

# Advancing the Understanding of Youth Development and Its Effective Application: Reflections on the North Central Region's Recent Efforts

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**A**s youth development evolves, professionals face the difficult task of developing and evaluating programs and community initiatives that meet the complex needs of young people (Pittman & Irby, 1996). Recent tragedies in Georgia, Colorado, Alabama, and other states reinforce the importance of promoting positive youth development for all young people (Benson, et al., 1999; Benson, 1997; Garbarino 1999; Hersch, 1998). Communities, schools, faith-based agencies,

social service agencies, youth organizations, government officials, parents, and other caring adults are struggling to create environments that prevent problems, promote positive development, and engage young people in meaningful ways. Youth development (whether as a philosophy or an approach to programming) is based on building strengths and engaging young people, as well as the many formal and informal ways in which communities and adults can support and challenge the development of youth.

More research is needed on youth development and the people, places, and opportunities through which it occurs. At the same time current research and knowledge must be brought to bear on youth programming and on helping communities become more intentional. Both programs and communities need access to

youth development professionals who can engage young people; identify their needs; design, implement, and evaluate programs; and mobilize community efforts to create environments and relationships that promote positive community-based youth development.

What role can and should land-grant universities (and in particular their Extension systems) play in preparing and providing access to such youth development professionals and to advancing the understanding and practice of youth development approaches? Over the past year, several key opportunities to further Extension's collective understanding of youth development have taken place in the North Central Region. This article will summarize the ongoing dialogue that has transpired during these opportunities and explore its implications for advancing the field of youth development.

## Leaders Meet

In May of 1999 three 4-H State Leaders met with the North Central Cooperative Extension Directors to discuss the work of 4-H Youth Development. Dr. Dale Blyth (Minnesota), Dr. Jo Turner (Missouri), and Dr. Greg Hutchins (Wisconsin) presented information on the work of 4-H Youth Development throughout the region. They summarized some of what is known about youth development, the Search Institute asset framework and data, and the need for more evaluation. They stressed the importance of the integration of research and practice



in youth development work. North Central Directors expressed their general support and reinforced the need for strong collaborative research and evaluation efforts.

In July of 1999, the State 4-H Leaders from the North Central Region identified the shared concerns and challenges land-grant universities face in meeting the needs of young people in the 21st century. This discussion focused on the current challenges facing both 4-H programming specifically and all youth serving organizations more broadly. It became apparent that as part of the land-grant university network, 4-H Youth Development is uniquely positioned to take the lead in addressing the youth development challenges facing communities today. The Extension system has access to:

1. young people and their communities through 4-H as the nation's largest youth-serving organization, reaching over six million youth annually;
2. researchers from a variety of disciplines in multiple universities;
3. Extension educators in counties, who both manage youth development programs and support community-based efforts;
4. the research, theory, application, policy, and communication technology expertise to make a difference and to significantly advance the field of youth development.

In January 2000 at Michigan State University, a summit called *Furthering Our Understanding of Youth Development Work: Removing Barriers, Exploring Opportunities* brought together teams representing three perspectives in the youth development field: researchers and evaluators, state 4-H staff, and field-based 4-H Extension educators. Over 70 people from 11 states attended, representing Michigan State University, University of Minnesota, The Ohio

State University, University of Illinois, University of Missouri, University of Nebraska, University of Wisconsin, University of North Dakota, The Pennsylvania State University, Iowa State University, and Purdue University.

The summit was a unique effort to create dialogue between and among these three key groups in response to the following broad question: What can we do to further our collective understanding of youth development and its effective application? The gathering grounded its work in the nationwide trend within land-grant institutions to re-examine our role as *engaged* institutions (Kellogg Commission, 1999).

### The Engaged Institution

Dr. Luanna Simon, Provost at Michigan State University, talked about the *engaged university*—where teaching, research, outreach, and service functions are sympathetically and productively involved with the communities the universities serve (Kellogg Commission, 1999). She noted that, while each group in the conference (researchers, state staff, and field staff) has a distinct role, these roles must be effectively integrated for the good of young people in today's communities. The Commission's report (1999) set forth five strategies for universities to advance engagement:

1. make engagement a priority on every campus,
2. develop plans for engagement,
3. encourage interdisciplinary work,
4. create new incentives to advance engagement, and
5. secure stable sources of funding.



