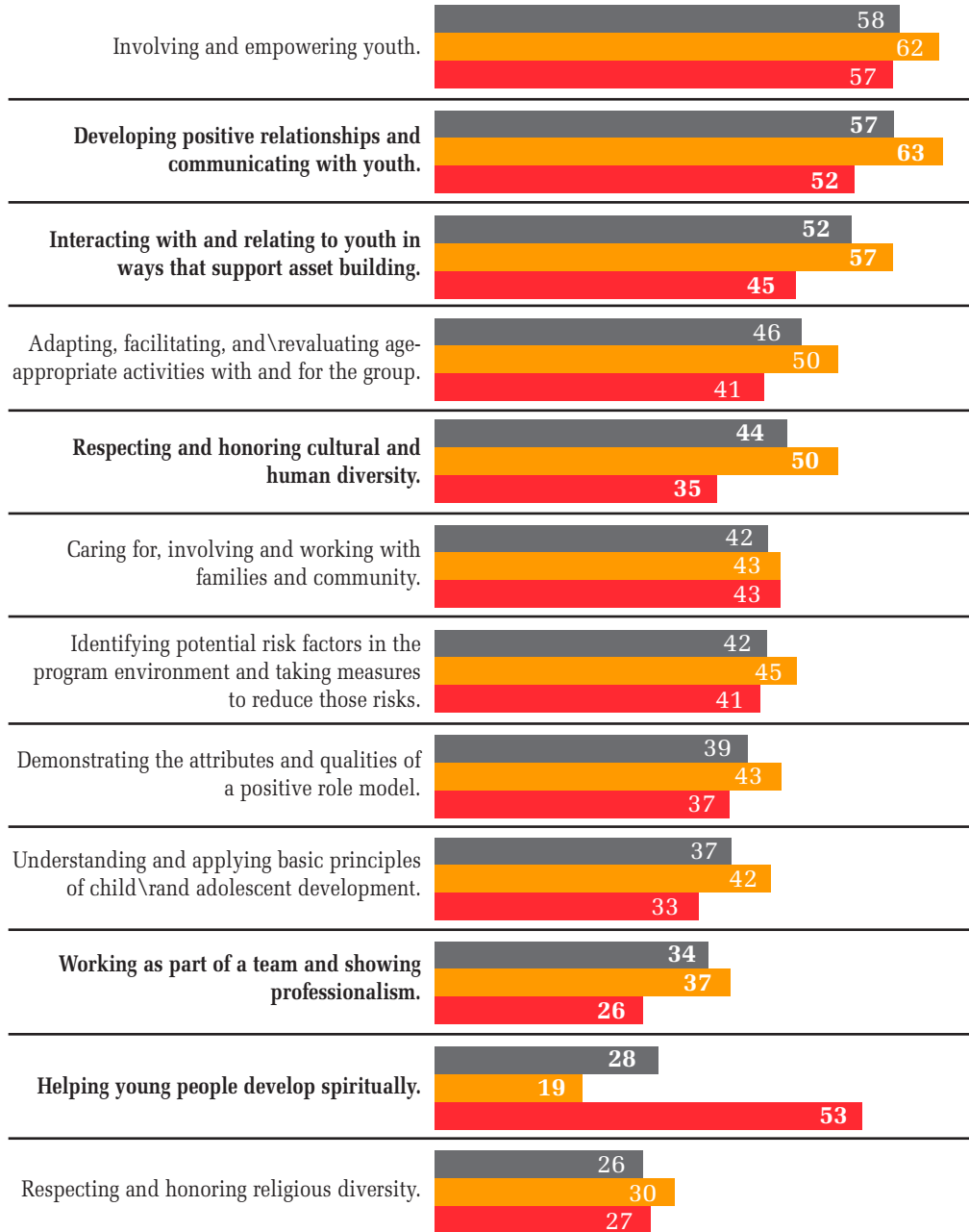
- Here are **the top five areas of readiness** for professional development in each sector:

<i>Community-Based Youth Workers</i>	<i>Faith-Based Youth Workers</i>
1. Developing positive relationships and communicating with youth.	1. Involving and empowering youth.
2. Involving and empowering youth.	2. Helping young people develop spiritually.
3. Interacting with and relating to youth in ways that support asset building.	3. Developing positive relationships and communicating with youth.
4. Adapting, facilitating, and evaluating age appropriate activities with and for the group.	4. Interacting with and relating to youth in ways that support asset building.
5. Respecting and honoring cultural and human diversity.	5. Caring for, involving and working with families and community.

