



YOUTH WORK PRACTICE

A STATUS REPORT ON PROFESSIONALIZATION
AND EXPERT OPINION
ABOUT THE FUTURE OF THE FIELD



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This report was commissioned by ProYouthWork America, a private non-profit organization established as a consortium of regional and national intermediary organizations and experts. PYWA's mission is to build and sustain the child and youth services workforce by growing the workforce; improving workforce quality, effectiveness and sustainability; and promoting public policy changes that support both workers and youth.

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Executive Summary

What is youth work? Who are youth workers? These questions and many more are key to the development of the field, yet practitioners are still in the process of answering them. One view holds that a “youth worker” is simply any professional working with children and youth in any setting. Others focus on where the practitioner works, ruling out residential treatment or juvenile justice settings, for instance, in favor of less-specialized afterschool programs and community centers. Still others insist that “youth work” is more about the client than the setting, targeting those who for a variety of reasons are disadvantaged and marginalized by society.

Yet despite the fact that professionals still don’t agree on precisely which workers, settings, or target populations fit under the “youth work” umbrella, the field has nevertheless continued to progress in the last few decades, a development that is arguably more important than ever, given the magnitude of issues facing young people today. Even absent some key definitions, there is now relative agreement on at least some of the directions the field should take. Most experts, for instance, agree that there should be more professional development opportunities for workers, or at least some subsets of workers; more research linking the practice of youth work to positive outcomes for youth; and clearer standards and practices for the field. In this report, we review the current literature on youth work and consult experts about the state of the field and how it must develop if it is to meet the considerable social and professional challenges ahead.

Introduction

In the United Kingdom, Canada and Australia, youth work is a legitimate profession with recognized standards, college-level programs and skills-based certifications. The professionalization of the field in those countries has conferred a higher status on youth workers than their peers in the United States enjoy. Despite scattered state and local efforts, and even some national programs, attempts to professionalize the field in the United States have so far been only partially successful. Obstacles tend to center on the inability or unwillingness of agencies employing youth workers to pay more for better-skilled staff, and the seeming reluctance of state licensing agencies to require those specialized skills. Yet progress is being made.

This report examines current research on the direct-service workforce. It goes on to describe the latest trends and developments toward professionalization, seeking the best thinking on the topic from six experts in the field. Our goal is to describe the ‘next steps’ most needed to move the field closer to realizing its professional potential – an evolutionary development that will certainly benefit youth workers themselves, but more importantly, the young people with whom they interact.

Research on Workforce Development

Throughout the past decade, many researchers and practitioners have advocated for extending educational opportunities for youth workers to include certificate and degree programs. Such an expanded educational framework has generally been considered a prerequisite to advancing the field professionally:

Comprehensive educational opportunities help move youth workers to the point where they are acknowledged as experts and recognized as professionals. The goal of the youth development

professional is to create positive adults who can contribute to their families, communities, and society. Such a lofty vision deserves equally high-quality training.¹

Yet gaining more respect and potentially higher pay for workers is rarely the sole stated reason for developing more elaborate educational pathways. The assumed benefit to clients of better-skilled workers is also a driving justification behind the recommendations. According to a 2006 report from the National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability, improving education and training for staff improves outcomes for young people and organizations.

[With professional development] there is a link to increased job satisfaction and retention and improved youth outcomes such as more community involvement, less risky behaviors, improved academic scores, and better job retention (Bouffard & Little, 2004; NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 2001; Norris 2001). Professional development of staff is also a smart financial investment for organizations and funders. Advertising for, selecting, and training a new employee can cost an organization three to six months of productivity and 29 – 40% of a position’s salary (Fitz-Enz, 2000, Center for School and Community Services, Academy for Educational Development, 2002; Hall & Cassidy, 2002; and Westat & Policy Studies Associates, 2001).²

¹ Borden, L., Craig, D., & Villarruel, F. (2004). Professionalizing youth development: The role of higher education. *New Directions for Youth Development*, 104. Retrieved from http://wikis.lib.ncsu.edu/images/a/ae/Higher_ed_and_Professionalizing_the_field.pdf

² National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability. (2006). *The Workforce Development System & the Professional Development of Youth Service Professionals: Why Professional Development?* Retrieved from <http://www.ncwd-youth.info/information-brief-19>



Recent after-school research also makes the point that skilled workers are a critical component of successful programs.

Out-of-school time programs with skilled staff retain youth at much higher levels than programs with untrained staff (Pearson, et al., 2007), and staff with strong training have shown better capabilities to respond to the needs of young people, to engage them in arts, sports, science and other activities in ways that promote social, academic, and emotional development, and operate programs with greater benefits for children and youth (Grossman et al., 2007).³

Professionalization as a concept can involve specialized degrees, certificates, state-wide or national exams or legislative recognition.⁴ But no matter the mix of components, experts agree that education should be meaningfully linked to professional growth opportunities; otherwise, there is no financial incentive for these workers, already paid poorly, to seek more education.

Although a growing number of certification programs are being offered at community colleges, colleges, and universities, there is no coordinated effort to bring these programs together into some type of career ladder. This lack of a nationally agreed-upon curriculum for youth development workers and

the lack of an accrediting body leaves youth development workers unable to take their educational experience with them from one place to another... Increasing the availability of higher education courses is only the first step in addressing the challenges faced by those in the field who work with and on behalf of young people. The next step is to develop a comprehensive career ladder or lattice and a system that offers youth development workers the opportunity to take advantage of their educational experiences in subsequent positions.⁵

Given that the cost of recruiting and training a youth worker can be high, there is another incentive for keeping talented youth workers in the field: to avoid the cost of replacing them.