Relationships lie at the core of youth development and must be respectful, offering young people and adults the opportunity to learn and work together.

The purpose of the summit—bringing together professionals from various disciplines and perspectives to integrate research and practice in youth development—reflects this call for institutional engagement.

### Critical Issues

Dr. Richard Lerner of Tufts University outlined the critical issues facing today's young people, linking them directly to the challenges and opportunities facing those who work in youth development. Lerner pointed to the overarching goals of the youth development field by identifying the following broad categories of desirable youth outcomes: competence, confidence, connection, character, and caring/compassion (Pittman & Irby, 1996). He challenged participants to consider youth issues from a global perspective and outlined key features of programs that are effective in promoting positive youth development. Lerner concludes (based on the work of multiple authors Benson, 1997; Carnegie Corporation, 1992; Damon, 1997; Dryfoos, 1990, 1998; Hamilton, 1999; Lerner, 1993, 1995; Lerner & Galambos, 1998; Little, 1993; Pittman, 1996; Roth, et al., 1997; Schorr, 1997) that effective programs:

- are predicated on a vision of positive youth development and have clear goals
- focus on youths' assets and on the importance of youth participation in every facet of the program, including its design, conduct, and evaluation
- pay attention to the diversity of youth and of their family, community, and cultural context
- assure that the program represents a safe and accessible space for youth

- recognize the interrelated challenges facing youth and integrate the assets that exist within the community
- provide broad, sustained, and integrated services to youth and a “seamless” social support system across the community
- provide training to adult leaders
- emphasize the development of life skills
- are committed to program evaluation and to strengthening the use of research in design, delivery, and evaluation
- advocate for youth

### Community Youth Development

Dr. Della Hughes of the National Network for Youth introduced the Community Youth Development Framework, which lets practitioners think intentionally about working together with young people. The framework reminds us of the importance of developing relationships with young people. Relationships lie at the core of youth development and must be respectful, offering young people and adults the opportunity to learn and work together. Community youth development offers young people attachment, autonomy, achievement, and altruism (Hughes & Curnan, 2000).

### Getting Down to Work

In role-specific work groups, practitioners, researchers, and state staff each addressed the critical issues, barriers, and opportunities facing the field from their perspectives. Upon reconvening in the larger group, a panel identified common ground among the lists. Themes that emerged included:

- the need to prioritize issues and approach the work in a holistic and integrated way
- the importance of recognizing cultural competence and differences

- the need to effectively communicate or market effective programming efforts
- the need to generate and align resources

### Identifying Opportunities and Priorities

Work groups were then formed with representation of all three participating groups to begin cross-perspective discussion with the goal of identifying and prioritizing opportunities.

Groups were charged with the goal of identifying up to four *critical opportunities* currently facing the field. Opportunities identified by groups needed to meet the following five *criteria*. If pursued, they would (1) further our collective understanding of youth development; (2) increase effective application of knowledge; (3) integrate research and practice perspectives and advance both; 4) model university-community partnerships; and 5) illustrate how Extension can and does contribute to the field of youth develop-

ment across state lines. When the groups returned from several hours of work, and duplications were accounted for, what remained was the following list of nine opportunities:

- professional development for youth workers
- assessment of youth development programs
- collaborative research initiatives across state lines
- enhancement of 4-H as a research-based system
- enhancement of collaboration within universities or “inreach”
- enhancement of cultural competence
- emphasis on workforce development
- youth involvement in community development
- enhancement of 4-H partnerships with schools

