

10-20-2011

# "What is the Value of Youth Work?" Symposium Booklet

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## Recommended Citation

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<http://commons.clarku.edu/loalknowledge/1>

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What is the Value of....

# Youth Work?

Mattering Relationships  
Safety Positive  
Youth Community Healing  
Gender Family Structure  
Race Opportunities Support  
Skills Social Efficacy Resources

Clark University  
Seymour N. Logan Symposium

**SYMPOSIUM BOOKLET**

**October 20-21<sup>st</sup> 2011**  
Boys & Girls Club of Worcester  
65 Tainter Street  
Worcester, MA

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### THE FOLLOWING INDIVIDUALS DEVELOPED THE CONTENT FOR THIS BOOKLET:



### HOW TO CITE THIS BOOKLET:

ROSS, L. (2011). WHAT IS THE VALUE OF YOUTH WORK? UNPUBLISHED CONFERENCE BOOKLET. SEYMOUR N. LOGAN SYMPOSIUM, CLARK UNIVERSITY, WORCESTER, MA.

# WHAT IS THE VALUE OF YOUTH WORK?

As a group of experienced and novice youth workers, we believe that youth work is fundamentally about building trust-filled, mutually respectful relationships with young people. We create safe environments for young people to connect with other supportive adults and peers and to avoid violence in their neighborhoods and their homes. We guide those harmed by oppressive community conditions such as racism, sexism, agism, homophobia, and classism through a process of healing. As we get to know more about young people's interests, we help them develop knowledge and skills in a variety of areas including: academic, athletic, leadership/civic, the arts, health and wellbeing, and career exploration. In short, we create transformative experiences for young people.

In spite of the critical roles we play, we have largely been overlooked in youth development research, policy, and as a professional workforce. We face challenges 'moving up' in our careers. We get frustrated by how little money we earn. We are discouraged that despite our knowledge and experience we are not invited to the tables where youth funding, programming, and policy decisions are made. It is true—many of us do not have formal training or degrees in youth work—a reality which at times we regret. Yet, as our colleague communicates in the accompanying passage, we resent that formal education is required for us to get ahead, particularly because we question whether we need it to do our jobs more effectively.

*I grew up in the Boys Club, I'm a "Club kid." For work, I have been a camp counselor, done child welfare; I have been a coach, a bus monitor, and a youth mentor. Over the past fifteen years I have worked my way up to be the Director of Operations. In spite of all I have done, I always face the subtle reminder that because I don't have my degree I must continue to impress and improve because I don't want to see a ceiling hit me. But I wonder, how much can a book help? Is there a curriculum that equals these types of life experience? I am tired of "book smarts" and degrees giving individuals "carte blanche" over the theories and practices of this profession. Doesn't this much life experience equal four years sitting through college education? Hell yes! ---Veteran youth worker.*

Through the "What is the Value of Youth Work?" symposium, we hope to address these concerns through a dialogue about youth work with the following objectives:

- Increase awareness of the **knowledge, skills, contributions, and professionalism** of youth workers;
- Advance a youth worker professional development model that integrates a **dilemma-focused approach with principles of social justice youth development**;
- Launch an ongoing Worcester area **Youth Worker network**.

This booklet provides a brief overview of the challenges in 'professionalizing' youth work and an alternative approach that we are advancing that puts the knowledge and expertise of youth workers at the center of professional development.

## Preparing Youth Workers

The limited attention that has gone into advancing youth work in the United States has focused on professionalizing the field through the establishment of youth worker competencies (Akiva,

2005; Vance, 2010). A competency is basic knowledge, skill, or attitude in a specific domain (Starr, Yohalem and Gannett, 2009). While there has yet to be adoption of a universally agreed upon set of youth worker competencies in the United States, a growing consensus is emerging around the following types of competencies (Vance, 2010):

- Child/Youth Development**—youth worker understands the principles of child and youth development and applies them to the implementation of the program;
- Positive Guidance**—youth worker uses positive guidance techniques to manage the behavior of youth;
- Families and Communities**—youth worker builds relationships with families and other organizations in the community that encourage support of and involvement in the program;
- Program Management**—youth worker demonstrates management skills that are necessary for program implementation such as resourcefulness and time management;
- Professionalism**—youth worker acts in a professional manner by following program policies and shows a commitment to professional growth by pursuing opportunities to enhance skills.

Many competency models include a rubric that identifies benchmarks from novice to advanced status in these domains. Advocates for competency frameworks argue that they allow for the establishment of clear standards of practice, consistent job requirements, reliable evaluation procedures, and the potential for identifiable career pathways (Vance, 2010).

While we agree that these competencies are important in youth work, we question whether they ensure youth worker *expertise*. Walker and Gran (2010) raise two problems with the idea of a competency focus. One, competency models set the benchmarks, but they do not provide guidance on how to move a youth worker from novice to advanced status. Two, and perhaps more problematic is that a competency focus tends “to reduce practice to the most measurable thereby reducing youth work to a technical skill,” (p. 2). We agree with Walker and Gran. This focus on competencies risks removing our control over our knowledge and practice because it favors programmatic outcomes over the relational, dynamic, and adaptive core of youth work.

An *expertise* frame on the other hand focuses on the successful application of knowledge and experience in real working contexts. Expert youth workers “orchestrate multiple competencies into a full range of behaviors necessary for effective practice” (Walker & Gran, 2010, p. 3). The reference to ‘orchestrate’ implies that expertise is not simply a function of acquiring competencies. Rather, expertise requires a complex process that combines and blends knowledge and skills in context specific ways.

Larson and Walker (2010) found that when confronted with everyday dilemmas, expert youth workers were able to read the complexity of the problem. Their careful appraisal led to the generation of many possible solutions. They anticipated the possible outcomes of various solutions and were strategic in choosing the course of action with the most potential for favorable outcomes. The experts engaged the young person in solving the problem, thereby turning the

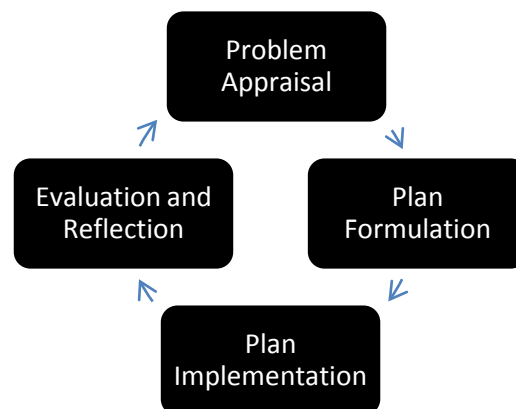


Figure 1: Youth Work Dilemma Resolution Cycle

situation into an opportunity for relationship building and learning. They also tended to reflect on the effectiveness of their choice of actions, which guided their responses to future situations. Larson and Walker’s research reveals the artistry of youth work and shows how it is a relational process rather than a means to pre-determined outcomes.