Nationally, the turnover rate among direct-service residential and youth care workers in 2002 was 57 percent. Turnover rates of this magnitude have significant implications for both the agencies and their clients. Formulas for calculating replacement costs of direct-service workers commonly puts the cost of recruiting and training new workers at between 33% and 50% of yearly salary.⁶

“Increasing the availability of higher education courses is only the first step in addressing the challenges faced by those in the field who work with and on behalf of young people.”

In addition to costing agencies money, high turnover also affects client-worker relationships as workers cycle through programs, forming relationships with young people and then disappearing. Research shows that professional development can reduce

turnover. One study points out the mechanism for such reduction:

High quality professional development can lead to rapid program improvements as employees integrate new knowledge into everyday practice. Organizations that have committed to developing a strong, stable workforce have experienced reductions in turnover and increases in productivity.⁷

Though most experts agree about the link between skilled workers, increased retention, and better outcomes for clients, persuading employers and their funders to make the investment in better-trained direct-care staff has proved difficult. A field that relies primarily on public grants and contracts to fund its services is vulnerable to year-to-year fluctuations, and economic downturns that squeeze the public purse make raising salaries particularly

³ Foundations, Inc. and The After-School Corporation, Inc. (2010). *Out-of-school time: Leveraging higher education for quality*. Retrieved from http://www.afterschooled.org/PDF/Higher_Ed_Report_Feb2010.pdf

⁴ Schneider-Muñoz, A.J. (2009). Youth work: Organizing pathways for leadership development and social change. *Journal of Child and Youth Care Work*, 22, 163-176.

⁵ Borden, L., Craig, D., & Villarruel, F. (2004). Professionalizing youth development: The role of higher education. *New Directions for Youth Development*, 104, Retrieved from http://wikis.lib.ncsu.edu/images/a/ae/Higher_ed_and_Professionalizing_the_field.pdf

⁶ Wilson, M. (2009). Supporting the direct-service workforce in behavioral health programs for children and youth in New Hampshire: A report to the New Hampshire Endowment for Health. *New England Network for Child, Youth and Family Services*. Retrieved from http://www.nenetwork.org/publications/NH_Behav_Hlth_Workforce.pdf

⁷ NextGeneration Youth Work Coalition website. (March 2010). A concise case for investing in youth workers. *Publications and Resources*. Retrieved from <http://www.nextgencoalition.org/resource/concise-case-investing-youth-workers.html>

untenable. Indeed, funding streams that annually expand and contract create serious difficulties for the development of the field; when entire programs can come and go quickly, even job security is difficult to guarantee, let alone raises rewarding workers for the acquisition of new skills. Ultimately, what results is a Catch-22 of low pay, low skills, poor workplace performance and negative public perception:

*The profession does not have a positive and clear identity, which means that there is no strong public support for funding for the field, [so] the system is underfunded and working conditions are dire, which leads to poor training, low standards for workers, and rapid turnover. The quality of practitioners often is not good, which leads to problems that are played up in the press because of the negative image of the field, leading to less positive information and a poorly-defined identity for the profession.*⁸

Professionalization

Several organizations are leading the way in professionalizing youth work including the National Collaboration for Youth, which helped develop core competencies for youth workers, and the National Building Exemplary Systems for Training Youth Workers (BEST) Initiative, which offers youth

work certification and training programs in partnership with higher education institutions. The North American Certification Project (NACP) has been building a national professional-level certification process for multiple practice settings for child and youth care workers since 2000.⁹ In 2008, the program was nationally implemented by the Child and Youth Care Certification Board (CYCCB), a non-profit organization developed by The Association for Child and Youth Care Practice. Over 100 practitioners and educators from across the country worked on creating the certification, which defined the field of practice, created a five-domain taxonomy of competencies, and created a multi-layered assessment methodology. Pilot testing of the certification program was conducted on 775 practitioners from multiple practice environments drawn from 26 sites in nine states and two Canadian provinces.¹⁰

Still, the field is not in complete agreement about the importance of these steps. The National Training Institute for Community Youth Work, for instance, agrees that professionalization standards for youth workers are needed to best serve youth across the country:

*Establishing national standards for foundational training, and for the trainers who deliver that training, is a necessary step in establishing youth development work as a profession. Every youth development worker entering the field needs to start with the same set of core competencies – regardless of the setting in which he or she engages with young people. Nationally accepted standards for entry-level knowledge, skills, and abilities are the first step in coming to agreement on prerequisites for entering the field, salary ranges, and career paths across agencies, settings, and systems.*¹¹

But the Forum for Youth Investment is reluctant to advocate for a national certification given the diversity of youth work occurring across the U.S. Although acknowledging the importance of shared, evidence-based competencies, the organization is concerned about limiting access to the field:

From a policy and advocacy standpoint, ensuring multiple pathways to and through this work, given the diversity of the workforce (everything from 18 year olds with no prior work experience to licensed social workers and retirees) and the organizations involved (e.g. Boys and Girls Clubs, churches, school districts), is critical. While identifying research-based competencies that define good youth work practice is important, and states

⁸ Thomas, D. (2003). An overview of current national trends in the profession of child and youth care. *International Child and Youth Care Network*, 53. Retrieved from <http://www.cyc-net.org/cyc-online/cycol-0603-davidthomas.html>

