

## Center for Community Engagement and Service-Learning (CCESL)

### *Youth Voice Collaborative Needs Assessment*

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### **Introduction**

The purpose of this needs assessment was to conduct a community and university scan of leaders of local nonprofit organizations and University faculty or graduate students with research or practice interests in youth voice programs. Results of the assessment will inform the development of a community-engaged, multidisciplinary collaborative on youth voice connected to CCESL's initiatives. The overarching vision for this collaborative is to increase local capacity to implement youth voice programs through community-engaged research and teaching/learning.

The purpose of this needs assessment was threefold:

- Map existing assets related to youth voice on campus.
- Engage community constituents to ensure the development and implementation of the Youth Voice Collaborative characterized by mutually beneficial and reciprocal work with communities.
- Establish foundational ideas that will inform a convening of a collaborative for youth voice, including the development of a set of commitments for collaborative members.

### **Overview of Youth Voice Programs**

Youth voice programs are a subset of positive youth development programs, a strengths-based practice model focused on enhancing youths' assets, working with adolescents as collaborators in their own development, and integrating resources from young peoples' environment to help them live healthy and productive lives (Gootman & Eccles, 2002; Lerner et al., 2011). Youth voice programs incorporate the foundation of positive youth development approaches, but emphasize particular youth voice principles, components, processes, and competencies. More specifically, they involve young people in identifying, understanding and addressing social problems through youth-adult partnerships, youth-led programming, and awareness-building or advocacy activities (Ozer & Douglas, 2015). There are a variety of terms used to describe the types of programs that we are referring to as youth voice programs in this report, including youth leadership, empowerment, engagement and participation.

### **Research Questions**

Our research questions were the following:

- How are local agencies and university stakeholders incorporating youth voice principles and practices into their programs, research or teaching?
- What are the main opportunities, challenges, or barriers that local agencies face when implementing, studying, or teaching about youth voice programs?
- What university supports would help agencies strengthen or increase their use of youth voice principles or strategies?

- In what ways are people collaborating and communicating already across the community and the university?
- How would faculty members and local practitioners like to be involved in the development and implementation of an interdisciplinary, community-engaged collaborative focused on youth voice?

Across university and community stakeholders, we were interested in identifying overlapping needs for, and interest in, a youth voice collaborative.

## Methods

We used purposive sampling methods to identify community and university stakeholders that would represent a range of perspectives about the development of a youth voice collaborative (Teddlie, 2007). Subjects were identified by 1) searching public websites; and, 2) seeking recommendations from research team members who were familiar with local youth-serving organizations and faculty members on campus with relevant interests.

On the community side, we intentionally identified six practitioners who represented a range of organizations on a continuum from traditional top-down youth services that are less likely to utilize youth voice strategies to more empowerment-oriented agencies that focus on youth organizing. Interviewees served in executive director and program manager roles.

**Table 1.** Sample Typology – Community Scan (n=6)

	<b>Youth Services</b>	<b>Youth Development</b>	<b>Leadership Development (2)</b>	<b>Civic Engagement</b>	<b>Youth Organizing</b>
<i>Target population</i>	Homeless youth	Foster care teens	Vulnerable youth	High school students	Adolescents of color
<i>Setting</i>	Community	Community	Community	Schools	Schools
<i>Reach</i>	Regional	Regional	National & Local	Local	Local

In our university scan, we similarly aimed to recruit a diverse sample of participants from across campus that had different specializations, both in terms of their population of interest and their research methodologies. Our sample of nine scholars was primarily comprised of tenure-track faculty, but also included graduate students and an adjunct faculty member.

**Table 2.** Sample Typology – University Scan (n=9)

	<b>Education (3)</b>	<b>Social Work (4)</b>	<b>Media, Film &amp; Journalism</b>	<b>Sociology</b>
<i>Methods</i>	Quantitative	Mixed	Qualitative	Qualitative

<i>Specialty</i>	Qualitative			
	Youth of color with social emotional disorders Latino students School health	LGBTQ & homeless youth Youth civic engagement Youth organizing	Digital storytelling	Youth activism

Interviews usually lasted 30-45 minutes, were audio recorded and then transcribed verbatim. Individual members of the research team coded transcripts inductively with themes discussed collectively.

