

## **National Consultation: Overview and Participants**

In April 2007, Lilly Endowment Inc., National Collaboration for Youth, and Search Institute convened 20 national thought leaders to discuss this report and implications for the field. Their dialogue shaped the interpretation and recommendations in this report. The group included a balance of people whose work focuses primarily in community-based youth development, those who focus on faith-based youth work, and those whose work bridges these sectors. The meeting sought to:

- Highlight key understandings of today's adolescents and their implications for equipping community-based and faith-based youth workers.
- Identify unique strengths and expertise that attendees bring to working with youth and preparing youth workers to work with youth.
- Learn from each other about what is happening to develop youth workers in each sector.
- Interpret findings from an exploratory study of community-based and faith-based youth workers' priorities and development needs as well as their interest in and reservations about building bridges across sectors.
- Identify potential common ground for equipping faith-based and community-based youth workers.
- Create recommendations for next steps.

### **Participants in National Consultation**

- Kiarash Afcari, *Director, Academy for Transformation, YouthBuild USA, Oakland, CA*
- Iyad Alnachef, *Director, Youth Programming and Services, Islamic Society of North America, Plainfield, IN*
- Stephanie Artman, *Project Assistant, National Collaboration for Youth, Washington, D.C.*
- Peter L. Benson, Ph.D., *President and CEO, Search Institute, Minneapolis, MN*
- Willis Bright, *Director, Youth Programs, Lilly Endowment Inc., Indianapolis, IN*
- Christopher Coble, Ph.D., *Program Director, Religion, Lilly Endowment Inc., Indianapolis, IN*
- Steve Culbertson, *President and CEO, Youth Service America, Washington, D.C.*
- Tom East, *Director, Center for Ministry Development, Gig Harbor, WA*

- Pam Garza, *Director, National Youth Development Learning Network, National Collaboration for Youth, Washington, D.C.*
- Kay Hong, *Senior Projects Manager, Office of the President, Search Institute, Minneapolis, MN*
- Elaine Johnson, *Vice President and Director, National Training Institute for Community Youth Work, Academy for Educational Development, Washington, D.C.*
- Reed Larson, Ph.D., *Pampered Chef Ltd. Endowed Chair in Family Resiliency, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Urbana, IL*
- Rev. Roland Martinson, S.T.D., *Carrie Olson Baalson Professor of Children, Youth, and Family Ministry, Luther Seminary, St. Paul, MN*
- Fred Oduyoye, *Director, RELOAD Training Tour, Urban Youth Workers Institute, Cincinnati, OH*
- Eboo Patel, Ph.D., *Founder and Executive Director, Interfaith Youth Core, Chicago, IL*
- Paul Patu, *Youth Development Specialist, World Vision, Federal Way, WA*
- Karen Pittman, *Executive Director, Forum for Youth Investment, Washington, D.C.*
- Jane Quinn, *Assistant Executive Director for Community Schools, Children's Aid Society, New York, NY*
- Michael Resnick, Ph.D., *Professor and Giesela and E. Paul Konopka Chair in Adolescent Health and Development, Director, Healthy Youth Development Prevention Research Center, Division of Adolescent Health and Medicine, Department of Pediatrics, University of Minnesota, St. Paul Minnesota*
- René Rochester, Ed.D., *Community Collaborative Advisor to the President, Youth for Christ USA, Franklin, TN*
- Eugene C. Roehlkepartain, *Senior Advisor, Office of the President, Search Institute, Minneapolis, MN*
- Paul Schmitz, *President and CEO, Public Allies, Milwaukee, WI*
- Rev. Mark Scott, *Director of Community Partnerships, Big Brothers Big Sisters, Boston, MA*
- Peg Smith, *Executive Director, American Camp Association, Martinsville, IN*
- Luis Villarreal, *Executive Director, Save Our Youth, Denver, CO*
- Melanie Wilson, MSW, *Director, Research and Public Policy, New England Network for Child, Youth and Family Services, Merrimac, MA*
- Anne Wimberly, Ph.D., *Director, Youth Hope-Builders Academy, Interdenominational Theological Center, Atlanta, GA*

Themes from this meeting are interwoven into this document. To read the draft notes of the full meeting, go to:

<http://www.nydic.org/nydic/staffing/workforce/EquippingEffectiveYouthWorkers.htm>

## Consultation Discussion about Today’s Young People

Before engaging in the core topic of finding common ground across sectors for the professional development of youth workers, consultation participants engaged in dialogue about realities and trends among today’s adolescents. The consultation sought to surface central themes, trends, and issues in current research that community-based and faith-based youth workers need to understand to engage effectively with today’s youth. Four scholars (see box on next page) brought important insight to the dialogue through a panel discussion, and their work frames the information presented here.