⁹ Curry, D., Qaqish, B., Carpenter-Williams, J., Eckles, F., Mattingly, M., Stuart, C., & Thomas, D. (2009). A national certification exam for child and youth care workers: Preliminary results of a validation study. *Journal of Child and Youth Care Work*, 22, 152-170

¹⁰ North American Certification Project. (2009). *Final Phases in the Development and Implementation of the North American Certification Project*. Retrieved from <http://www.acycp.org/Final%20Phases%20in%20the%20Development%20of%20the%20NACP.pdf>

¹¹ Johnson, E., Rothstein, F., & Gajdosik, J. (2004). The intermediary role in youth worker professional development: Successes and challenges. *New Directions for Youth Development*, 10. Retrieved from http://nti.aed.org/assets/pdf/article_dec_2004.pdf

¹² Yohalem, N., Pittman, K. & Edwards, S. (2010). Strengthening the youth development/after-school workforce: Lessons learned and implications for funders. *The Forum for Youth Investment*. Retrieved from http://www.forumforyouthinvestment.org/files/Strengthening_the_YD-AS_Workforce.pdf



A few states have begun training youth workers to an established curriculum. Some states implement their programs through the BEST Initiative, others through local or regional networks or institutions of higher learning.”

assessed and evaluated in five general competency areas including child/youth development; families and communities; program/service environment; program content/curriculum; and professionalism.¹⁶

and many other systems are moving in this direction, promoting the certification of competency through a single national credential, like early childhood's CDA, is unlikely to meet the needs of either the adults choosing this work or the organizations providing services.¹²

State, University & Organizational Initiatives

A few states are moving toward the professionalization of youth work by training youth workers to one established curriculum. Some states implement their programs through the BEST Initiative, and others through local or regional networks or institutions of higher learning. This section describes what various states are doing to address professionalization of the field and how their efforts intersect with other fields and/or professional groups. While not an exhaustive account of players and programs, it nonetheless illustrates the types of approaches being taken.

Texas has a state-wide certification program for credentialing youth workers, developed by the Texas Youth and Child Care Worker Association and administered through the Academy for Competent Youth Work.

Texas is also involved in the Child and Youth Care (CYC) Certification Institute, which provides credentialing in several states.¹³ The Texas credentialing process involves classes and testing designed to:

*increase awareness, understanding, and sensitivity to how children and youth develop; increase understanding of and capacity to engage in empowering interactions; increase understanding of and capacity to work within and across systems (teams, families, cultures, and communities); enlarge repertoire of activities and techniques for engaging youth in interactions and activities that will help them to develop skills essential to becoming independent and increase capacity (understanding and skill) to discipline youth and resolve crises.*¹⁴

The **Indiana Youth Development Credential** is a statewide effort to provide adults working with youth the opportunity to earn recognition for professional development. The program was developed through the Indiana YouthPRO Association, which is an affiliate of the National After-School Association.¹⁵ Youth workers attend trainings, and are

Springfield College's School of Human Services, based in Massachusetts, offers an undergraduate bachelor's of science concentration in community youth development and leadership that was created at the request of local nonprofit agencies looking for college graduates specifically trained to work with youth. The school has campuses in several cities across the country, and offers the youth development concentration in Boston, San Diego and Tampa Bay.¹⁷ Through the College of Public and Community Service at the **University of Massachusetts** in Boston, a youth worker can earn a B.A. with a youth-work concentration and a youth-work certificate. Both programs teach students about youth development and youth culture, as well as models for effective practice in youth work.¹⁸

¹³ *CYC Credentialing Links*. (n.d.). Retrieved from http://www.acycp.org/cyc%20certification%20board/information_links/information_links.htm

¹⁴ *Academy for Competent Youth Work*. (n.d.). Retrieved from <http://youthworkacademy.org/CYC.html>

¹⁵ *Indiana YouthPro Association*. (n.d.). *The Core Competencies*. Retrieved from <http://www.indianayouthpro.org/core.htm>

¹⁶ *Indiana YouthPro Association*. (n.d.). *Setting a Standard: The History of Professionalizing the Field of Youth Work in Indiana*. Retrieved from <http://www.renewaloutfitters.org/Ambassadors/Resources/Setting-A-Standard.pdf>

¹⁷ *Springfield College, School of Human Services*. (n.d.). Retrieved from <http://www.spfldcol.edu/homepage/dept.nsf/04E52AE2BE212E4245256BD80029D783/A6BF8CE902934D5045256C85003B3997>

¹⁸ *UMassBoston, College of Public and Community Service*. (n.d.). *Youth Work*. Retrieved from http://www.cpcs.umb.edu/undergrad/youth_work/about_youth_work.htm

Kansas and **Missouri** have had joint competencies for youth workers since 2006, which were developed in partnership with the Opportunities in a Professional Education Network (OPEN) Initiative, the Missouri Afterschool Network and the Kansas Enrichment Network. They developed several core competencies for youth workers and created assessments for measuring workers' knowledge and experience in each competency area.¹⁹

In 2008, **New York** instituted the New York City Core Competencies for Youth Work Professionals, which were developed to help youth-serving organizations and staff serve their clients more effectively. The overarching principles in the New York City standards included:

... building on youth strengths rather than focusing on youth deficits; setting and maintaining high expectations; understanding the centrality of and fostering positive relationships with peers and adults; providing age-appropriate and challenging programming; engaging participants as partners, not just as consumers of services; promoting positive identity formation and helping young people to fully develop their