While our approach grows out of Larson and Walker’s work, we are faced with several important questions before we can reconcile the tension between youth worker professional development and the attainment of expertise in a way that advances the field of youth work in the United States beyond a narrow competency focus:

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If formal education does not solely account for youth worker expertise, then where does it come from?

Given our operational definition of expertise, how can formal education assist in the development of expertise? In what areas can expert youth workers benefit from formal education?

Does this operational definition of expertise fully explain what experts do in the face of everyday and extraordinary dilemmas?

If we answer the above questions about youth worker knowledge, pedagogical approaches, and needed research, then, to what extent will we find that the voice of youth workers must define the field of youth work (Smith, 2005)?

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*These four questions are at the heart of “The Value of Youth Work” project (VYW).*

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## **The “Value of Youth Work” Project: Putting Youth Worker Knowledge at the Center of Professional Development**

The “Value of Youth Work” (VYW) is a collaborative project among a group of experienced youth workers, university students interested in youth work, and myself, a university faculty member who is also a long-time youth worker. We launched this project in 2011 at Clark University through a semester-long course, entitled, “Youth Work: Everyday Practice and Social Justice.” The course integrated a dilemma-focused approach to youth work (Larson & Walker, 2010) with principles of social justice youth development (Ginwright & Camarotta, 2002). A defining feature of the course was the inclusion of youth workers alongside traditional upper level undergraduate and Master’s students. With resources from the Seymour N. Logan Faculty Fellowship<sup>1</sup>, youth workers were able to take the course for credit at no cost to them. By bringing together experienced youth workers—roughly half whom did not have a college degree or formal training—and college students interested in youth work, we were able to create a

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<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.clarku.edu/departments/cetl/faculty/facultyfellowships.cfm> for more information on the Seymour N. Logan fellowship.

learning community in which novices learned about the profession from ‘old-timers,’ who in turn gained new insights into youth work as a field and a profession. Lave and Wenger (1991) refer to this approach as ‘situated learning’ in a ‘community of practice.’

In a community of practice, novices move from the periphery to the center through a process of social participation in the activities of the community. As novices develop the relevant language, actions, and practices, they form an identity affiliated with that community. “Investigations of situated learning focus attention on ways in which the increasing participation of newcomers in ongoing practice shapes their gradual transformation into old-timers,” (p. 72). The ‘old-timers’ own learning deepens in their role as informal mentor to the novices (Richards, 2010) and through collaboration with other old-timers.

***Investigations of situated learning focus attention on ways in which the increasing participation of newcomers in ongoing practice shapes their gradual transformation into old-timers.***

The “Value of Youth Work” (VYW) is based on the idea that youth workers develop actionable knowledge and a culturally relevant disposition through situated learning in different communities of practice (Ross, under review). For example, youth workers who grew up in the same or similar neighborhoods and attended the same or similar programs as the youth they now serve tend to have gained important knowledge in particular communities of practice. Being a part of neighborhood-based peer groups and participating in youth development programs provided them with a rich education in how to navigate distressed, urban neighborhoods, how to ‘code switch’ when in different peer groups and settings (Anderson, 1999), how to negotiate complex family relationships that both encourage and discourage getting ahead and moving away, and an expanded repertoire for thinking and acting from non-family mentors at youth programs. This unique knowledge and perspective positions these youth workers to be able to read complex situations and respond in appropriate and effective ways. For them, neighborhood-based peer groups and youth programs serve as communities of practice in the development of their youth worker identity. Their situated learning deepened as they took jobs in youth organizations.

It is much more difficult to create an authentic youth worker community of practice in a university setting and for those who are ‘outsiders’ to the community in which they want to work. The formal structures of the university favor the competency approach, where an instructor delivers information to students in a decontextualized environment. At best, students may have an opportunity to reality-test the information in service-learning placements or through community-based research projects. Yet, there are many barriers preventing students from learning directly from the ‘old-timers’ in these settings, such as the time limited nature of placements, the lack of preparation students receive beforehand to interact meaningfully on site, and the ambivalence that agencies sometimes have about taking on students (Stoecker & Tryon, 2009).

In the Clark University Youth Work course, we attempted to create a classroom-based community of practice that would overcome these challenges. The key was having both Clark students and youth workers enrolled in the class, holding the class in a community-based youth

development organization rather than on campus, and having the Clark students act as apprentices to the youth workers. The formal objectives of the course focused on the *practice* (rather than the competencies or theories) of youth work, such as how to frame and complex

***By working together on everyday and extraordinary youth work dilemmas, a community of practice formed in the class through which youth work expertise was communicated.***

and ambiguous youth work problems; how to think and communicate on one's feet; how to improve writing skills; and how to introduce a reflective stance to youth work. In this way, those starting out in the field would learn to appraise and respond to youth work dilemmas more effectively, while assisting those with considerable experience to network with other youth workers in the community and to become more deliberate and reflective in their practice (Emslie, 2009).

By working together on everyday and extraordinary youth work dilemmas, a community of practice formed in the class through which youth work expertise was communicated. The experienced youth workers felt validated through this process. Not only did they discover that there is an emerging academic field devoted to their profession and that their knowledge is playing a role in advancing that field, but they could tell that their words and experience mattered to the novices. As they would respond to particular dilemmas in the class, their thought processes became more transparent and tricks of the trade were revealed. Some of these discussions were very fast-paced and referred to very local incidents. The Clark students tended to stay relatively quiet through many of these discussions, feeling a combination of awe, intimidation, and inexperience. Their early participation was indeed 'peripheral.' Yet, as the college students were able to develop relationships with the youth workers they came to realize that had valid experience and valuable facilitation, research and writing skills to contribute to the community.

The Clark students valued the opportunity to engage directly with professionals. They learned more about the practice of youth work and the functioning of non-profit organizations than they could have in a traditional class or even in a service-learning placement. That so much of the traditional Clark students' learning happened because of their interactions with experienced youth workers shifted notions of expertise from the professor to the youth work professionals. This in turn helped build the youth workers' confidence and belief in the value of their knowledge and skills.

## **Building a Community of Practice through Youth Work Dilemma Stories**

The dilemmas we present here are our stories. We changed identifying information, but the challenges we discuss and our approaches to them are real. We tell these stories not to suggest that the ways we handled the dilemmas are the right or the only way. Far from it. Rather, our intention behind sharing these stories is that we want to inspire reflective, deliberate dialogue about youth work. Our experience suggests that it is vital to consider how our identities and backgrounds, the policies of our organizations, and the situations of youth intersect in complex ways that require careful consideration when attempting to resolve problems in the field. We



found that discussing actual dilemmas in the form of case studies was an excellent way to make transparent the practice of youth work and to develop this critical, reflective stance.

In this booklet, we showcase six of the 100+ dilemma stories we deliberated over in the course. These six stories are divided into three categories:

1. Struggling with Cultural Relevance in Developing Relationships with Youth;
2. Maintaining High and Realistic Expectations for Young People;
3. Handling Youth's Risky and Illicit Behavior.

