

Developing a Professional Development System for Youth Service Professionals

Youth service professionals in the workforce development system are responsible for shaping the future workers and leaders of this nation's economy. Every day, they help young people, ages 14 to 25, to prepare for transition to adulthood and successful employment. They do this work in various settings including educational, workforce development, after school, and community-based organizations. These professionals are called upon to serve all youth, including youth with disabilities, and other disadvantaged groups such as youth involved in the juvenile justice and foster care systems.

Although youth service professionals are responsible for preparing millions of youth across the country each day for the transition to adulthood, there is no career pathway or cohesive professional development system through which they can receive training and education in core competencies that culminates in a nationally recognized professional certification or a degree. As a result, there is no way to distinguish those who are qualified to do the job from those who are not, no way to recognize and reward those who become highly qualified, and no way to recruit and develop new talent in this profession. Because youth service professionals enter the field by many different avenues, they also lack a common language and knowledge base about quality practices.

This Info Brief describes the current status of and opportunities for a comprehensive cross-disciplinary professional development system for youth service professionals. It also discusses next steps for systems, professionals, and policy makers.

The work of youth service professionals is cross-disciplinary, requiring knowledge and skills that cut across the fields of workforce development, youth development, education, counseling, and disability services. As a result, programs of study and existing professional certifications in any one of these fields can equip youth service professionals with some, but not all of the competencies they need to be effective. For this reason, it is necessary to develop a comprehensive career pathway and professional development system that specifically addresses the training needs of our nation's youth service professionals.

Developing such a system will take the commitment and collaborative efforts of all those concerned with improving the outcomes of youth served by the workforce development system. This includes organizations and agencies that employ youth service professionals; associations and professional groups consisting of youth service

professionals; higher education institutions and other organizations that offer education and training in all of the relevant fields; foundations and other private funders interested in improving workforce system and youth outcomes; local and state workforce development agencies and boards (including Youth Councils) that fund youth services, select youth service providers, monitor performance and outcomes, and set policies; and other policy makers including mayors, local and state agency officials, governors, members of Congress, and federal agency officials.

Key Components of a Professional Development Infrastructure

Much can be learned about building a professional development system for youth service professionals from initiatives in related fields including early childhood education, afterschool programming (also called school-aged care and out-of-school time), and youth development. Two organizations in the youth development field, the National Institute for Out-of-School Time (NIOST) and the Next Generation Youth Work Coalition, are thought leaders on how to develop a professional development system for youth workers, building on lessons from early childhood education. Based on its review of professional development systems, NIOST identified the following interrelated components as necessary to create a system:



- 1) Core competencies that define what professionals need to know and be able to do to be effective;
- 2) A training system that is aligned with the core competencies and responsive to the realities of the workforce;
- 3) A training and trainer approval system that ensures the quality of both the content and delivery of training;
- 4) A professional registry that documents all relevant training and education completed by professionals in the field; and
- 5) Career lattices and pathways that link roles, responsibilities, and salary ranges (Dennehy, Gannett, & Robbins, 2006).

With respect to a professional development system for youth service professionals, some building blocks related to some of these components already exist; however, much work remains to build a comprehensive system.

Core Competencies for Youth Service Professionals

Core competencies particular to a specific profession are an essential component for professional development systems because they define the content for professional development. With support from the Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP) at the U.S. Department of Labor, the National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth (NCWD/Youth) has developed a validated set of core competencies, referred to as the Youth Service Professionals' Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities

(YSP/KSAs). NCWD/Youth developed the YSP/KSAs by reviewing over 70 initiatives in the fields of youth development, workforce development, education, and disability services. The competencies were validated through consultation with a national advisory group of experts and stakeholders, through focus groups, and through an online feedback survey of youth service professionals.

NCWD/Youth's Info Brief, [Core Competencies for Youth Service Professionals: Guiding Youth Toward Employment](#), describes the YSP/KSAs in detail, explains how they were developed, and provides recommendations for organizations and systems on using them to develop staff competencies. This brief can be accessed online at: <http://www.ncwd-youth.info/information-brief-30>.

The Current State of Credentials and Credential Awarding Programs

Once consensus has been reached on what core competencies are necessary for effective practice in a given profession, the competencies may be used as qualifications for awarding credentials. A credential is a certification recognizing that the professional has the necessary set of competencies. Credentials may be degrees or certificates awarded by higher education institutions; however, they may also be certificates awarded by professional associations. For example, the National Association for Workforce Development Professionals (NAWDP) administers a certification called the Certified Workforce Development Professional (CWDP). Youth service

professionals can apply to receive the NAWDP's CWDP certification with a Youth Services Endorsement that is based on the Youth Service Professionals' Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities.