*potential. Respecting and valuing the cultures and traditions of participants, their families and their communities, and treating all participants and staff equally, irrespective of race, religion, sex, gender identity, national origin, age or disability.*²⁰

Youth workers interested in certificate programs in New York have several options at various universities and community colleges that offer degree or certification programs in youth development. **Cornell** offers a family development credential; **Duchess Community College** has a human services youth worker applied academic certificate; students at **Lehman College** can enroll in a youth studies certificate program; and **New York City Technical College** and **Empire State College** both offer community and human service degrees.²¹

Rutgers University in New Jersey offers a professional youth work certificate that "addresses the growing need for educated professionals to work with youth in structured organizations... through academic and experiential learning and draws upon educational pedagogy, sociology, and psychology to prepare students to address

complex problems in youth, family and community services."²²

The **University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee** offers a youth development certificate through an interdisciplinary program that focuses on youth in high-risk situations. The program fulfills the educational requirements for professional certification with the Wisconsin Association of Child and Youth Care Professionals.²³ Students at **Clemson University** in **South Carolina** can receive a master's degree or certificate in youth development, and students at **Palm Beach State College** in **Florida** can earn a youth development certificate.^{24 25}

Youth workers in **Maryland** can enroll in a youth worker certificate program at the **Community College of Baltimore County**, and in 2008, Maryland enacted legislation requiring certification for residential care workers by the year 2013.^{26 27}

Colorado started credentialing youth workers in 2005 through the Colorado Office of Professional Development. The Colorado School-Age/Youth Professional Credential and The Colorado School

¹⁹ Missouri Afterschool Network, Kansas Enrichment Network. (2001). *Kansas and Missouri Core Competencies for Youth Development Professionals*. Retrieved from http://www.coloradoafterschoolnetwork.org/admin/uploads/Resources/Core_Competencies_for_Youth_Development_Professionals.pdf

²⁰ NYC Department of Youth and Community Development. (2008). *Core Competencies for Youth Work Professionals*. Retrieved from http://www.nyc.gov/html/dycd/downloads/pdf/core_competencies_for_yw_professionals.pdf

²¹ ACT for Youth Downstate Center for Excellence, ACT for Youth Upstate Center of Excellence (2003). *A Guide to Positive Youth Development*. New York: Mount Sinai Adolescent Health Center. Retrieved from http://www.hss.state.ak.us/dph/wcfh/adolescent/assets/PYD_Guide.pdf

²² Rutgers University. (n.d.). *Minor in Professional Youth Work*. Retrieved from <http://sciencelearning.rutgers.edu/youthwork.htm>

²³ University of Wisconsin. (n.d.). *Youth Work Learning Center*. Retrieved from <http://www4.uwm.edu/sce/dci.cfm?id=19>

²⁴ Clemson University. (n.d.). *Youth Development Leadership program*. Retrieved from <http://www.grad.clemson.edu/programs/Youth-Development-Leadership/>

²⁵ Palm Beach State College. (n.d.). *Human Services Programs*. Retrieved from <http://www.palmbeachstate.edu/x4640.xml>

²⁶ Nichols, M. (2008). Local schools give youth workers more class. *Youth Today*. Retrieved from http://www.youthtoday.org/publication/article.cfm?article_id=1263

²⁷ Curry, D., Eckles, F., Stuart, C. & Qaqish, B. (2009). National child and youth care practitioner professional certification: Promoting competent care for children and youth. *Child Welfare*, 89, 57-77. Retrieved from <http://www.historyconference.org/Documents/cyccb%20child%20welfare%20journal%20in%20print.pdf>

Age and Youth Development Core Knowledge and Standards were built on the Colorado Early Childhood Professional Credential, criteria of the US Military School Age Credential as well as criteria from many other states. The standards apply to those who work with children and youth ages 5-18, and the credentialing process must include “alternative ways of meeting educational requirements, which will encourage practitioners to meet standards, help retain workers, be a means to secure increased wages, and ultimately improve outcomes for youth.”²⁸

It is clear that states, professional associations and colleges are approaching professionalization of youth work from a variety of angles, sometimes together and sometimes separately. Some are linking standards to existing programs in related fields, while others focus on providing more structured professional development opportunities to existing workers and students. Still others are requiring formal certification or conducting field-specific assessments of worker competencies. It remains to be seen which approaches are most effective at advancing the field. It is possible, and even likely, that conditions specific to different states require different programs.

Professionalization Models

Models that support professionalization of direct-service workers by forging collaborations between academia and work settings can be found in other fields. For instance, Lee University in Tennessee partners with healthcare institutions to provide students with internships and eventual employment in nursing homes, hospitals, assisted living facilities, senior residence complexes, medical practice organizations, and public health agencies. In partnership with Life Care Centers of America, the university provides specific training in preparation for positions with Life Care and other public and private long-term care organizations.²⁹

Another model can be found in social work. Undergraduate and graduate social work students typically must complete internships in order to graduate, and colleges usually partner with local social service agencies to provide this on-the-job training. Some programs even include employment for students post-graduation. At the University of New Hampshire, social work students can apply for the Child Welfare Training Grant program, which includes tuition and post-graduation employment. Students who are accepted into the program complete internships at the New Hampshire Department

of Health and Human Services/ Division for Children, Youth and Families (DCYF) and are employed by DCYF after graduation.³⁰

However, direct university-to-state pipelines might not be cause for universal celebration. Private nonprofits employing youth workers often complain that the higher-paying public agencies deplete their workforce by luring their best workers away after they have spent months or even years developing them.