Our dilemma stories come from two sources. The first are from interviews with fifteen local youth workers who have between five and forty years experience. These interviews cover their path to youth work, a typical work day, stories about dilemmas they faced, how they resolved those dilemmas, and their future aspirations. The second source of dilemma stories are from the journals we kept for class. In the journals, we described dilemmas we were facing, how we felt and thought about them, what we believed to be the causes, how we addressed the problems, and how we decided on a course of action. They also included the outcomes of our actions and our reflections on how we handled the dilemmas.

Subsequent publications will include dilemma stories from all ten of the categories that emerged out of the VYW project. We chose

the stories for this booklet because they provide an opportunity to look at how youth workers from different backgrounds approach dilemmas. With the material here, for example, we can consider how novices and more experienced youth workers struggle with establishing rapport with youth, how growing up in the same city in which you work provides insight into the struggles of the youth, and how a youth worker's own attitudes about drugs influences how she handles drug use by participants in her program. Taking into account the ways a range of identities intersect—including education, race, class, gender, and age—we begin to get a complex picture of what it means to be an 'insider' or an 'outsider'; a novice or an 'old-timer' in youth work and the particular strengths and challenges that come with these positions.

The way we present the categories of dilemma stories in this booklet is similar to the structure we used in class. We briefly introduce the issues raised in each category of dilemma stories. Then we tell two dilemma stories, starting with a presentation of the central problem in the youth workers' own words. We present some background information about the youth worker and her/his organization. The stories go on to provide more information about the dilemma, how the youth worker approached it, and her/his reflection on the outcome. We try to show the problem the youth worker is confronted with along with her/his internal struggles with how to resolve it. We conclude each story with several questions to consider before moving to the next youth worker story in the category. Each dilemma category closes with a set of overarching discussion questions designed to have students compare and contrast the cases, consider what they would do in that situation, reflect on their own practice, and develop professional development activities. While this is the general format for each category, there is some variation across these stories. For example, we intentionally varied the amount of biographical information provided in order to consider the importance of the youth workers' own life stories in how they resolve complex dilemmas.

## Dilemma Category One: Struggling with Cultural Relevance in Developing Relationships with Youth

Youth development is a relational field. Authors like Eccles and Gootman (2002) provide characteristics of supportive relationships, such as warmth, closeness, connectedness, and good communication. Yet, it is one thing to say relationships are critical and another to know how to develop them. There can be many challenges to achieving this with youth.

What follows are two dilemmas that illustrate some of these challenges. The first is Leah's, a White college senior who struggles to overcome the divide she feels between her background and that of the youth she seeks to support. The second is from Sylvia, a White youth worker with roughly eight years of experience working in the same city where she grew up. Sylvia's challenge is that she is entering a new job and is trying to develop relationships in a context where the youth were extremely close to her predecessor. Sylvia is struggling with her desire to be liked and accepted while also establishing and maintaining clear expectations for the youth.

### Leah's Story

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*During my first visit to the Center, Hector gave me a thorough tour and explained the Center's history and current programs. I was inspired and excited by the Center's youth-driven and youth-empowering mission, and was impressed by its perseverance and success in spite of many setbacks and challenges. I was feeling really glad to be placed at an organization that offered so many relevant programs and activities. But when Hector finished the tour, I was at a loss. He said I was free to hang out, but I quickly realized that I did not know how to just 'hang out' with the youth.*

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Leah felt awkward, out of place, and uncomfortable in the Center. She described the cause of this disconnect as coming from, "a completely different cultural space." Leah comes from a relatively wealthy suburb of Boston, "I went to high school with girls whose houses were so big you could get lost in them if you got up in the middle of the night to go to the bathroom during a slumber party." Leah recognizes her educational and class privilege in spite of the fact that she was not among the wealthiest in her community. "I grew up with social capital, with educational privilege, and with the culture, norms, discourse, and mannerisms of socioeconomic elites, so I consider myself to have class privilege in a pretty big way."

Leah participated in youth programs as a teenager. The most influential for her was the Young Religious Unitarian Universalists (YRUU) in which she participated during her teen years. YRUU was a youth-led, youth-run program. Adults were present in the organization, but it was the youth who made the decisions and did the work.

YRUU exposed me to a lot of ideas about social justice, consensus decision-making, anarchy, anti-oppression, anti-racism that I wouldn't have known about otherwise. My experience in YRUU was hugely empowering and radicalizing and I credit it with a lot of the reason I turned out the way I have so far.

Leah has also worked at a music camp and has tutored in one of the local schools. She is currently enrolled in a teaching Master's program. She is committed to working with young people but has been on the fence about whether she should go into public education versus community-based youth development work.

In spite of her personal aspirations and experiences she felt that she was not prepared to work at the Center. Leah recalled that she had tried to participate in a conversation with Hector and some of the youth on that first day, but she could not understand what they were saying:

Literally, I could not understand the words they were using and the ways they were arranging them. Speaking a different language and not being a part of youth or hip hop culture made me feel like I didn't have a way to connect with these young people. In youth spaces, so far, I've felt like a fish out of water, all thumbs, awkward and bound to say and do the wrong thing.

She was not afraid of the youth, but she did fear making a mistake with them and not being able to interact with them successfully. This fear prevented her from even trying. She described the problem as cultural illiteracy:

I speak differently than the youth and feel self-conscious about it because it marks me as an outsider. But to change the way I speak would obviously be fraudulent. I'm also hyper conscious of my class privilege in these spaces – where would I even begin talking to these youth about anything significant in their lives that would be anything even close to my own experiences?

She understood that the work was not about her. That it was about the youth, and that she may have been creating more distance than there actually was. But, she remained at a loss about what to do to overcome these challenges and become culturally literate. She felt paralyzed, caught between her ideals and ability to act on them. "I want to feel comfortable and confident in what I do and yet, this challenge of how to work with and connect with youth is so overwhelming and intimidating that I feel hopeless". This situation left Leah questioning whether youth work was even right for her.

**Questions to consider from Leah's case:**

1. Describe the situation Leah is faced with in your own words. Describe the individuals who are important in this case. Speculate on what motivates them to act as they do. Describe the aspects of Leah's identity or background that you think are associated with her approach to developing relationships with youth.
2. What would you say are the key challenges in this story?
3. What do you think are the real barriers Leah is facing at the Center? Which are perceived? What more could Hector have done to help her transition in the Center? In what ways is her awareness of her difference a strength she brings to youth work?
4. Have you had experiences like Leah's? Describe them. What did you do about them? How do you 'hang out' with youth?
5. Leah worries that she can't imagine, "talking to these youth about anything significant in their lives that would be anything even close to my own experiences." What is your reaction to this worry? How would you advise Leah to overcome her fears? To what extent can they be overcome?