For the youth service professional, credentials are important incentives for pursuing professional development that will enable them to acquire the full set of core competencies. When professional development activities culminate in a recognized credential, professionals are able to demonstrate to current and future employers that they are highly qualified. A recent survey by the National Association of Workforce Boards and NAWDP indicates that organizations employing youth service professionals value credentials when making decisions about hiring, promotions, salary, and bonuses (NAWDP, 2010). Providing professional credentials that increase access to family-supporting salaries and benefits is likely to increase retention of high quality youth service professionals which in turn will increase youth outcomes.

Whether or not a youth service professional obtains a credential and what specific credential they obtain are often dictated by what credentialing programs are offered and accessible to them where they live and work. To gain an understanding of what credentialing opportunities are currently available nationwide for youth service professionals, NCWD/Youth conducted a review of pre-service and in-service education and training opportunities that lead to a credential and examined how they align with the YSP/KSAs. The National Youth Employment Coalition (NYEC), a partner in the NCWD/Youth,



conducted the credential research, looking specifically for certifications, credentials, and degree programs within the fields of youth development, workforce development, and transition services. Because some of the competencies of youth service professionals cross multiple disciplines and settings, some of the programs of study identified extend beyond these three fields to other professions such as education, counseling, psychology, criminal justice, and human services management.

NYEC identified and examined 63 credential-awarding programs that matched the research criteria. This review by no means includes all available programs, but some information can be gleaned from the review. First, the review indicates that credentials and degree-granting programs for professionals who work with youth have grown significantly over the past two decades. This growth in programs of study suggests an increasing demand for developing the competencies of professionals who work with youth. Nearly half (30) of the programs identified award credentials in youth development specifically, several of which are expressly targeted to professionals working in afterschool program settings. Among the remaining programs, 16 were specific to the workforce development and career counseling professions, nine were specific to the special education transition and disability services professions, nine were specific to the education profession more broadly, and 11 were related to other professions and specializations such as criminal justice, sports and recreation, substance abuse, and assistive technology. This demonstrates how

truly cross-disciplinary the youth service profession is.

The majority of the programs identified are available to individuals who already have a bachelor's degree: 15 programs are graduate level certificates, 15 are master's degree programs, and three are doctorate programs. The review also identified 14 non-graduate level certificate programs, which are the most accessible option to individuals who have not yet obtained a bachelor's degree. At the associate's degree level, two programs were identified while three of the programs awarded bachelor's degrees. This suggests that credentials relevant to the competencies needed by youth service professionals are more readily available to individuals who already have a significant level of education. The limited number of associate's and bachelor's degree programs in the youth development and workforce development fields exposes the absence of a career pathway that could attract new talent into the youth service profession.

With respect to accessibility, the majority of the programs identified require participants to attend classes and training sessions in-person while one-third are delivered online or provide an online option. In-person training formats offer many benefits to participants; however, the lack of online learning options limits access to training for those who do not live or work near the institution offering the program, as well as those with time constraints due to work and family commitments. An uneven geographical distribution of the programs identified also limits accessibility. The majority of the programs identified are located in the Midwest and southern states.

A final observation about the credential awarding programs identified is their alignment with any professional competencies and specifically with the youth service professional competencies or KSAs. Of the 63 programs identified, about half were based upon a set of core competencies that are recognized by a national professional association or organization such as the National Career Development Association, the Council for Exceptional Children, and the Association for Child and Youth Care Practice. A review of each program's content indicates that most address topics that align with two or more competency areas of the YSP/KSAs. This confirms that the available credential-awarding programs address some but not the full set of professional development needs of youth service professionals. Still, the available programs of study have the potential to serve as building blocks for a comprehensive, cohesive system of professional development.

Reflections on How to Build an Infrastructure: How Do We Get There From Here?

In July 2010, NCWD/Youth held a roundtable discussion with representatives from national professional development organizations, universities, local youth programs, and federal agencies. The group discussed the current state of professional development and credentials for professionals working with youth in a variety of settings and systems. Several key next steps emerged:

1) Establish a Joint Effort

During the discussion, the participants concluded that a joint effort across all the professions,



sectors, and systems working with youth is needed. This effort should develop a national infrastructure that prioritizes and addresses the professional development needs of all those working with youth outside of school settings. Professional development opportunities ranging from pre-service to in-service programs are growing within the various specializations working with youth; however, no one has taken a close look at what commonalities exist across the programs or explored how the investments in each can be maximized through cross-sector and cross-discipline collaboration. It is clear that some gaps exist within each specialization. For example, programs of study for transition services for youth in special education are weak on workforce development, while vocational rehabilitation credentials do not include competencies related to youth development. These gaps result when standards of practice and competencies are driven by institutional arrangements rather than the needs of the individual served.