No brief discussion can do justice to the many varieties of experience among today’s adolescents or the rich body of research on adolescent development. Rather, we seek to highlight some of the salient themes that emerged in the dialogue at the consultation that provide a foundation for exploring how community-based and faith-based youth workers approach today’s youth.

### Trends and realities of today’s youth

Whenever we talk about adolescents broadly, there is a creative tension between what young people hold in common (the broad trends and issues) and the particularities of a particular group of young people—or even a specific young person. As one consultation participant noted, unless we hold both the commonalities and the particularities in mind, the dialogue can be reduced to stereotypes and meaningless generalities.

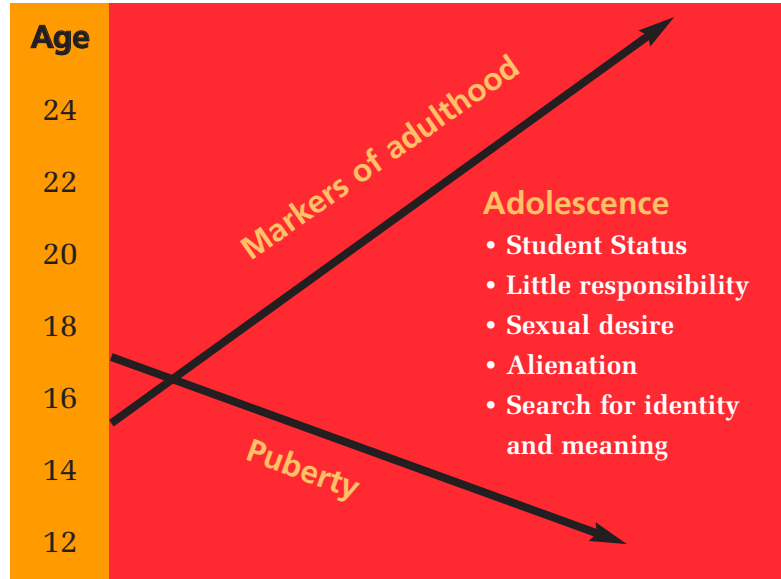
The national consultation sought to hold these dynamics in tension by offering two distinct windows into the worlds of youth. First, Reed Larson offered highlights from an international study group that looked at the emergence of adolescence as a life stage for virtually every population of young people around the world, due in large measure to globalization. As a counterpoint to this sweeping perspective, Anne Wimberly highlighted her work with African American youth, building insights out of her lived experience with young people at Hope Builder’s Academy. Other participants particularized their comments to the specific populations with whom they work: young people in institutional settings; young people on the margins of society; and young people serving as leaders within a particular organization or tradition. Several themes emerged out of these perspectives, which are described below.

### Scholars Presenting Insights on Today’s Youth

- Michael Resnick, Ph.D.,  
*Professor of Pediatrics and  
Director, Healthy Youth  
Development Prevention  
Research Center, University  
of Minnesota, St. Paul,  
Minnesota*
- Anne Wimberly, Ph.D.,  
*Founder, Youth Hope  
Builders Academy,  
Interdenominational  
Theological Center, Atlanta,  
Georgia*
- Rev. Roland Martinson,  
S.T.D., *Carrie Olson Baalson  
Professor of Children, Youth,  
and Family Ministry, Luther  
Seminary, St. Paul,  
Minnesota*
- Reed Larson Ph.D., *Pampered  
Chef Ltd. Endowed Chair in  
Family Resiliency, University  
of Illinois at Urbana-  
Champaign, Illinois*

## The growing “wedge” between childhood and adulthood

Larson presented findings from the global youth study that shows, in most countries, a growing period of time between childhood and adulthood. In most societies, the markers of adulthood are getting later. Young people are staying in school longer, waiting longer to take their first job, marry, and have children. At the same time, puberty is coming earlier, particularly in industrialized societies. The result is a growing “wedge” between childhood and adulthood (see illustration on this page) during which young people are students, have little responsibility, experience sexual desire, and, too often, feel a sense of social isolation and alienation. Their status presses them to search for identity and meaning. After his presentation, Larson posed to the group, how does society deal with this wedge? How do we create meaning, structure, and continuity during this increasingly longer time that we call adolescence?



This growing period of adolescence calls for re-examining several aspects of youth work, particularly to ensure that young people have the supports they need to bridge the gap between childhood and adulthood. They need, among other things, opportunities to engage in the search for identity and meaning through meaningful service and action, rites of passage and markers, and safe, nurturing places to “practice life” across this age span.