## Sylvia's Story

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*“I don't like you. I don't want you here, you took her job!” After more or less ignoring her for the first few weeks she was in her new position, these were the first words that Sasha, a 16 year old youth leader told Sylvia. Having worked in the youth development field for several years, Sylvia was well aware that developing relationships with youth is critical, but after this encounter, she was really taken aback and wondered, “How I am ever going to get these teens to trust and confide in me?”*

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Sylvia grew up in the city she now works. Her first job working with youth came in her freshman year of high school. She was a counselor at a day camp. She was amazed that she could get paid to play with kids. After that she knew she wanted to work with youth. Youth work, however, was not an obvious career choice for her. Under pressure from her family, she spent her first two years in college studying pre-medicine. But, it came down to doing something that she liked and that people told her she was good at versus doing something that could make her money, like being a doctor. Her family thought she should be some sort of “real job person,” suggesting that they did not consider youth work as a real career option for her.

In spite of these objections, she persevered in doing what she felt passionate about. She volunteered with a youth mentoring program and did some fundraising for a youth organization in Providence. She also worked at college preparation program for students who would be first in their families to attend college. These experiences deepened her commitment for youth work, but she also began to realize that she tended to give a lot of herself to the young people and that she also found it difficult to enforce personal boundaries and program rules. She struggled with getting the youth to trust her and confide in her without becoming their friend.

When she started in this new youth development position she vowed to herself that she would develop relationships slowly with the youth and maintain an atmosphere of trust, mutual respect, and accountability. Yet, soon after starting her new job, she began hearing rumors that Iris, one of the young people she was working with, was pregnant and was partying a lot. Sylvia did not know if she should ask her about it or if that would be “overstepping some type of boundary.” And in the midst of her internal struggle with how to develop relationships and gain trust with the youth in her group, Sasha basically told Sylvia that she was unwanted and unwelcome. Sasha wouldn't even come to her office to see her.

Confused by Sasha's powerful reaction, Sylvia asked a few people if they knew where Sasha's anger was coming from. Sylvia found out that Sasha had seen her sitting at her predecessor's desk before she had started working. Apparently Sasha was furious about this. Sylvia recounted Sasha's reaction, “you took over; you're sitting at her desk. She hadn't even left yet, why were you sitting there?” Sylvia began putting the pieces together. She realized for Sasha, it was too soon. One week the former youth worker kind of joked that she would leave, and then two weeks later, she actually did leave. Sylvia reflected:

Sasha told her a lot of things. There was one day where it was a little before she was going to leave and Sasha was talking about her dad being in jail, she was crying, telling her a lot of really personal things. She's known the family for a long time. They were just really close and then she just left.

Sylvia wanted Sasha to trust her and she wanted to help Iris. To build the relationship, she started giving them rides, snacks, and extra hours. Sylvia said, "it was a process of not giving in to every demand they had but if there were little things that I could do like 'oh do you want a ride?' or 'there's some extra snacks do you want some of those?'" But, Sylvia was also hesitant to impose any sort of discipline—fearing that would turn the youth off. She let certain ground rules slide (e.g. showing up for work, being on time for meetings or even attending meetings at all) and did not uphold the agreed upon disciplinary steps for violations of the rules. When she felt she was being taken advantage of, she abruptly cut off the rides and the favors.

She was not happy with her approach and she felt she was slipping into old patterns. She had Iris, whom she knew was struggling, but she didn't have enough of a relationship with her to help her and Sasha, who was pushing her away due to the pain she felt at the loss of another youth worker. Sylvia thought: "I'm not giving in to all their demands. But I think I let them walk all over me. I just want them to like me and trust me." Sylvia was unsure how to both set clear standards with the youth but also be friendly, warm and accessible enough so that they would come to her if they needed help.

**Questions to consider from Sylvia's case:**

1. Describe the situation facing Sylvia in your own words. Describe the individuals involved to the extent that you can. Speculate on what motivates them to act as they do. Describe the aspects of Sylvia's identity or background that you think are associated with her approach to developing relationships with youth.
2. What would you say are the key challenges in this story?
3. Have you had experiences like Sylvia's? Describe them. What did you do about them?
4. How do you ask youth about concerns you have about them?
5. How should youth organizations handle staff transitions? What policies do your organizations have to handle staff transitions?
6. Sylvia knows that trust has to be earned and not gotten in exchange for favors, but her worries about the youth liking her override more long-term thinking. What is your reaction to her worry? How would you advise Sylvia to address her worries?

## **Dilemma Category One: Struggling with Cultural Relevance in Developing Relationships with Youth**

### **Final Questions**

1. How can knowledge of the city one is working in and personal experience in youth programs affect youth workers' ability to forge relationships with youth? What can you do if you don't have this knowledge or background? How can having this knowledge and background be important? In what ways can it be limiting?

2. Here is an excerpt from another interview about relationships.

I think that as soon as I build that relationship with youth I always make sure that they know that I am their friend but I am their staff first. And I think that that's important for them to know because I think that some youth workers just go for the friend part or just go for the fear. If they feel like you're more of a friend then they're going to treat you like they treat their friends. I think that you can't do everything to be liked, you can't let them do whatever they want and walk all over you because then they'll love you because you don't do anything. And sometimes you are going to have the kids that just don't like you, but that's ok too.

I think that boundaries are really just so important. A kid needs to know that he can't call you at 2:00 in the morning. Some girl the other day was like, "you know my boyfriend just broke up and I just really need someone to talk to, can I call you later?" I was like, "That's really not ok. I'm here now, you can talk to me now, but you can't call me at midnight or Facebook me or Myspace. I had to delete my Facebook and my Myspace because it's a constant thing.

It's a lot of things where you have to keep saying no and I think I know that now because I've done this for a while. But I think that a lot of people that are just coming into it they're just like, "yeah sure call me later" and they don't understand how important it is to say no. Like if you ever said the wrong thing or you're not always trained to be that kind of person and heaven forbid their parents ever found out that, you know it's just a messy situation you don't want to get involved with.

What do you think of this approach? Can a youth worker speak on the phone and connect on Facebook and still remain be an authority figure and not a friend? Explain.

3. Develop a role play that could help with training youth workers on developing relationships in a real and authentic way.

## **Dilemma Category Two: Maintaining High and Realistic Expectations for Young People**

Creating an environment in which youth understand what is expected of them, keeping those expectations consistent and providing youth the support they need to succeed is an important but challenging task of youth work. Ideally, we set the expectations for young people's performance as high as possible, and then provide individualized scaffolding and emotional support needed to achieve those expectations. Some youth workers, however, want to create a different type of space than the standardized environment of schools and inadvertently do not push enough and are too lax with youth. Others—in the name of safety—create environments that are too controlling and do not give youth space to experiment and test their limits. These environments tend to turn off many young people—particularly older youth.

