



# Youth workers in college: A replicable model for professional development

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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 7 October 2011

Accepted 24 December 2011

Available online 5 January 2012

### Keywords:

Youth workers

Workforce development

Youth development

Credited certificate

## ABSTRACT

Positive relationships with skilled frontline staff are critical to positive youth outcomes (Bouffard & Little, 2004), and yet many youth workers are insufficiently prepared to deal with these complex environments (Casey Foundation, 2003). There is also concern that there is little motivation for frontline youth workers to stay in a field rife with danger of burnout, feelings of being overwhelmed, and low pay (Anderson-Natthe, 2008; Borden, Craig, & Villaruel, 2004). This article establishes the important role higher education can play towards stabilizing the youth workforce, and posits that coursework that is multidisciplinary, relevant to students' jobs, and supported by employers is important to the success of college programs.

The 12-credit Youth Studies Certificate (YSC) was offered by the City University of New York (CUNY) to 223 youth workers from 1999 to 2011. Coursework addresses the complex field of youth development by recasting traditional courses in education, human services, psychology, sociology, development, and recreation. Frontline workers combine their practical knowledge of the field with the theoretical framework of a college course. Additionally, the certificate is an opportunity to develop academically and in critical thinking, skills which enhance a worker's development and delivery of service in the practice setting. Public/private partnership is an important feature of this replicable model aimed to build the stability and capacity of the youth development field and the workers within it.

Recommendations for replicability and future research are provided.

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## 1. Introduction

Professionalization of youth workers requires new and innovative models to address longstanding and well-documented concerns about the lack of resources provided to this important, diverse, and decentralized workforce. In a report on the frontline workforce, the Annie E. Casey Foundation identified that there are an estimated two to four million youth workers in the United States (2003) working in thousands of organizations and serving around 30 million young people (Yohalem, Pittman, & Edwards, 2010, p.4). Positive relationships with skilled staff are critical to positive youth outcomes (Bouffard & Little, 2004). As frontline workers, those who work with young people play a key role in educating children and youth in academic and life skills, as well as providing recreational activities in a safe and supported environment. Because youth work happens in a variety of settings such as after-school programs, camps, and residential facilities, the skills required to perform these jobs are as

varied as the educational, social, physical, emotional, and cultural needs of the young people and their communities.

Many youth workers are insufficiently prepared to deal with these complex environments, as "the education and training these workers receive do not match the role and demands actually required by the jobs they hold" (Casey Foundation, 2003, p. 23). There is also concern that there is little motivation for frontline youth workers to stay in a field rife with danger of burnout, feelings of being overwhelmed, and low pay (Anderson-Natthe, 2008; Borden, Craig, & Villaruel, 2004). This article establishes the important role higher education can play in stabilizing the youth workforce, and presents both qualitative and quantitative data on a replicable credited-certificate model developed through public/private partnership at the City University of New York (CUNY).

## 2. The need for professional development

Several studies indicate the need to develop career ladders which connect education to professional development and result in workers' longevity in the field. Anderson-Natthe identified that workers expressed feelings of being overwhelmed by situations they were unable to resolve (2008, p. 128). The study also indicated that with additional training as an intervention, participants felt more confident in their ability to handle unpredictable situations. They were able to improve job performance as their coping skills were enhanced

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through better understanding the dynamics of their work. Curry, Eckles, Stuart, and Qaqish (2010) cite that organizational support for professional development and the worker competence which results are both positively linked to long term retention in the youth field. The authors also add that professional commitment, education and training contribute to “job satisfaction, higher quality of care, and increased retention” (p. 58).

### 2.1. Higher education

Higher education should be a principal venue for delivering professional development opportunities to youth workers. Unlike in-house trainings which are often agency-specific, college credits and degrees are transportable and more widely acknowledged in diverse occupational settings. Borden, Craig, and Villaruel indicate that professional development through higher education is a means to learning that is “formally recognized” (2004, p. 75). Degrees are not the singular currency. Research shows increases in income consistent with the accumulation of college credits, as students with some college earn more than students with only a high school diploma (Attewell & Lavin, 2007, p. 36). The mere placement of professional development programs in a university is not enough. Three components to college programs are paramount in this context: multidisciplinary, relevance of the curriculum to work, and employer support.