**Table 1  
Summary of Voting on Opportunities for Advancing Youth Development**

Opportunity	Overall		State Staff		Practitioners		Researchers		Number of States Voting for Opportunity
	Total Votes	Overall Rank	Number of Votes	Rank in Group	Number of Votes	Rank in Group	Number of Votes	Rank in Group	
Youth Involvement in Community	41	1st	8	3rd	18	1st	15	2nd	10 out of 11
Professional Development for Youth Workers	38	2nd	9	2nd	13	2nd	16	1st	11 out of 11
Assessing Quality of Youth Development Programs	32	3rd	8	3rd	12	3rd	12	3rd	11 out of 11
Collaborative Research	30	4th	10	1st	8	5th	12	3rd	10 out of 11
Enhancing “Inreach” within the University	30	5th	8	3rd	7	6th	15	2nd	11 out of 11
Cultural Competence	23	6th	7	4th	9	4th	7	4th	11 out of 11
School Partnerships	18	7th	4	6th	7	6th	7	4th	9 out of 11
4-H Research Base	17	8th	6	5th	6	7th	5	5th	8 out of 11
Career Dev. / Workforce Preparation	6	9th	2	7th	2	8th	2	6th	3 out of 11



### Emerging Priorities

A vote was taken to record interest by state as well as professional perspective (researcher, practitioner, state staff) and the top five priorities were: (1) youth involvement in community development; (2) professional development for youth workers; (3) assessment of youth development programs; (4) collaborative research initiatives; and (5) enhancing collaborations within universities or “inreach.” In addition to receiving the most individual votes, these five opportunities were deemed priorities by at least ten of the eleven participating states, and all but “inreach” were in the top five within each of the three perspectives. While our goal was to narrow our focus to five critical opportunities, the sixth most critical in terms of votes was cultural competence with support from all 11 states. Viewing cultural competence as essential to all of the other issues identified and to the future of the youth development field in general, the group decided to address cultural competence within the context of all five opportunities. In addition, interested participants met at the end

of the summit to discuss strategies for continuing dialogue in this area.

Based on the prioritization of opportunities, new groups were formed to discuss and elaborate on an opportunity and begin the development of specific strategies that would advance the work in each area. Although more work was done, the following summarizes the discussion of each opportunity.

#### **Critical Opportunity #1:** ***Youth Involvement in Community Development***

The goal identified by this working group is to increase youth involvement in community development by identifying, disseminating, and supplementing existing knowledge and materials related to community youth development and youth empowerment. Increasing and disseminating knowledge in youth/adult partnerships and youth empowerment programs will allow communities to more effectively engage youth as resources in community planning efforts. While efforts to engage youth as resources abound, the group identified opportunities for further research, evaluation (in particular community-sensitive evaluation tools), and curriculum development to support and sustain program efforts.

#### **Critical Opportunity #2:** ***Youth Development Training/Certification***

The broad goal identified by this working group is to promote positive youth development through education across a continuum of audiences. With the overall goal of improving youth development services and programs, this group focused on the need to advance the professionalization of adults who work with youth, possibly through the development of certificate programming at the university level. Programming could provide professional, spe-

cialized learning opportunities in youth development and community services, both for volunteers and practitioners in the field and for students pursuing professional degrees in related fields. While meeting a critical need in the workforce, such a program would also foster and support dialogue between research and practice, bringing scholarship to bear on pressing contemporary youth issues. The group identified training and certification as an ideal area for partnering among universities, especially with the interactive opportunities afforded by new technologies and existing networks such as Extension and the Big Ten's Committee on Institutional Cooperation.

**Critical Opportunity #3:  
Assessing Quality Youth Development Programs (Evaluation)**

The goal identified by this working group is to use evaluation and assessment methodologies to identify and disseminate research-based program strategies that intentionally operationalize the qualities of environments needed for positive youth development. The group identified the components necessary for promoting healthy youth development as well as positive youth outcomes, and discussed ways to identify and develop evaluation instruments and measures to help programs assess those components and outcomes. The group also identified an