The broadening age span also presents significant challenges to youth workers. Several consultation participants noted the lack of adequate positive developmental experiences for sixteen- to twenty-two-year-olds, for example. Some consultation participants suggested that these adolescents have already left many programs and organizations and, thus, are ignored. However, it’s inadequate to think that you can simply create the kind of programming for younger ages available for these older adolescents; they need a distinct set of opportunities that likely emphasize leadership, service, and civic engagement.

These and other changes in the nation’s social fabric require that we think about youth development in new ways. And all of these changes require that we think about healthy youth development in a different way. We need, what Resnick calls, “intentional, deliberate strategies for providing support, relationships, experiences, resources and opportunities that promote positive outcomes for young people.”

## Relationships, isolation, and technology

Anne Wimberly quoted Edward Wimberly, who writes in his book *Relational Refugees* (Abingdon, 2000), “Human identity is formed in a matrix of relationships. We discover ourselves in and through our encounters with others. Our sense of ‘me’ is dependent on the existence of a ‘you.’ We can only see our own eyes in the reflection of another’s . . . Adolescents sort through a jumble of messages, both internal and external, as they arrive at some sort of self-understanding. . . . Some [teenagers] get the idea that to be of significance, they have to be someone other than themselves. They strive for affirmation by fitting themselves into someone else’s prescribed set of expectations that are often alien to who they truly are. Those who insist on defining themselves by the standards of others will become ‘relational refugees.’”

There is also a paradoxical need for young people to have their own space and subculture while also being embedded in a web of caring, intergenerational relationships. For many young people, the social networking world of the Internet has become a significant way that this new generation of youth is creating its own space and subculture. In a sense, then, social networking, instant messaging, cell phones, and the other technological innovations that are second nature to a growing number of young people are both sources of connection as well as isolation and alienation.

At the same time, this electronic world is inaccessible to many young people who live on the other side of the digital divide. While this lack of access may reduce some of the dangers that come with technology, it also reduces

### Nurturing Young People’s Resilience

We probably all can think of amazing stories of those who, against all expectations, in the face of overwhelming odds, are healthy, engaged people. How did they do it? What happened along the way to redirect them away from a downhill path? What kept it from becoming their destiny?

The best way to think about resilience is to envision a bridge. After all, the concept of resilience originated in physics and metallurgy; and those who were interested in resilience before the 1970s were builders and scientists who focused on the capacity of physical materials to resist stress. Picture a bridge on a cold winter’s day in my home state of Minnesota, supporting hundreds of cars and trucks. That bridge is exposed to cold, wind and vibration. And we know that the bridge is able to perform its function because of two resources: internal strengths, and external supports like cables and concrete footings. The evidence is clear today that caring, competent adults are a critical source of that external support that strengthens the resilience of our youth, and increases the likelihood that they, too, will grow up to be caring, competent and engaged adults.

Our challenge is to develop in young people the same strengths that help that bridge to function on a cold winter’s day: the internal resources they need, along with the external supports that nurture positive development. These are the nutrients communities can provide to our youth. This requires advocacy, strategic investment, and knowing the evidence about what works.

*(Excerpted from Michael Resnick’s presentation at the national consultation.)*

opportunities, reducing these young people’s readiness for work and life in a world that is, for both better and worse, increasingly digital.

The technology issue is only part of the challenge when it comes to young people’s web of relationships. Social connections are clearly foundational for healthy development. Resnick reviewed research studies from the United States and 26 other nations that identify clear protective factors that appear again and again in the research. These include three critical factors involving relationships:

- A strong sense of connectedness to parents and family (all kinds of families – single parent, dual parent, extended family, adoptive families);
- A strong sense of connectedness to other adults and organizations outside of the family (adults who value and reward positive, pro-social behaviors, not anti-social behaviors); and
- A strong sense of connectedness to school, where young people report: my teachers are fair; my teachers are interested in me as a person; my teachers have high expectations and care about my success.

On the flip side, social isolation and alienation is a powerful predictor of anti-social behavior. Resnick also noted that social isolation and disconnection is as big of a risk factor for early death as is cigarette use.

Within this context, it is troubling that many young people are less embedded in their communities than they once were. Young people in industrialized nations, such as the United States, are far more separated from adults and from community organizations than their counterparts in other countries.

Consultation participants raised concerns about whether this web of relationships, when it exists, is really sustained and sustaining or are most relationships in young people’s lives short and fleeting, limited to a particular program year or activity? Furthermore, do the adults who work with and care about young people have the skills needed to foster deep, sustaining relationships?

### **Meaningful roles and voice**

One powerful strategy for addressing the “rolelessness” of adolescence is to ensure that young people have meaningful roles in their organizations and communities and that they have opportunities to speak for themselves. Young people, Wimberly suggested, are bombarded with numerous images and stereotypes of who they are, what they should be, and how they should act. They want—in fact, need—to share the realities of their lives from their own perspectives.