### 2.2. Multidisciplinary

Borden et al. identified that youth workers need exposure to various content areas when in the college environment. No single traditional educational program addresses all that the field requires of a worker: youth work requires competency in social work, education, psychology, recreation, sociology, leadership, social action, and others (2004, p. 77). To address “the diverse range of issues that affect contemporary youth” (Evans, Sicafuse, Killian, Davidson, & Loesch-Griffin, 2009, p. 37) a multidisciplinary approach is necessary. This curricular design is consistent with the multifaceted youth development movement which acknowledges the plurality of settings for youth work, various facets of youth personal development (i.e.: physical, intellectual, psychological, emotional, social), and multiple principles and goals of promoting youth development (Hamilton, Hamilton, & Pittman, 2004).

### 2.3. Relevance

Colleges have a responsibility to situate research for applied disciplines in practice, create educational offerings that are relevant to practitioners, and consider the “special requirements of a profession” (Bennis & O’Toole, 2005). Hartje, Evans, Killian, and Brown (2008) found that workers who received job-related training were more likely to continue working with youth. A contextualized college curriculum with opportunities for workers to apply what they learn in the classroom to the job site strengthens the workers’ skills as well as their relationship to the field.

### 2.4. Agency support

Evans et al. (2009) identify the necessary role of the agency in facilitating professional development for youth workers in out-of-school settings. The majority of youth workers surveyed ranked “increasing professional development opportunities” as a critical issue to advancing the profession (p. 46), and yet the authors argue that agencies do not always allow workers the release time needed to participate (p. 37). Evans et al. also identify that workers whose agencies recognized their participation in training scored a higher rating in self-competency for implementing positive youth

development programming (p. 48). Because many agencies, and especially non-national agencies, lack resources to support staff in professional development activities, partnerships are integral to providing cost-effective training opportunities (p. 50). Agency support of workers in training is necessary so that new knowledge and skills gained by workers will be more likely to be implemented practices at work sites (Johnson, Rothstein, & Gajdosik, 2004, p. 60).

## 3. Youth Studies Certificate at the City University of New York

The Youth Studies Certificate (YSC) at CUNY aims to build capacity and raise status in the youth development field at both human services agencies in New York City (NYC) and within the university itself. Since 1999 the YSC has engaged 223 frontline youth workers to better equip them in their jobs, help them climb the career ladder, further their formal education, and retain them in the youth development field. These youth workers are employed in a variety of settings including after-school programs, residential programs, and camps. The certificate has also resulted in the development of new coursework at CUNY to mirror current trends in the field. The five-course, 12-credit certificate has been offered by CUNY as a cohort model for ten cycles at four campuses for more than a decade, and is cited as one of a few initiatives across the country which provides “educational and training opportunities for youth workers” (Bowie & Bronte-Tinkew, 2006).

The City University of New York is the leading public urban university in the United States, comprised of 23 institutions which educate more than 480,000 students (CUNY, 2011). CUNY students hail from 210 countries of ancestry; 44% of undergraduates have a native language other than English, and 43% of first-time freshmen are born outside of the United States (CUNY OIRA, 2011). This educational setting is a good match for the diverse backgrounds and needs of youth workers in New York City, and the certificate is structured flexibly to account for these. Courses are offered at convenient day, weekend, and evening times at locations near public transportation hubs in high-need areas of Brooklyn and the Bronx.

The YSC’s directed resources to urban youth workers. Evans et al. (2009) found that:

Program staff who worked with youth from mostly suburban areas were significantly more likely than those who worked with urban or rural youth to identify ‘more university-based degree programs’ as a critical issue related to advancing the youth work profession (p. 47).

A college-based program provides an opportunity for frontline youth staff to better imagine themselves as belonging in a campus setting.

The YSC was administered through the John F. Kennedy, Jr. Institute within the university’s Central Office of Academic Affairs in partnership with four CUNY campuses: Lehman College, Medgar Evers College, New York City College of Technology and Hostos Community College. The Institute was positioned to broker relationships and services between the campus, youth-serving agencies, and other stakeholders, operating as a “local intermediary” (Johnson et al., 2004). In accordance with the literature, the YSC was developed with a multi-disciplinary curriculum, inclusion of field-based experiences, and in partnership with the workers’ employer agencies. The certificate’s structure and outcome data are presented together here to suggest the program’s replicability as a successful model of professional development for youth workers.

### 3.1. Recruitment

Participants were recruited through their employers, typically community-based nonprofit agencies serving urban youth. To

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