It makes sense that the easiest-to-borrow models would come from fields most closely related to youth work. A careful look at systems being used in related fields, while beyond the scope of this report, could yield important insights about how various models impact students, existing workers, agencies, and clients.

Models for successfully professionalizing youth work can be found in other fields.

²⁸ Starr, B., Yohalem, N. & Gannett, E. (2009). Youth work core competencies: A review of existing frameworks and purposes. *NextGeneration Youth Work Coalition*. Retrieved from http://www.niost.org/pdf/Core_Competencies_Review_October_2009.pdf

²⁹ Johnson, M. (May 6, 2011). *New Healthcare Administration Major Graduates Two Students*. Lee University News website. Retrieved from <http://www.leeuniversity.edu/newsEvents/newsDetails.aspx?Channel=%2FChannels%2FAll+Content&WorkflowItemID=85ebb9c8-e239-4ce9-9dba-353f630e9737>

³⁰ University of New Hampshire Social Work Department website. (n.d.). *Child Welfare Training Grant*. Retrieved from <http://chhs.unh.edu/sw/cwtg.html>

Current Perspectives

In order to better understand the advances in and current challenges to professionalization, we conducted individual phone interviews with several experts in the field:

The Experts

Dale Curry

Associate Professor, School of Family and Consumer Studies, Kent State; board member of the national Child and Youth Care Certification Board (CYCCB); and co-editor of the Journal of Child and Youth Care Work.

Frank Eckles

Executive director of the Child and Youth Care Worker Certification Institute; board president of the CYCCB; and training director for Academy for Competent Youth Work.

Dana Fusco

Dean of School of Health & Behavioral Sciences, York College, City University of New York; Next Generation Youth Work Coalition Leadership Council member.

Mark Krueger

Professor of Youth Work at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee; founder and director of the Youth Work Learning Center.

Andrew Schneider-Munoz

Vice president and director at the Academy for Educational Development Center for Youth Development; board member of the Association for Child and Youth Care Practice.

Janet Wakefield

Chief exploration officer for The Journey; Next Generation Youth Work Coalition Leadership Council member.

Interviewees were asked to reflect on both how the field has evolved and what challenges remain. They were also asked to comment on developing trends, individual and organizational leaders, municipalities and states at the forefront of youth work development, and finally, on suggestions for next steps. Their comments are organized by theme, and together constitute a round-robin discussion representing their various perspectives.

Developments and Trends

Who are youth workers, what do they do, and how has their work evolved over time?

Frank Eckles: *There has never been an agreed-upon description of the field. Child and youth care evolved from local communities taking care of children. Communities figured*

out they needed better workers and better care for children. Now we have people who are youth workers who recognize what they do; the practitioners have started it. Change has been internally driven; workers said, 'I need to know this to do my job.' We need [a system] to be able to recognize the good workers.

Dana Fusco: *What do we mean by 'the field' – what is youth work?*

I've been pushing to bring together different subareas of youth work. There is no consensus on this, especially internationally.

For me youth work is really about working with kids where they're at without so structured an agenda that you can't support their development. That can look a million different ways. It might be afterschool, it might not be – just because you're



“I very much feel that youth work is a dying breed, and that concerns me. It’s being co-opted by after-school education. Not to say that after-school is bad; it’s just different. It’s not necessarily youth work”

working with kids doesn’t mean you’re doing youth work.

I very much feel that youth work is a dying breed, which concerns me. It’s being co-opted by after-school education – not to say after-school is bad, it’s not, it’s just different; it’s not necessarily youth work. More and more it’s not youth work, and the money is going to after-school for academic achievement, not to youth work.

Networking and collaboration

Mark Krueger: *One could argue that we [youth workers] are much more in touch with each other. There are more networks to work collaboratively, to share what we’ve learned.*

But there is a need for advocacy and insight around how to organize in today’s world. How do associations get the word out and organize? Our field is still lagging behind in networking and growing our community. Getting youth workers to talk with each other and getting the word out is still a challenge.

In the U.S there are now emerging collaborations between the residential and after-school communities. The two communities are talking more and sharing more and that is a good sign; both sides are learning from each other. The merging is good for everyone.

“We need to engage youth early in high school and educate them about what youth work is.”

Frank Eckles: *The Academy for Competent Youth Work creates networking opportunities for youth workers across practice settings. When you get people from different programs and get them together to talk, they all really benefit.*

Dale Curry: *There have been lots of attempts to get people from different practice settings together and that seems to be working in some instances. We are trying to partner with the National After School Association and others, but there is still resistance. We need to partner for the good of the field.*

Standardizing training, recognizing skills

Each interviewee spoke about the development of youth work competencies, credentialing and certification standards:

Frank Eckles: *Everyone has the same problem: how do we prepare and pay for the youth work workforce? [These questions] lead to the same solution: certification and credentialing.*

A lot of what has been talked about is competency-based credentialing with a career ladder. That is important: meeting entry-level requirements, developing, and moving up the ladder. We want a fully prepared youth worker.

We have connected six certification programs and made an umbrella program [through CYCCB development of the competencies]. Now we have

an international set of competencies that describe a full youth work professional.

Now that there are national competencies, there is a lot of interest; more and more employers want people who are credentialed.