2) Engage the Federal Government

Federal government support will be critical to undertaking this joint effort. While the federal government places significant emphasis on supporting the development of highly qualified teachers, nothing comparable exists for professionals working with youth in workforce development and other youth serving systems. Despite growing concern among national policy makers that the youngest generation is not adequately prepared to meet tomorrow's workforce demands, the federal government has yet to address the critical role that youth professionals play in improving

youth outcomes. To achieve its desired results, the federal government must make professional development of youth professionals a priority and lend fiscal support to the professional associations and national organizations that have begun this work.

3) Align Standards and Competencies

The standards of practices and professional competencies already established by various professional associations and national organizations provide a starting point for building national consensus about the critical core competencies that various youth professions and systems share in common. In addition to the KSAs for Youth Service Professionals developed by NCWD/Youth, other sets of professional competencies recently developed or under review by national organizations include: Core Competencies for Afterschool and Youth Development Professionals, developed jointly by the National Afterschool Association and the National Institute on Out-of-School Time; Competencies for Professional Child and Youth Care Practitioners, developed as a part of the North American Certification Project of the Association for Child and Youth Care Practice; and the National Career Development Association's Career Counseling Competencies.

4) Build Upon Existing Credentials

Some professional development initiatives around the country have also laid the groundwork for development of other components of a common professional development system. In the fields of youth development and afterschool

programs, some states have recently established credentials that youth professionals can earn by completing a combination of college level courses and community-based training. Some credential programs also require portfolios documenting required competencies and on-site observations. Two such initiatives are the School-Age Youth Development Credential, developed by Achieve Boston, and the Professional Youth Worker Credential, developed as a part of the Massachusetts Pathways to Success by Twenty-One (P21) initiative. These initiatives intentionally link the attainment of competency-based credentials with employee pay; participants who completed the program received a \$1,000 stipend or bonus. The National Institute on Out-of-School Time (NIOST) conducted evaluations of both pilot initiatives. NIOST's findings indicate both employers and employees reported improvements in the youth professionals' competencies and performance on the job.

In the field of workforce development, the National Career Development Association already has a well-established competency-based training and credentialing system through which professionals can receive a Global Career Development Facilitator (GCDF) Credential. Professionals can complete the required training in-person, online, or through a combination of both formats. NCDA has a national network of certified trainers who deliver the in-person training in various locations and lead online training.



5) *Expand Degree Opportunities*

Pre-service education programs may be the component needed for a comprehensive system that is most lacking. Too few associates and bachelor's degree programs are available for individuals interested in pursuing careers in youth development and workforce development. Those programs that do exist rarely address the transition from adolescence to adulthood. However, there are some exceptions. The Portland State University's School of Social Work has established a course titled "Improving Youth Transitions." The goal of the course is to prepare social workers to assist youth and young adults with serious mental health conditions to make a successful transition to adulthood. This includes assisting youth to navigate the various systems they may rely upon for certain services such as education and special education; employment and vocational rehabilitation; mental health, substance abuse, and health care; housing and homelessness services; social security and income maintenance; child welfare; parenting and childcare; and adult and juvenile justice systems. To increase the availability of pre-service programs that prepare professionals to work with transition age youth, higher education leaders must be engaged alongside other stakeholders in building the professional development system.

The expansion of pre-service programs should be accompanied by the development of supportive components including scholarship opportunities and mentoring. Scholarships can take the form of pay increases or bonuses when professionals complete education

and training. Mentoring is a valuable way to engage more experienced professionals in supporting the learning and growth of those with less experience. Paying professionals to serve as mentors is another way to reward those who achieve a higher level of education or experience.

The Role of Policymakers

The ongoing efforts of professional associations to develop a professional development system for individuals working with youth across various settings warrant national support from policy makers. Policy makers should start by supporting a baseline study of the state of professional development that includes analysis of both the pre-service and in-service sources of training, including the content of the various curricula. This study should include an analysis of the supply and demand for workers in the field, broadly defined. Wide consultation with associations representing the different stakeholders should occur and result in a report to Congress.

Additionally, as the federal government works to reauthorize several key pieces of legislation, including the Workforce Investment Act, policymakers should establish a dedicated funding source for developing the competencies of youth service professionals and other professionals working with youth outside of school settings.

Conclusion

The future productivity of our nation's youth depends on the skills of youth service professionals. Investing in their professional development will enable this vital segment of today's workforce to

provide for their own families as they help youth grow into tomorrow's leaders, citizens, and workers. While much remains to be done, significant groundwork has already been laid and presents a valuable opportunity for policy makers, systems, and professionals to join efforts.

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