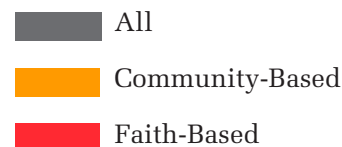
- The level of readiness for professional development is fairly strong and consistent across sectors on empowering youth, positive relationships, and asset building (though faith-based workers are somewhat less “ready” for professional development related to positive relationships and asset building).

FIGURE 5**Readiness* for Professional Development Across Sectors**

(Items in bold have a gap of greater than 10 points between community- and faith-based workers.)



* Readiness is the average percentage of “Felt Need” and “Very Interested.”



- Overall, the level of readiness for professional development is consistent across sectors (less than 10 percentage points difference) on seven of the twelve competencies. The competencies with meaningful gaps (10 points or greater) are:

Helping young people develop spiritually (34-point gap)

Respecting and honoring cultural and human diversity (15-point gap)

Interacting with and relating to youth in ways that support asset building (12-point gap)

Developing positive relationships and communicating with youth (11-point gap)

Working as a team and showing professionalism (11-point gap)

If the “readiness for learning” calculation approximates opportunities for strengthening the capacity of youth workers, there are clear areas of potential cross-sector training. As a starting point, both groups of youth workers see high priorities around building relationships, empowering youth, and asset building.

Another possibility is to identify those areas where one group or the other, on average, has more experience or sees as a higher priority and then encourage dialogue across sectors so that each can learn from the other. For example, what would happen if community-based youth workers introduced faith-based youth workers to some of the principles and practices of dealing with human diversity among young people, then the faith-based workers shared their knowledge and experience related to spiritual development? Such an approach would likely be riskier and would require a strong foundation of relationship and trust across sectors to be effective. One can imagine, however, the creativity interplay of these two issues offering stimulating learning for both groups of youth workers.

Preparing Youth Workers Together: Experience in the Field

The findings from the survey make a theoretical case that community- and faith-based youth workers do share a common base of interest and need related to professional development. But do these shared (and somewhat superficial) indicators translate into potential for on-the-ground training and professional development, or do youth workers approach these topics so differently that shared events (or even shared curricula) are impractical?

At the national consultation, Elaine Johnson of the National Training Institute for Community Youth Work (NTI) at the Academy for Educational Development described her organization’s youth development training curriculum³, which is delivered in a neighborhood or community context. The training focuses on community-level workers and includes a mixture of organizations—including both faith-based and community-based organizations—in most events. In her experience, the training effectively works across sectors and, in fact, stimulates important connections among youth workers at the community or neighborhood level.

3 AED/Center for Youth Development and Policy Research and the National Network for Youth (1995), *Advancing Youth Development: A Curriculum for Training Youth Workers*. Washington, DC: Academy for Educational Development. For information, visit <http://nti.aed.org/Curriculum.html>.

Building on that point, Tom East of the Center for Ministry Development suggested that an important framing issue for this dialogue is “to broaden the imagination of youth workers” (in both sectors) to include the web of relationships that are integral to their work and to the lives of young people. This includes colleagues, community partners, families, and the broader community. As long as youth workers view their role as only involving themselves and the youth in their program, it is difficult for them to see the value (or the essential need) for professional development and sharing with others.

Similarly, the consultation and survey findings noted the need for a focus on caring for and including families and community building as a core element. It is important, leaders affirmed, to understand how community and culture facilitate a young person’s development, and also

work to strengthen the community on behalf of (and with) young people. When they see the power of community and the potential for change, they are more likely to align themselves with other youth workers who share that commitment to youth in the community.

Diversifying Approaches to Youth Worker Preparation

Consistent with the broader definition of professional development to include more than training events, the national consultation participants provided input to how resources and other educational opportunities could be provided. Some possibilities include:

- Provide space for reflective conversation on being a youth worker. This requires developing expectations, structures, and supervisory systems that encourage doing this reflection. Current systems make this kind of reflection difficult, since youth workers are often accountable for running a plethora of activities that leave little time for anything else.
- Develop models (within and across sectors) of youth worker mentoring or apprenticeships. Adapt the idea of a teaching “hospital” to a teaching congregation or teaching community organization.
- Create and sustain coaching models that build relationships between seasoned and inexperienced youth workers.
- Work in higher education to support youth work as a legitimate and respected profession and vocation. In the process, equip these youth workers with the skills they need to be positive change agents in their organizations and communities—not just leaders who know

SURVEY PARTICIPANT INSIGHTS

“Many of the effective tools and strategies for youth work are not specific to a certain setting, but are very adaptable principles which could be used in various places, with various groups. It seems wise to collaborate and bring the best minds together to share their successes and the things they have learned from their less positive experiences.”