However, certifications and credentials that only work for one agency are not useful. We need a credential that is mobile; this is a very mobile workforce. Every time you go somewhere new you need a new credential, and that doesn’t work and doesn’t mean anything.

Andrew Schneider-Munoz: *There are a few major trends in the field [including] national certification for youth workers.*

With certification comes an accepted code of ethics, which is what you need for a real professional field – ethics, training and certification.

Dale Curry: *We have made some progress towards mandated certification. In Ohio we will probably reintroduce legislation for licensing in residential treatment centers, which will hopefully set a precedent, but we don’t know if it will pass.*

We have resistance from some agencies who say, “[Certification] means higher wages!” But, certification will place the cost on workers – they will have to pay for



the certification or license, not the agencies.

Mark Kreuger: *Several advances have been made in understanding what it takes to do youth work well. We now have a growing consensus on standards of practice and competencies.*

The efforts to develop certification standards have been really well done, and they are very comprehensive.

Janet Wakefield: *It's not a hard sell to get people to buy into the youth work competencies – people never say, "These aren't right." People agree that they are needed. But people are not as easy to come to the credentialing process. Some people say, "Who cares – what does it mean? I want my youth workers competent, but what does a credential mean?" We are trying to get the credential to mean something. To get more broad awareness of it in the field. All of the places around the country that are doing credentialing in their networks don't include strong examples – people are reluctant (to commit to it). Without a law or without incentives – why get certified?*

Dana Fusco: *There is a debate about whether competencies/certification is the way to go or not. Some say it's reductionist and doesn't give practitioners freedom to use their*

"For me it's essential to have youth work in low-income and urban life, so requiring a credential could be something that homogenizes the workforce. The only way to get around it is to ensure credentialing is accessible and affordable."

it doesn't matter if there are competencies. But, we've already started [with the competencies and credentialing]. It's a moot point, so the question is, now what?

There are risks in requiring youth workers to be credentialed. My concern is that we're going to lose the diversity – we're going to whiten the field. For me it's more essential to have youth work in low-income and urban life, so requiring a credential could be something that homogenizes the workforce. The only way to get around that is to ensure that your credentialing is accessible and affordable. But that raises the question: is the credentialing process worth it? Look at teachers – they have to go through all this training and the outcomes aren't there.

Developing and Sustaining the Field

The interviewees also discussed ways to improve, develop and sustain youth work. Many agreed that the

wisdom. I'm neither here nor there. For me it's not the question; it doesn't matter. There are bigger issues. The issue is not whether we need competencies or not, the issue is that youth work is a dying breed. If we don't deal with that, then it's a big problem. If there aren't frameworks,

field needs a national voice to improve how youth work is perceived by the public, potential funders and youth workers themselves.

The national voice

Frank Eckles: *There needs to be more advocacy in the community to educate the public about what good youth work can bring to a community and why youth work standards are important. If the community supports higher standards, the employers will follow. If you raise standards, the jobs follow.*

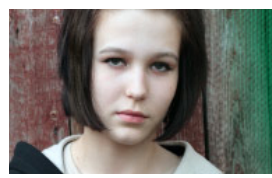
We need to engage youth early in high school and educate them about what youth work is. Youth workers are already working in high schools in afterschool programs and as teachers aids, but [the workers and the students] don't always know that they are actually youth workers.

We need to educate youth workers about themselves – who they are and what they do.

Dale Curry: *Most people don't even know that child and youth work exists as a profession; most are accidental practitioners.*

How do we get the word out about youth work? We are having trouble finding funding for the national certification campaign. We will have to try new ways to get the word out. We need to talk about our success stories with youth and work with allies in other fields.

We can sell our message; there is power in what we can do. There might be 5 million youth workers out there – there is a big potential



“There is no national voice.

Often associations of agencies are at odds with professional associations of workers. There is space for someone to come in and advocate on behalf of workers to agencies.”

impact for policy change – if we can unify.

We don't know who the workforce is, who youth workers are. We don't have agreement about what child and youth work actually is. We don't even have a common name for who we are. Are we child and youth care, youth work, youth work counselors, youth workers? The child and youth care certification board is proposing that people think more broadly about their professional identity, to define themselves by their body of knowledge and not by the setting and populations they work with. That push is gaining ground. We need to think of ourselves as child and youth workers first then talk about our specializations like juvenile justice work or residential treatment work. The message of professional identity needs to get out there.

Mark Krueger: *We have to find a way to convince the public and politicians that this kind of direct care work is powerful and valuable. It is still not a field that people look for, for a fulfilling career. Many people leave before they develop the skills they need.*

Youth work is still not a job that tends to command respect and incentives for people to do it for enough of an amount of time to become competent in it. Turnover rates are still high, workers are still underpaid, most workers leave for other professions and those who tend to stay aren't necessarily the best.

In youth work there has been some work with agencies, but there is no

national voice. Often associations of agencies (like the Child Welfare League, or the American Association of Children's Residential Centers) are at odds with professional associations of workers. Agencies tend to think that raising standards and developing staff will cost too much money and they resist change.

There is space for someone to come in and advocate on behalf of workers to agencies. The largest agencies and associations feel they have the most to lose financially by professionalizing the field, so they are resistant. However, there is always a core group of executive directors who are supportive.

We don't have those one or two nationally recognized leaders who are a voice for youth work. Who would want to be those leaders?