A widely supported strategy for powerful youth engagement is service-learning with its positioning of young people as actors, agents, and leaders in the efforts. Consultation participants noted that young people are volunteering at record high rates, yet the systems still resist giving young people the power to lead and learn through these efforts.

Service-learning is not just promoted for ideological reasons. Resnick reported on research

showing that young people are more likely to have successful outcomes when they have opportunities to develop skills, and then learn how to use those skills to help someone else. To be successful, youth must also have the opportunities to reflect upon and find meaning in these opportunities—which suggests vital roles for youth workers. People who are involved in service to others during their adolescent years are more likely to be engaged as adults, involved in their community, in community organizations and networks that join them with others.

Service-learning brings together action with cognitive and spiritual development. It creates a lifestyle with an ideology. You can actually do something, not just talk about it. Furthermore, the narrative of service is a counter-veiling message to the prevailing materialistic message. The power happens when you shift from serving kids to giving them space to serve.

## **Religion and spirituality**

In thinking through cross-sector collaboration, it is important to get broader perspectives on religion and spirituality during adolescence, particularly since the “conventional wisdom” is not always accurate. The National Study of Youth and Religion (led by Chris Smith, now at the University of Notre Dame) provides new insights into the religious and spiritual lives of American teenagers. Roland Martinson reported some of the key findings:

- Though the vast majority of American teenagers identify themselves as Christian (95%), they exhibit a wide array of religious and spiritual beliefs, practices, and attitudes. Only 8% of youth could be described as “spiritual, but not religious.”
- For a significant subgroup of youth (between 8% and 23%), religion is a core, defining part of their identity. However, most American teenagers (62%) are inarticulate or confused about their faith. Smith labeled their perspective as “moralistic, therapeutic deism.”
- Most youth (70%) are involved in conventional religious practices. Most are quite like their parents in this sphere of life. They tend to be relatively positive about their religious institutions. But in the pressure of competing opportunities for youth, religious involvement “occupies a weak and losing position.”

Resnick reminded consultation participants that a sense of spirituality, in which young people describe a sense of connectedness to a creative power in the universe greater than themselves, is a core factor supporting young people’s resilience. The challenge for the field is coming to terms with how it understands spirituality and spiritual development within a secular and pluralistic society. (This issue is addressed in more detail in the full report.) 1

## **Shaping Life Narratives**

A theme that emerged at the consultation out of the dialogue about today’s young people was the theme of narrative. What are the forces in young people’s lives that are shaping their life stories and connecting them to larger stories? Who are the narrators who tell stories that are compelling and powerful to young people? And how do these stories give a sense of meaning, purpose and direction?

For many young people, it was suggested, these life narratives are being written through the world of media, which is engaging young people in powerful (though not always healthy) messages. The danger is that the messages being offered by youth organizations and faith communities are generally boring in comparison.

In some sense, every youth-serving organization has an opportunity to claim its role in shaping young people's narratives. It involves shifting from merely providing services to engaging young people fully in writing their own stories through their experiences. It involves helping young people find something to do that taps into their passion and commitment.

### **Different contexts have different impacts**

In thinking through the “common ground” across sectors, Reed Larson presented research that reminds us that both sectors play important roles in young people's development, and that each sector's area of impact is somewhat unique. A study of 2,200 youth examined both their involvement in six different types of activities and the impact of those activities on various developmental outcomes, such as identity formation, initiative, emotional regulation, teamwork and social skills, positive relationships, and adult networks.

Researchers found important differences in the kinds of outcomes that were associated with each type of activity. For example, sports and arts were higher than others on initiative (setting goals and applying effort), while community-oriented activities and service activities were higher on adult networks and social capital. Faith-based youth groups were found to stand out as a setting in which youth reported higher rates of experiences across five of the six developmental domains.

### **Integration vs. silos**

The reality, though, is that young people do not think in terms of sectors and how each sector helps them developmentally. Rather, they negotiate and integrate the many parts of their lives, seamlessly and dynamically. Yet, most institutions in communities approach their work with young people from one specific silo.

From young people's perspective, even the dialogue about common ground is artificial. They are focused on trying to figure out their own lives. How would the field be different if we started with that same perspective in thinking through our roles as youth workers? A different approach would be for youth workers, regardless of where they work, to come together not for professional development and networking, but for shared action on behalf of and with young people. As one consultation participant put it, youth workers spend too much time within their own agencies or organizations, and not enough time building their community.

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<sup>1</sup> See Smith, C., with Denton, M. L. (2005). *Soul searching: The religious and spiritual lives of American teenagers*. New York: Oxford University Press.