What follows are two dilemmas that illustrate the challenges of establishing and maintaining high expectations while providing individualized support for each young person. The first is Melinda's story. Melinda is African American and grew up in the city where she is working. She leads a successful dance group in her organization. She knows dance is a huge draw for young people and uses dance as a way to teach them other important life lessons. She struggles, however, with how to maintain her high standards for her dancers both in and out of performances with her deep understanding of the realities of their lives that make meeting her standards a challenge. Rob's dilemma is the focus of the second story. Rob, also African American, grew up in a large city in the Northeast and attended youth programs, an experience he credits with a lot of his personal development. In his story, he struggles with how he should support his group in completing a task that he knows is too challenging for them. The group fails in completing their project. Rob knows they learned some important lessons in the process, but struggles with whether he could have supported them in a way that would have resulted in a more positive outcome.

### **Melinda's Story**

Melinda recounted a conversation she recently had with one of the girls on her dance team. The girl was telling Melinda about her plan to go to California to 'make it' after high school. Melinda replied bluntly to her:

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*Don't tell people you're going to California, you're not going anywhere. What are you doing now to go to California tomorrow? Nothing. I see you in the hallway when everyone else is doing their homework and you're going to California?—maybe in your head!*

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Melinda laughs and shakes her head as she tells this story. She wonders why it seems she cares more about their future than they do. Despite her laughter, it is clear that she struggles with how to motivate girls like this one and hold them to the highest standard possible while also taking into account the challenges they face in their lives.

Melinda got into youth work through a high school job at an afterschool youth program. She had actually gone to that program as a child and remembered having a really good time there. Later, as an employee, she felt it was one of the best, most rewarding jobs she ever had because

she felt that they were really affecting the youth. She was also able to integrate her passion for the arts into her job. She ran music groups, led the choir, and directed their shows during the years she worked there. Her involvement in the arts continued through her own college experience and through subsequent jobs at several youth organizations.

Melinda uses the arts —something that she and the youth love—as an entry point to do deeper youth development work. She runs a successful dance program at her youth organization. She has a waiting list of youth who want to get in. Once young people are in her group, they stay with her for years. Her Hip Hop dance team ‘Synergy’ has won dance competitions and is highly sought after. They perform at many community events every year.

One of her main priorities is to teach the youth about respect, accountability, and character building through dance. She doesn’t want to just teach them about these ideas, but actually have her groups live them. To Melinda, character building includes, “hold[ing] them accountable and mak[ing] them be responsible for their actions.” For example, she breaks it down that the time management skills that they need to be successful in the dance program apply to everything in their life. She tells them, “If you know you have practice on Tuesday at four, why didn’t you study a long time ago?” She tells them that these are things they will encounter when they go to college or when they go to a job. She makes it personal and relatable by saying things like, “I know I go to work every Monday so unless it’s something really important, why am I trying to paint my toes right when I’m supposed to be at work?”

Melinda discussed several issues that make it hard for the youth to live up to her high standards. One that is particularly troubling to her is when what she does with the youth isn’t supported in their homes. She feels that sometimes, “the culture that they live in at home is the culture that I’m trying to have them fight against. It’s so discouraging for me.” She used the example of school:

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*I’m talking to a youth about her grades on her report card. Then, when I see her the next day I asked her what her mom said about her report card. The girl said that her mom never asked her for it. I was like, ‘Ugh.’ I don’t know what I’m doing this for. I wish they would be more supportive of their kids.*

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She often feels like she is the only one in their lives who is conveying to them that they have to work hard, that there is a professional way that people expect things. She says it is hard to work against youth’s upbringing and that sometimes she even feels like giving up. But the realization that she may be the only one telling them these things keeps her going.

Supporting individual youth to succeed is hard enough. But what Melinda finds particularly challenging is how to balance her high standards for the dance team with her need to hold the youth accountable and her desire to keep the most vulnerable youth connected to her program. This challenge comes to a head when she has to decide how to enforce her rule that you are not supposed to dance if you are not doing well in school.

While most of the members of her team were doing well in school, there were three that were failing. Of course, it was exactly those three that she most wanted to keep her eye on. One of



the girls—Vanessa—was a 7<sup>th</sup> grader who had already stayed back once. Until recently, Vanessa was what Melinda refers to as a ‘hallway kid’—kids who roam the hallways because they aren’t in any of the activities. Vanessa had danced with Melinda when she was younger, but as she hit middle school age she withdrew from organized programs. In spite of this, Melinda decided to take a chance on her by bringing her onto the team. Some people in Vanessa’s life noticed an improvement in her motivation and attitude after joining the team; however her school work remained problematic and she was on the verge of having to repeat the 7<sup>th</sup> grade again.

So, Melinda knows that this girl is failing and should not be allowed to dance in an upcoming show, yet, she feels that to exclude her jeopardizes some of the improvements others have seen in her behavior and attitude. So, in this case, Melinda decided to let her dance so she could continue to feel connected. Interestingly, no one called her on breaking her own rule. She attributes it to the lessons she has taught the girls. Melinda said one of them told her, “you know, she needs this so I don’t think you should just let her go.” But, Melinda is not convinced this was the right thing to do and made a vow for next year. “I have too much heart so they think they can get over on stuff. So next year I will be stricter on the grades from the beginning.”

**Questions to consider from Melinda’s case:**

1. Describe the situation in your own words. Describe the individuals involved to the extent that you can. Speculate on what motivates them to act as they do. Describe the aspects of Melinda’s identity or background that you think is associated with her approach to setting high standards, holding youth accountable, while recognizing challenges in youth’s lives.
2. What would you say are the key challenges in this story?
3. Have you had experiences like Melinda’s? Describe them. What did you do about them?
4. Have you faced the situation where what you are trying to do with youth isn’t supported at home? What do you do about that?
5. What should Melinda do to prepare herself and her team if she is serious about enforcing her rule on school performance? Should she get ‘stricter’ or are there other ways of achieving her aims?

## Rob's Story

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*Youth work is about posture. Not physical posture but how to set up the relationship between you and youth. What kind of an adult-youth relationship you want to have? You can go authoritarian, be all business, no fun. You can be all fun and no business or you can try to strike a happy balance. But striking a happy balance is always a struggle.*

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Rob describes himself as someone who was reluctant to go into youth work as a profession. His reluctance may in part have come from his own experiences growing up. He said: "I was a good kid but if I didn't like a teacher or somebody I might give him some attitude." But he also had very positive experiences in an out-of-school program, "I came up through a program called The City Partnership and it was better than high school for me. I spent a lot of time there. I got all my extra-curriculars and all kinds of workshops and summer programs."

But despite his positive experiences in the youth program, when it came time to find meaningful work, Rob was hesitant to work with kids. As he laughingly said, "they can be really honest, they're brutal almost." In spite of his hesitation, he sought out work with middle school aged youth at the Leadership Academy. He got cursed out by them his first day, he got cursed out his second day. After that though, he was good to go. When the Leadership Academy closed, he started working at the Environmental Justice Collective (EJC). He liked the youth-adult partnership model there and has been working for EJC ever since.