Janet Wakefield: *We need a national leader to say 'This is the certification path.' In medicine, in law, you know what you have to do. But now, different states are doing different things; they get it figured out on a state level but don't have a national leader to look to.*

Dana Fusco: *Politically, we need to claim youth work, or reclaim it. I have really strong concerns about youth work losing that community connection that fosters youth leadership and empowerment. If you don't start there, kids couldn't care less about school. You can't force the reading and math down their*

throats if they are living in poverty stricken communities and... you haven't figured out how to teach them to navigate their communities and lives. We need to make some strong statements about youth work and why we do it – we need

to articulate what our theory of change is. If you really want to close the achievement gap, think about what has worked.

In the discussions that I've had across domains there is more agreement than not. To me the essence is not what you're doing, but how you're doing it. I think there are principles there. We need to define our common values and principles and then figure out how do we best teach those to the people who want to do the work, then link that to an educational piece and employment piece. The competencies and credentialing people can bring in their pieces; higher education can bring in their pieces. If you can have the conversation on a national level, that's where you need to start.

More training, more money, or both?

Frank Eckles: *Employers should pay workers more instead of only training them more. Employers are training people only at entry level, but we need to train them on a professional ladder. We need to produce workers at a higher level than just entry level.*

We need to have a well-paid workforce, but that only comes when people know that you have to be educated to do the work. Lots of employers think youth workers are disposable and interchangeable. Most youth workers are not prepared for the work, they have good hearts, but they don't have knowledge; they are replaceable.

Not all youth workers are underpaid – the really trained ones are making money. We train youth workers at the Academy for Competent Youth Work and then do follow up six months later; are workers getting raises? Some are.

Andrew Schneider-Munoz: *As centers are closing and merging teams we need to get lower paid youth workers better trained to take on more responsibilities. As places close and merge, people are getting promoted left and right (it has happened in Minnesota and Wisconsin). If there are better trained and certified youth workers to do the work that was left by the social workers in the middle-range who are being cut – that [could be] a big trend in professional development.*

There are many workers (especially minorities) who do youth work part-time. They work just as hard, but little has been done to create professional development opportunities for them – for the part-time workers. That is a clear need for the future of the field.

“Employers should pay workers more instead of only training them more. Employers are training people only at entry level, but we need to train them on a professional ladder.”

Turnover in youth work is very high, so there are not a lot of training and professional development opportunities for people who stay in the field, to further their growth – this is an area of need.

Another need for the future is for there to be more volunteer development – more training for volunteers working in youth work. There are lots of retired people who work with youth; so, for example, intergenerational training could be an emerging need in the field. In South Africa and Scotland, workers pay for their own professional development through paycheck deductions – that's a potential idea [for the future of youth work in the U.S.].

Professional development is good for risk management – poorly-trained staff are not good investments; well-trained staff are.

Dale Curry: *There has been a lot of funding in child welfare over the last 20 years that has gone into training and development. Many youth workers have not been able to access that funding, but some have. There have been benefits to youth work*

from the massive amount of funding child welfare training has received. We can build upon that.

We need to build training programs off the competencies that already exist. Training is not a solution to everything, but it is important for

development. The training programs within most agencies are pretty limited – many staff members lack child and youth work degrees. We should develop training plans to address individual staff, and individual programs, not just blanket training in CPR, restraints, etc. for staff. Some training needs are developmental – you could have training for staff regarding what they need in order to move into a supervisory position, to climb the ladder. Or trainings for staff on how they can stay in the field. Professional development training for youth workers could fill a gap.

Programs for trainers are also a potential layer of need. Some people are already doing ‘train the trainers’ programs; that could be built on.

Mark Krueger: *If you have competent staff, you might feel more comfortable with a bigger staff/client ratio, which leads to the need for less staff – a plus for agencies. Some agencies have figured out how to keep their best workers through incentives and career ladders, but most agencies are struggling. Tapping into the successes would be useful.*

Most youth workers don't have access to the kind of education and training they need to advance in the field; that is a place of need.

Something to explore is to look at predictors of what contributes to peoples' satisfaction in work. Salary is never number one – autonomy, good mentors and supervisors, education and training, engagement in something outside of the agency, like a professional association – those



“The single missing thing in our field is that there are no outcomes – there is no good study that says if we do this much training for youth workers, you will get a result like this with youth.”

Research to fill in gaps in knowledge

Dale Curry: *There isn't a whole lot of research out there, it's a growing field. That is why we established our Workforce Institute [the International Institute for Human Service Workforce Research and Development].*

contribute to satisfaction. What can be done with that information?

If I were running an agency with limited resources, I would invest in developing within the staff a few key youth work leaders who are committed to the work and want to stay. Those leaders would then serve as mentors to other staff, which, given the right, positive influence, could reduce turnover, inspire others and develop competence. The key youth work leaders would serve as role models for the others.

Dana Fusco: *Workers are trained to death. It's such a local thing. We have to make these decisions more fluidly. The tendency is to make these decisions on a macro level. I know lots of youth workers who need training and lots who don't. New youth workers need tools, they need to understand their roles. Training depends on what we're talking about. It should emerge organically from the needs of the organization.*

The college connection

Andrew Schneider-Munoz: *There is a real trend of universities offering core courses in child and youth care. The more we can get youth work into college credit, the bigger the push will be for higher salaries, and degrees for all youth workers.*

Frank Eckles: *We are talking about setting up an online coursework system that leads to degrees in youth work through several different universities.*

Dale Curry: *We have the best higher education system in the world and*

lots of child and youth development degrees that are related to youth work. We can do a better job of getting the word out early to students about the field. We can tie youth work to already existing courses and programs. If a certification program took off and there were competencies in place, universities could add course work/ concentrations/ certificate programs to already existing programs in order to meet the competencies.