— Faith-Based Youth Worker

“[An advantage to cross-sector learning includes] awareness of each other’s strength in areas where your organization is lacking. . . . We can’t all be the best in every area of need, so why not refer?”

— Faith-Based Youth Worker

how to relate with youth (which is key), but also leaders who can help to affect the systems that affect young people.

- Create learning opportunities that are appropriate for volunteers who are critical to many youth development settings, both community-based and faith-based.

What Role Does Spiritual Development Play?

The “elephant in the room” in thinking about building bridges between community- and faith-based youth workers is the issue of spiritual development. It’s the lowest priority for community-based youth workers and among the highest priorities for faith-based youth workers. It’s clear that “spiritual development” is a critical point of difference between faith-based and community-based youth workers. As such, the issue generated conversation among the leaders gathered at the national consultation. It was also a point of conversation during the focus groups.

The online survey of youth workers did not examine spiritual development in any depth (thus we don’t know what these youth workers mean when they ranked it as “essential” or not). However, the focus groups gave participants an opportunity to indicate how they think about and define spiritual development, with people each having an opportunity to write down and share their own definition. The most frequent themes included the following:

- Spiritual development is building a personal relationship or connection with a higher power or God.
- Spiritual development is learning and the development of life skills.
- Spiritual development is a life-long process.

Other comments on spiritual development included:

- Spiritual development can take place in activities outside of religion.
- Spiritual development is the adoption of a religious doctrine and/or developing faith.
- Spiritual development is a connection with others and the universe.

Many in the camp community feel that the camp experience is an important environment for spiritual growth because of the nature-based context of many camps. Understanding how camp directors defined spiritual development was crucial to establishing a context for their answers. In the camping survey, camp directors were asked to define the term “spiritual development.” Their responses were highly consistent with the themes identified above, with the following additions:

- Christian evangelism/education with a focus on the Bible.
- Importance of connecting through nature and the natural world.
- Moral and character development tied to values and ethics.

Focus group participants were also asked to articulate how they understand the place of spiritual development in their own work with youth. The main themes included:

- As a youth worker, I serve as a guide to help young people create their own definition of spiritual development and spirituality.
- I incorporate spirituality in youth work.
- I am a role model to youth by trying to live a life that is an example of spirituality.
- My spirituality serves as a personal motivator when working with youth.

It is not clear the extent to which this range of understandings shaped the responses to the online survey. It may be, for example, that asking about spiritual development without any context, definition, or depth led many youth workers to respond to the items with an assumption that religious and spiritual development are somewhat synonymous. Hence, when faith-based youth workers indicated that spiritual development is a high priority, they likely thought in terms of their own tradition's approach to spirituality (or, more likely, faith formation or education), and community-based youth workers presumed it wasn't part of their responsibility.

However, there are models where dimensions of spiritual development have been successfully addressed in cross-sector contexts and spiritual development has long been a part of the definition of youth development. For example, Elaine Johnson from the National Training Institute for Community Work at the Academy for Educational Development described how her organization's *Advancing Youth Development* curriculum addresses three themes that are, from her perspective, part of spiritual development:

- *Connectedness*: Are young people aware of how their actions bring about consequences for others? Do they care about other people's well-being?
- *Compassion*: How do young people learn to care for others without a direct benefit to themselves?
- *Abundance*: How do youth workers help young people understand that they can share out of their abundance, knowing that there is a place for them in the world?

This is just one example of how the issue of spiritual development has been negotiated within a community context for youth development. In addition, the New England Network for Child, Youth & Family Services has done extensive work in listening to the spiritual perspectives and needs of vulnerable youth, then encouraging secular youth-serving agencies to address these questions more intentionally.⁴ Extensive work is also under way by Search Institute to deepen a shared understanding of spiritual development that resonates across communities and cultures, which will likely establish a platform for deeper analysis and dialogue.⁵ But when thought leaders discussed spiritual development they wanted it to go hand in hand with people considering the role of moral development with young people. In the process of different organizations working in this area, a shared understanding of spiritual and moral development may help increase the interest in and comfort with the issue among community-based youth workers and also help faith-based workers see the issue in a broader context.

4 For information on this work, visit www.nenetwork.org/initiatives/youth-spirit.html.

5 For information on this work, visit www.spiritualdevelopmentcenter.org.