Millennium Youth Challenge Writing Contest

The Future of Me and You

by Rachel Eisenschenk

My life in the future is not how I see it,  
It's what I see and how I do it.  
My grandparents may not be alive then,  
But they've lived through two centuries,  
Mine has just begun, theirs coming to an end.  
They dealt with wars, the Depression, television,  
and the first man on the moon,  
While I dealt with crime, technology,  
Kidnappings, and making sure to be home soon.  
Back then in the 60's, they didn't worry about  
Make-up, and clothing, or the latest passion,  
Here in the 90's, I depend on "cool" stuff,  
Money, and the latest fashion.  
They played with toys like games, cars, and cards,  
Played tag, went swimming, and in the winter went  
hiking,  
I play with Gameboys, Beanie Babies, Pokemon, and  
N64.  
You could find me outside rollerblading or biking.  
Back in the "olden days," they went to a one-room  
school,  
With children of all ages,  
Nowadays, it's separate grades and separate schools,

Me deciding what book and how many pages.  
A long time ago did they have hobbies?  
Or go to a hotel with many lobbies?  
Did they look forward to the future, or were they scared?  
Did they know they would one day be less-haired?  
What will become of me this New Year?  
Will I one day still be able to hear?  
Who will my grandchildren be?  
Will they look like my children or more like me?  
The answers to my questions lie only ahead,  
Making me think more at night in bed.  
I feel scared, happy, and full of delight,  
But nervous for my future to  
take flight.  
Time has passed, it's not  
hard to tell;  
And I wish the beginning of  
a century to be great  
and well.



Rachel Eisenschenk  
Age 12

important layer of research and evaluation that requires further attention from the field—that is, identifying what it is about effective programs that leads to positive outcomes for youth. Specific efforts in Iowa (around life skills) and Indiana (around connecting four frameworks) are examples of this type of work.

**Critical Opportunity #4:**  
*Collaborative Research*

The goal identified by this working group is to develop and promote a shared research agenda for youth development and to increase dialogue between researchers and practitioners. The group felt an interdisciplinary approach will lead to more comprehensive answers to the complex questions facing the field. In addition to identifying research priorities, the group discussed the need to create a healthy balance between research and evaluation priorities. The group is looking at ways to create a climate that supports dialogue between researchers and practitioners, as well as strategies to facilitate collaborative research initiatives across states and universities.

**Critical Opportunity #5: *In-Reach***

The goal identified by this working group is to foster communication within/among colleges and universities to engage faculty, administration, and practitioners in furthering the youth development mission. This group emerged out of a discussion about the importance of collaboration not only between institutions but within large universities where various units and individuals working on the same issues can be isolated from one another academically, physically, politically, and as a result of funding issues. The group discussed several specific strategies that would support the development of collaborative relationships and broaden institutions' internal capacity for research and outreach. In addition to institution-based goals, the group discussed the importance of building regional networks to support data sharing, policy advocacy, and professional development efforts in the area of youth development.

Each of these work groups has established email groups to continue the dialogue and new members are welcome (contact Lynne Borden or Nicole Yaholem at Michigan State University).



**Integrating Themes and  
New Commitments**

Within Extension as well as the broader youth development field, the past year has been spent in numerous conversations, meetings, summits, and conferences all addressing the current and pressing needs of young people. While concern for the well-being of children and youth rises, no longer do such discussions dwell exclusively on how to reduce risks and solve crises. Instead they are often focused on the need to create comprehensive community-wide efforts that support and meet the needs of all young people regardless of their personal degree of risk. The challenge that lies before all of us is to figure out how to make the most of these multiple oppor-



tunities. How do we link them together rather than allow them to compete? How do we serve as catalysts and resources for such efforts at a national, state, and community level? How do we help Extension (and land-grant universities) take a leadership role in efforts to integrate research, education, and outreach to improve the lives of all of America's youth? This work will require a re-examination of Extension's and the University's roles within 4-H youth development and the broader children, youth, and family areas of Extension's work. We must begin to revitalize and help realize the promise of Extension for making a difference in the lives of

children and youth. This past year has seen steps toward shaping the interdisciplinary field of youth development into a firm foundation from which programs, communities, and society can create environments that promote the positive development of all youth.

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