## Findings

### *Incorporation of youth voice principles and practices*

**Community members.** Most practitioners were not familiar with the concept of youth voice, and instead used the terminology of “youth leadership” to capture this type of work. In practice, participants reported the greatest success in incorporating former youth participants into mentoring positions with responsibilities that mirrored those of adult program staff. A site supervisor from a school-based program described the results of doing this work for over thirty years, “Now we have a number of staff members who came up through our program. They were little lift students, they were in middle lifts, and they were lift leaders, and now they work for us.” Nearly half of the community sample had some form of a youth board in which young people were involved in organizational decision-making. Most often, these activities were prompted by youth interest and advocacy within the organization. Participants reported that their responsiveness to young peoples’ desire to have a greater voice was grounded in their own personal values and beliefs around the importance of these types of opportunities for adolescent development and organizational growth. An executive director from a youth leadership organization explained:

We’re founded on the idea that youth are an amazing and overlooked resource...I think that just genuinely believing that youth provide that value makes it so easy to incorporate youth voice in every aspect of our programming

**University stakeholders.** University representatives most often used the term “youth voice” and empowerment to describe their research and teaching in this area. Most had conducted research on programs that utilized these strategies, such as photovoice or participatory action research. Others were involved in evaluation projects in which young people were asked to provide their opinions about services in order to improve their delivery. Few DU stakeholders tied youth voice programs to their teaching. Most faculty and graduate students reported that they were motivated to engage youth voice in their scholarship in order to counteract dominant deficit-oriented paradigms in their field. A few reported it was a natural extension of their disciplinary focus on positive youth development or social issues. For example, a faculty member stated that her interest, “came from trying to examine age as an axis of inequality and how that intersected with gender, race, and class.” Several talked about professional experiences they had prior to becoming scholar in which they

learned the power of youth voice as a transformational tool for young people and the adults with whom they work.

### *Challenges and opportunities with youth voice*

**Community members.** The most common challenges faced by community representatives in implementing youth voice programs were time and adult attitudes. Interviewees reported that this work is time-intensive and staff members were already over capacity. Secondly, they found that their colleagues' negative beliefs about young people's capabilities often undermined their efforts to engage youth in meaningful leadership roles. An executive director explained, "we live in a culture, a country, a world, where young people aren't taken very seriously." In other words, it was challenging to implement youth voice programs in the context of a staff culture that was paternalistic or tokenistic. In addition to the time spent training and supporting young people in taking on new roles, they had to spend a considerable amount of time preparing adults to work with youth via more egalitarian relationships.

**University stakeholders.** Faculty and graduate students reported far more benefits to incorporating youth voice into their research than challenges. These individuals felt their involvement of young people and youth-serving organizations in their areas of study had led to important personal and professional growth. They spoke at length about specific studies they had conducted and what tremendous learning opportunities they were for all involved. The main obstacle mentioned was finding organizations interested in partnering on research projects. Another challenge was working with institutions, like schools, that do not see the value in youth voice and can constrain the efficacy of these programs. A professor shared,

There are a number of systemic issues that if [the youth voice program] is just kind of an add on rather than understood as a foundational piece...then it just tends to be kind of like that little patch and may have some really exciting outcomes for some period of time but they often are not sustained...or students start to actually become more empowered...then they get squashed.

These participants acknowledged that adult belief systems and organizational hierarchies can be significant barriers for youth voice programs. Of note, DU stakeholders recognized that these biases also exist on campus, in particular among students who are of more privileged backgrounds or faculty of more positivist methodological orientations.

### *Campus Supports*

**Community members.** It was difficult for interviewees from community agencies to envision roles for university partners that would strengthen their use of youth voice strategies. Some were interested in exposing their clients to DU, or involving DU students as interns to build organizational capacity. A few thought that the university would be a useful partner in designing and delivering ongoing professional learning opportunities for their staff. For example, a program coordinator elaborated, "I could see training facilitating being really helpful, you training us...I think that having that being facilitated by the university and having that research to back it up, I think that could be really encouraging." Others, however, were skeptical about their youth or staff being "used" by the university in a tokenistic way and wanted to ensure it would be a "two way street" in which all parties would benefit from participation. One participant shared that any collaborative activities would have to explicitly address negative perceptions of DU students as "selfish" and "apathetic" by making it very clear what organizations would gain through their involvement.