Going back to Rob's challenge about forging a balanced adult-youth relationship, he recalled a story from his first summer at EJC. He had some tough kids in his group. There was serious conflict among the youth and between some of the youth and him. Towards the end of the summer, one of their responsibilities was to develop a poster for the annual EJC block party. The poster had to summarize the focus of their group, which was arts and activism. He laid out instructions to them; got them all the supplies that they needed, and let them come up with their own plan for the poster. His personal hope was that they could overcome all the conflict and drama from the summer and get the project done.

When the group let him know their ideas, however, Rob was afraid they would never complete the poster. He warned them that what they were proposing was too ambitious. He suggested ways they could take it "a step down." Following the pattern of the whole summer, however, they resisted Rob's advice and adamantly stuck with their plan. As the time they had to create the poster was diminishing, Rob got even more direct with them and told them, "listen we need to do this now or it's just not going to get done, or it's not going to be as high quality as you want." But, by the deadline the poster was not done. They got about half-way through and as Rob said, "It just looked crappy."

He kept the pressure on the youth and challenged them to make the best out of what they did. They regrouped and decided to give an oral presentation rather than a visual representation of their work. In the end, Rob feels mixed about the process. He realizes that they learned to be adaptive but they also dropped the ball and he feels he let them drop the ball. Rob said:

I think it was good to let them feel embarrassment for not having put in the hard time, the hard work to get their poster done. But then I was also torn because they had failed and I let them fail. And I know that part of the reason I let them fail was because they weren't listening to me.

**Questions to consider from Rob's case:**

1. Describe the situation in your own words. Describe the individuals involved to the extent that you can. Speculate on what motivates them to act as they do. Describe the aspects of Rob's identity or background that you think are associated with his approach to setting high standards, holding youth accountable, while recognizing challenges in youth's lives?
2. What would you say are the key challenges in this story?
3. Would you have done the same thing Rob did in terms of allowing the group to 'fail' in their task of creating the poster? If not, what would you have done?
4. How can Rob keep his personal feelings about the group separate from how he sets standards for them? Should he do this?

**Dilemma Category Two: Maintaining High and Realistic Expectations for Young People****Final Questions**

1. In what ways is insider and outsider knowledge and experience important to consider in how to maintain high and realistic expectations for young people?
2. In 2010, 71.4% of students in our community's public schools graduated in four years, as compared with 82.1% of students in our state. Further, in 2010, 12.2% of students dropped out of school—yet, that rate is much higher for students with limited English proficiency (19%); special education (18.6%); and Latinos (17.2%). In what ways do statistics like these reinforce the urgency of setting high standards, holding youth accountable, while recognizing the challenges in their lives?
3. Develop a debate on the following topic of support to ensure young people's success. One side should argue for the need for youth to fail in order to learn what they need to do to succeed. The other side should argue for continual support or scaffolding throughout youth's participation in a program. Use actual examples from your experience in your arguments. Be ready to take either side.

### **Dilemma Category Three: Handling Youth’s Risky and Illicit Behavior**

Community-based youth organizations should be spaces where youth are safe from physical and emotional violence and places where young people learn strategies to resist engaging in risky and illicit behavior. Yet, several realities can interfere with this ideal. Adolescence is a time of experimentation. As youth workers, we try to minimize the harm of their inevitable forays into trying drugs, sexual activity, and breaking rules—but we can’t prevent all risky behavior. We also need to realize that as youth workers, we have limited ability to ‘change’ youth and where they come from. Young people develop their identity and decision-making processes in families, peer groups, neighborhoods, and schools. Youth organizations can play a role in helping young people make good choices, but youth workers are competing with other complex forces.

In this section, we hear the stories of how two youth workers balance the interests of young people engaging in risky or illicit behavior with the safety and wellbeing of other young people in their programs. William, a White youth worker in the city for roughly five years who operates from a social justice perspective, is faced with an impending fight between a young person in his group and another youth. He struggles with how to help the young person avoid the fight. When he is not successful with this, he tries to minimize the repercussions that both the victim and perpetrators face as a result of the fight. Then, we hear from Rebecca, a multi-racial youth worker, about her struggle to use her organization’s consensus-based process to resolve an incident of alleged drug use by two young people participating in her group.

#### **William’s story**

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*We were about to start our regular community meeting with the sophomore class. Two students, Jade and Carolina, roll into the meeting about five minutes late. It was immediately apparent that they were preoccupied. I got the meeting started, but they were very disruptive. The two eventually got up and went to the bathroom. Another girl took that opportunity to whisper to me that Carolina was going to get into a fight that afternoon at Crestview Park. I was like, ok, a fight is being planned and a place has been chosen. I thought, at least she’s in the meeting and hasn’t gone anywhere. She isn’t getting into that fight right now. But during our closing exercise, I realized that Jade and Carolina were gone, and that they had left the building.*

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William came to the city in which he now works five years ago. His journey started in New Hampshire, but he spent most of his childhood in South Carolina, where his analysis of race and power began. He realized he wanted to be an educator when he was in middle school. He credits early experiences in school with fueling his desire to facilitate young people’s learning:

I had teachers who encouraged a lot of learning. People like to criticize the South for not being as far-along as the North in terms of racial equality. I shoot back, ‘how many teachers of color did you have growing up? Cause I had a lot and they were strongest, most memorable teachers I had.

He has thought very carefully about the type of educator he wanted to be and realized non-formal, community-based work matches his values and work style.

Returning to Jade and Carolina, William felt he had to use the meeting as an opportunity to divert the girls' attention from the fight. But as the meeting went on Carolina became increasingly distracted. Her cell phone kept going off and at one point, William grabbed it and said, "I think that's distracting you." Carolina said, "okay, okay, okay." That lasted for a few minutes, at which point she got up from the meeting to go to the bathroom again. On her way out she grabbed her phone, although William hadn't noticed that.

When she came back to the meeting, she was acting even more erratic, like she was drunk. She just burst into the meeting, and said, "I gotta go, my mom just called, on the phone and I gotta go." William said to her, "you are interrupting the meeting, why don't you just stay. Tell your mom you need five more minutes 'cause the meeting's almost over." And Carolina said, "I don't wanna wait, I just gotta go!" William told her to sit down. Finally she said "okay" and sat down.

The group had a final question to discuss in small groups. At some point during that exercise Carolina must have gotten up and left. William admitted he had not realized it because he was talking to somebody else. When he noticed she was gone, he sent a student to see if she was still around but students were telling him she had left the building.

William thought to himself, "Ok, obviously she didn't go with her mother, and Jade is gone too." William ended the meeting and ran down to the park. On his way down, he found Carolina and Jade walking up the street. Carolina's face was bloody. He asked her if she was ok, she said, "yeah, yeah I'm fine." And at that point she told William the story.

On the way to the meeting that day, Carolina and Jade had run into a girl they call Frankie. Frankie had been harassing Carolina at school and repeatedly made threatening phone calls to her telling her, "you need to get away from my ex-boyfriend, he's cheating on you anyway." This run-in before the meeting got her really upset. Carolina said she was at a breaking point, where she was like "fine, I'll fight you- that's it. If it'll get you off my back, I'll fight you". So, they set up the fight at Crestview Park.