Canadians have many more degree programs, which arguably leads to better-educated and more knowledgeable youth workers.

Dana Fusco: *There is a lot of questioning about whether we need higher education or not. I think it's the right place, because degrees have caché and real capital, but some of the best practitioners doing youth work don't have degrees.*

We created a program here (CUNY York) because youth workers asked for it, but then they didn't come. They didn't have the time, money, etc. You have to maintain accessibility and affordability.

There are some models at the community college level that are doing good work in building youth work in the community and serving community needs. What they do less well is build the disciplinary base of knowledge.

Frank Eckles: *There is a gap in the literature when it comes to data on how many employers are now asking for credentials from youth workers.*

Mark Krueger: *There hasn't been a good study comparing professionalizing the field versus losing money through staff turnover.*

Andrew Schneider-Munoz: *The single missing thing in our field is that there are no outcomes studies – there is no good study that says if we do this much training for youth workers, you will get a result like this with youth. It's been done in early childhood, but not in youth work.*

The role of intermediaries

Andrew Schneider-Munoz: *With a lot of these efforts [by outside intermediaries looking to improve the field of youth work] there is a lot of talk about how things should be, a plan is produced and then nothing is done. [An intermediary] should stay focused on what they can do and keep it simple – it can't be so many partners that nothing gets done.*

Mark Krueger: *An intermediary could become an advocate for youth work – the field is very poor at getting attention. Youth workers have a powerful story to tell, but most people don't know what we do. We haven't found a good way to use the media and technology to influence public opinion.*

The field is good at opening its doors and arms to whomever wants to help, but tends to get upset when an outside agency says, "We've identified that you need to professionalize and we're going to tell you how."

More activity now is local, not national; we need to work with that. [An intermediary] should join into the networks that already exist. Lots of people replicate what's already been done – don't reinvent the wheel.

Dana Fusco: *What we don't need is another self-appointed group to do the very thing that groups of us are already doing.*

We need partnerships; not more groups talking about the same old, same old. There are a lot of people who are riding on the backs of what people have been doing for 30 years.

Funding and legislation challenges in the field

Dale Curry: *We have to impact some of the legislation in the states. If we can just get one state to say you must have certification to work, that establishes a precedent. That establishes funding for the certification board, because everyone will start paying for certification.*

We need to get the message out to foundations. Foundations want to fund youth, not staff. But, by impacting the staff, you impact the youth. The best indicator of how well youth do is the competence of staff.

Getting in skilled people to push that message would be helpful. If one foundation would support the certification board for a few years, we may be able to make some inroads into legislation or to increase workplace standards.

Federal money is going to social work and child welfare, not to youth workers – we need advocacy there.

Mark Krueger: *Lots of work needs to be done with funders and finding new funding sources, perhaps through recruiting from boards.*

Learning from other models

Andrew Schneider-Munoz: *City Year could be a good model for creating a statewide legislative effort [for future youth work advocacy]. City Year is a good model for understanding how much government is doing, how much foundations are doing; they might be a model for how to best develop the field.*

"If we can just get one state to say, you must have certification to work, that establishes a precedent"

Dana Fusco: *The Army has an excellent model that links with the Department of Defense – they have credentialing for their child care services. The pay is incremental, it's based on degrees. There is an incentive to receive the credentialing, but the levels of promotion are linked to increasing levels of responsibility. There is some quality assurance there. I always thought that they (the Army) nailed it. The work is not what I agree with, but their infrastructure. They do have loads of money, but the model works.*

Conclusion

Youth work has evolved significantly over the past several decades, but there is widespread agreement that more work needs to be done if the field is to become professionally sustainable. A first step is better defining the field by taking on the occasionally contentious issue of who youth workers are, what they do, and with whom they work. While it hardly serves the professional development of workers to lump volunteer Girl Scout leaders together with, say, workers in residential programs for court-involved youth on probation, more role-specific definitions have not been put forward and broadly accepted. Many researchers and experts quoted in this report say that consensus on this most basic of issues – one that can be embraced by most, if not all, people in the field – is critical if the field is to gain recognition and stature.

Many, though certainly not all, experts agree that standardized credentials and certification are necessary, with some caveats. Credentials should be transferrable so they have value from job to job and there should be a clear ladder of progression for youth workers so they can see what a credential or certification can mean for them in terms of responsibility and salary. It is also important to retain the diversity of the field as it professionalizes.

While substantial research has been conducted on the youth work workforce, there are nevertheless some serious gaps in the literature. There are few outcomes studies that quantify how improving training for youth workers can improve outcomes for youth. There aren't even studies exploring how various types of training can impact bottom-line standards of care such as worker and client safety. The literature suggests and many experts agree that more training and education for youth workers means better outcomes for youth, but data supporting that assertion is still thin.

Clearly, much more research, discussion and collaboration must be done to advance the field. Youth work and youth workers have significantly evolved over the years, but debate remains about where the field can and should go in the future. One thing is certain: its biggest barriers – lack of cohesion, a national voice and secure, adequate funding – will not be overcome by accidental practitioners. If the field of youth work can rise to the professionalization challenge, it will benefit from the chance to exploit emerging resources – a rich volunteer force of baby boomers, a generation of young people keen on “service,” and social media and technological tools that maximize engagement opportunities for the youth of tomorrow. The time, then, is upon us.