**University stakeholders.** Most graduate students and faculty viewed the conduct of research and evaluation as the most suitable roles for university partners. Others reported an interest in seeing university stakeholders play a role in providing training and technical assistance that would translate the evidence base for practitioner audiences, possibly in partnership with regional organizations like Colorado 9 to 25 that convene youth development agencies. For example, a graduate student shared that her contacts in the community reported a need for “someone who can take the literature and make it interpretable...into reasonable things that practitioners can do in their settings, and push that out in some kind of way whether that be spec sheets, or training, or a webinar.” A few felt that the university could play a larger role in advocating for greater opportunities for youth voice in schools and communities via legislative mandates or the creation of new funding streams.

### *Existing Collaborations*

**Community members.** A few community representatives were involved in coalitions like the Afterschool Alliance, but most reported informal collaboration with other agencies because of shared clientele. None of the organizations reported partnerships with local universities, beyond having students placed as interns or volunteers at their agencies, but one did have experience working with a faculty member on a research project that involved young people from their programs.

**University stakeholders.** Graduate students and faculty were aware of other scholars on campus doing research on youth voice, several were involved in a formal collaborative around community based participatory action research, which shares several key tenets in common with youth voice programs.

### *Interest in Collaborative*

**Community members.** In general, participants saw some value in developing a university-community collaborative in an abstract sense, but had difficulty generating concrete ideas about what it would “look like” or how it could be reciprocally beneficial. The following response was typical,

I’m not devaluing [university-community partnerships] because it is important to have folks that dedicate their time to analyzing what we do, and why we do, and how we do, so we can be more effective at what we do...That’s important but it just, we don’t find ourselves in a lot of these.

**University stakeholders.** Several interviewees saw value in creating a new entity that could help connect faculty members with community organizations interested in partnering on youth voice programs. Only two participants expressed any interest in a new formal mechanism that would connect faculty with other faculty who shared interests in this area.

## **Summary**

Interviews with university and community stakeholders revealed that many utilize youth voice and leadership strategies in their work, for the most part with great success. The main barriers facing local agencies in strengthening these practices, and scholars interested in long-term youth voice interventions, are adults’ negative attitudes or beliefs about the capacity of young people to take on

greater leadership roles within local organizations and institutions. Although stakeholders were aware of other organizations and researchers engaged in scholarship and practice related to youth voice and leadership, interviewees did not report the existence of any formal mechanism to connect individuals or agencies with shared interests. Interviewees expressed tentative interest in a university-community collaborative that could provide clear and tangible benefits for community partners and their youth participants, while also enabling faculty to connect with potential research partners. Findings from the interviews suggest it would be most valuable if such a collaborative began with an emphasis on training. Community organizations are most interested in supporting their clients and recognize staff culture as key to doing their best work. Researchers, who appear potentially more interested in partnering with the community on research, could develop deeper relationships with community organizations through shared trainings. Commonalities can be seen in identification of barriers to youth voice that focus on overcoming biases towards adult-centric programs and policies. Overcoming barriers may thus be a good starting place for collaborative trainings. A limitation of this assessment is the involvement of young people's perspectives – which should be included in a next step as a collaborative develops.

### **Recommendations**

- Draw on language that is familiar to both scholars and practitioners, perhaps the Collaborative for Youth Voice and Leadership (CYVL)
- Focus on shifting adult attitudes that can be barriers to youth voice programs along with the practices that comprise this approach. One way to do this might be to develop evaluation tools that assess readiness to engage in youth voice work and potential barriers, then share, implement and analyze data from these tools in community agencies.
- Provide teaching and professional development as a strategy to address both skills and attitudes, potentially using a CEU cohort model with practitioners and university students together with young people. Such training could introduce key strategies for establishing youth voice as well as organizational structures conducive to sustaining youth voice over time. Such training models may address community practitioners' more immediate goals of exposing their clients to DU, while also addressing longer-term goals of increasing community capacity for implementing youth voice strategies. One specific idea from the interviewees was a short-term "summer boot camp" of sorts, potentially in the model of the Critical PAR institutes facilitated by the public science project at City University of New York.
- Develop case studies of model projects that demonstrate the relevance or utility of community-university partnerships and can be used to elicit greater engagement of local stakeholders.
- Provide networking opportunities among community organizations, university researchers and students, aimed at identifying common interests, needs, and shared resources.
- Host youth events on campus, such as a meeting of youth councils across agencies, as a means of bringing together young people for skills training and connection. Consult these young people about the needs and opportunities for partnership in their various agencies.

### **References**

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