But when Carolina and Jade got there, there were two carfuls of people. Apparently Frankie's mom and aunt drove her to the fight and brought others to watch. William was thinking, "wow, so the mom and the aunt were approving of this." According to Carolina and Jade, these women also kept it a one-on-one fight, but not to Carolina's benefit.

Carolina has a bum shoulder that frequently goes out of place, so when she went to throw a punch she threw her shoulder out. The pain drove her to the ground. Frankie then took her and slammed her face down. Jade, who William describes as "not the fiery type that gets into fights" came over and pushed Frankie off Carolina. But Frankie's mom grabbed Jade's hair and was like 'this is a one-on-one fight' but at that point, Frankie's sister was beating up Carolina.

As William was gathering all this information, Carolina and Jade's parents came. Carolina's mom was very upset. She didn't know if she should call the school or the police or just leave it alone. William let her know about the school's policy fighting. If a student gets in a fight after school- especially if it started in school, then the students would get suspended. They talked about why no one in school had done anything about this, especially because the problem had been brewing for a while. The girls told them the school had had a mediator, but that she had recently been laid off due to budget cuts.

When William talked to Carolina later, she said that she and her parents decided that they were not going to do anything about the incident; they were just going to 'bury it.' Carolina would stay out of school for a few days and let everything calm down. William was dubious. He reminded her that there had been two carfuls of people and that her face was really banged up, with stitches over her eye. Carolina then admitted that the whole thing had been videotaped and the sisters said they would be putting it on YouTube. William did not see how this would stay quiet, and did not think it was the right thing to do anyway. But Carolina was adamant against pressing charges or bringing it up to anyone with authority at school. She said she would lie about how she got injured, that she 'fell off her uncle's motorcycle.' William told her "if I heard that as a teacher, I would say 'No, there's no way that's what happened'. I said that there's another way that we might be able to handle this. I said we could maybe get a community mediator." Carolina and her family agreed to this, but Frankie's family never responded to the request.

William reflected:

So, that's the dilemma I'm in. You can see the kind of layers of choices that I made or didn't make. Looking back, I'm doubting some of what I did. I was informed enough to interrupt the situation more than I did. I wonder if I ran to the park and it was still going on, what I would have done? I realized I wasn't actually thinking about that. I didn't think about calling the police. I didn't tell anybody at my organization that I had left the building to break up a fight. I was just like 'I gotta go, I gotta go see what is happening'. So I'm questioning, maybe I should have told somebody, maybe they could have been more effective. But these are the things I thought of after the fact.

**Questions to consider from William's case:**

1. Describe the individuals involved to the extent that you can. Speculate on what motivates them to act as they do. Describe the aspects of William's identity or background that you think is associated with his approach to handle the impending and actual fight.
2. What would you say are the key challenges in this story?
3. William questions whether he should have run to the park at all, or if he should have called the police when he learned of the impending fight. What would the pros and cons have been of these actions?
4. Have you had experiences like William's? Describe them. What did you do about them?
5. How can William use this incident as a learning experience for his group?

## Rebecca's Story

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*I notice the smell of pot as I pick them up. But I don't mention it, hoping it's coming from outside the car. At the meeting they are not themselves. At first they are all giggles. Normal things are hilarious. Before long they're sleepy. Then one eats sunflower seeds till she says her mouth aches. At this point I am 95% sure that they are stoned. I furiously cling to the remaining 5% of doubt because I don't want to believe that they are already disrespecting the workplace, having signed the collective agreements to be sober at work just two weeks ago. Plus there is no "hard evidence" and calling for a urine is not an option. We don't want to get into the relationship of a suspicious boss.*

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Rebecca is part of a small non-profit organization that focuses on urban environmental and social justice issues. This organization runs a youth leadership program that has shared power and consensus-based decision-making as core principles. Youth are on the board and adult staff are co-directors with equitable responsibility, power and compensation. Youth teach youth wherever possible, using a community organizing model to not do for anyone what they can do for themselves. The adults who formed this group believe that youth involvement is a way of "waking the youth up to their agency, to their individual and collective power." But Rebecca notes that, "often youth lean on adult staff for guidance, input. We want them to have the full opportunity to exercise their power and good judgment, but they often look to us for authority."

Rebecca is in her late twenties. She came to this community to go to college. She is very familiar and comfortable with consensus-based organizations. Her uncle is a professional mediator who in his work in criminal justice utilizes restorative justice solutions that include all parties at the table. About her uncle's work, Rebecca says, "I've watched him have his heart broke a number of times, but he keeps at it."

Her prior work with organizing former prisoners taught her a lot about how poor decisions as a young person can negatively affect a person's life. But because she has also seen people change their decision-making patterns—make better choices and live healthier lives—she deeply believes in harm reduction instead of incarceration. She describes herself as, "straight edge [strictly substance free], due to her strict upbringing and seeing what addiction has done in the lives of many close friends." Because she is multiracial, she feels people often assume she is more of an insider than she actually is.

Driving in the car, furious, Rebecca was not sure what to do. She knew a timely response was critical. She had seen things progress quickly to a very bad place when blind eyes were turned to substance use in the workplace. She was also aware that a different youth worker might have pulled the girls right out of session and sent them home. But she knew herself. She needed time to watch the situation unfold to devise the best response.

Rebecca was aware that one of the girls—Lia—was in an extremely vulnerable place. She had had some trouble with the law. Because of her rocky relationship with her mother, she had just been put in foster care. She had been through drug rehab. Through her brother, Rebecca knew that Lia has been involved in neighborhood gang activity. The other girl—Julissa—had only been

with the group for two weeks and was too new in the group to have built a deep sharing and trusting relationship with Rebecca.

By the end of the day Rebecca was ready to address their sub-par participation and to hint at the drug use by reminding them that “‘being ready for work’ was part of the collective agreement they had signed on to.” In the car ride back she told the girls they had to talk. But the girls were eager to leave, so they agreed to push the whole discussion to the next day.

Rebecca was ok with delaying the discussion. She figured they could use a Community Meeting, their organization’s process, to address these types of situations. Although drug use is personal, she reasoned that the violation of the collective agreements was certainly the business of the group. Any youth or staff could call a Community Meeting to resolve a conflict or pass an urgent proposal. Youth and adults are trained (by youth and adults) to facilitate these Meetings and in conflict resolution. All decisions are made by consensus in which all members, even those seen as responsible for a problematic situation, have an equal say and the power to halt the progress of any proposal. Usually one person presents their view of a situation, others involved directly respond, and then everyone is given the chance to speak until nobody has anything left to say and resolution has been reached. This process is informed by restorative justice.

Rebecca spent a lot of time that night discussing the details of the situation with her partner. She came to realize that the pot use in the workplace was the core issue and had to be addressed. The more she talked about it the more she was able to let go of that 5% doubt. She knew she had to be careful constructing her proposal. She felt all the youth needed a bold reminder that drug use is absolutely not an option at work and at the same time she wanted to respect the collective governance of the group. She put together the following proposal:

1. I’m calling a community meeting because I have to make a proposal I don’t want to make
2. Julissa and Lia I know and you know that you appeared stoned at our session yesterday.
3. Just a week ago you signed off on our code of conduct, stating that you would maintain a 100% sober workplace and you would always be prepared for work.
4. Not maintaining these internal policies affects: a) the productivity of our group, b) the health of our members (you), c) the reputation of our group, d) the culture of our workspace
5. Because you have violated the policies created by our group I propose to fire you once we’ve paid you for your time with us, excluding yesterday when you were stoned.
6. I don’t want to make this proposal because I know the energy, talent and passion that you both can bring to the group – that’s why we hired you both hands down. I’ve seen your A-game. But unfortunately you made the decision to bring your Z-game to work yesterday.
7. Whatever it is that causes you to behave as you did yesterday is something you will have to get to the root of to be successful in your lives. But you can’t bring this group down with you.

While Rebecca felt she was ready, the next day did not go exactly as planned. Before work, Lia texted Rebecca to apologize for her lack of participation the day before, stating she had had a really bad headache. Rebecca figured that she knew a serious proposal was brewing. The



apology did cool some of Rebecca's frustration, even though she didn't really believe the excuse. At least Lia was aware her behavior was off.

The Meeting Rebecca called didn't happen till late in the day. Rebecca was hoping to have it first thing but the people who needed to be in the room for it were not there at the same time and the youth facilitator of the workday chose to place it late on the agenda. When she was finally up, Rebecca started by pulling out the group-created contract that both the girls had signed two weeks before. Rebecca had them read it. Lia and Julissa were defensive and one of them stopped and said "oooooh" on the line about being sober at work. They both denied being high, their excuses were that they have been friends since 4<sup>th</sup> grade so they get goofy together, one had been awake till 4 in the morning the previous night, and a third girl pointed out that she knew one was being screened periodically for drugs so she couldn't have been high.

Several members expressed that they understood why the issue was so important but that they wished they had been there to witness the situation for themselves. The one boy who had been in the car with them said he didn't notice anything. He had grown up with these girls and Rebecca thought he was probably covering out of fear or loyalty. He was also a new hire, unfamiliar to the group's process. Rebecca felt that, "he is very clearly the type to choose the path of least resistance and avoid confrontation."

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*Eventually, everyone, including the girls understood why I was proposing what I proposed, why I was bringing up what I was bringing up. Everyone re-affirmed that the group policies, for and by the group HAD to be respected. But the girls would not admit to the drug use, so I backed down. I let my proposal to fire them slide, and I actually apologized for my accusation. The group seemed to be ready to move on with the understanding that that drugs and not being prepared for work is taken VERY SERIOUSLY by me and the team.*

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Lia remained heated during the rest of the Meeting but said she was good by the end of it. She was pretty cheery at the end of the day. Both girls were singing in the room when they did their timesheets. They stopped singing or dancing whenever Rebecca looked their way. Rebecca realized that, "Lia won't be over this any time soon. I am sad that our relationship might be challenged." Her co-worker Jack tried to reassure her that she did the right thing:

Maybe she can't like you right now. She is incredibly defensive about this kind of thing because she is getting it from all sides of her life: family, foster home, DCF, etc. I guess one more place where she knows she has to be sober is a good thing, even if it frustrates her.

Rebecca reflected:

Although my proposal to fire the girls did not go through, I was actually happy with the outcome. I expected there would be lots of resistance to the proposal. But I also knew that to sweep it all under the rug and not bring it up would have had terrible impact on our group. Hopefully keeping the girls on the team doesn't encourage them or others to use drugs.

Since that council meeting this issue has not come up again. Rebecca is pleased to not have the feeling of “waiting for the next time” heavy in her gut that she knows would be there if it had not been brought up in the Meeting. Surprisingly to Rebecca, within weeks she and the girls were back in a good space.

**Questions to consider from Rebecca’s case:**

1. Describe the individuals involved to the extent that you can. Speculate on what motivates them to act as they do. Describe the aspects of Rebecca’s identity or background that you think is associated with her approach to handle the alleged drug use.
2. What would you say are the key challenges in this story?
3. How do Rebecca’s views on drug use and sobriety affect her response? What are your views on drug use and sobriety? How does that affect your work with youth?
4. In Rebecca’s case, they use group processes involving youth and adults to intervene and make disciplinary decisions. Do you have experience using these types of interventions? How have they worked for you?
5. Why is it important to have youth partnership in discipline and setting standards? What problems does it cause?

**Dilemma Category Three: Handling Youth’s Risky and Illicit Behavior**

**Final Discussion Questions**

1. Compare and contrast the issues and the youth workers’ responses in these two cases.
2. How did the organizational context in which these incidents took place help or limit the youth workers’ effectiveness?
3. Do your organizations have protocols, rules, guidelines to deal with these types of situations? Do you think they are adequate? Why or why not?
4. The 2009 Massachusetts Youth Risk Behavior Survey found that:  
Forty-three percent (43%) of all high school students in MA reported having ever used marijuana in their lifetime. Around a quarter (27%) used in the past 30 days, and nine percent (9%) of students reported having used marijuana before the age of 13. Less than half (46%) of high school students reported that they believe smoking marijuana occasionally would be a moderate or great risk to their health.  
  
Twenty-nine percent (29%) of high school students reported having been in a fight in the past year, and 3% reported having been in a fight in the past year in which they were injured and needed to be treated by a doctor or nurse. Combining all grades, 12% of high school students reported that they had initiated a fight in the previous 12 months and 15% reported bullying someone else in that period. (MYHS 2009)  
  
What in your experience is driving these statistics? What helps young people to avoid engaging in violence, substance use, or other risky behavior? What is the role of the youth worker to address these types of statistics?
5. What are training opportunities in this case? What knowledge, competencies and skills do youth workers need to be able to handle these types of situations?

## Final Comments

In this booklet, we focus on youth worker dilemmas not to establish a particular response for dealing with issues of violence, substance use, or establishing rapport with youth as the right way or only way. Rather, we remain convinced of **the value of learning youth work with experienced youth workers through deliberate engagement with actual problems encountered in the field**. This type of engagement reveals *old-timers'* and *insiders'* thinking about dilemmas for novices. Observing and then participating in these conversations has enormous pedagogical value for up and coming youth workers. An additional benefit of this approach is that it sharpens experienced youth workers' practice. This reflective engagement with dilemmas forces *old-timers* to reevaluate their assumptions and gives them an opportunity to pause and possibly adjust their responses to youth work dilemmas.

In addition to the benefit this approach has for novice and experienced youth workers, we hope it is clear from these stories that youth workers address some of the most serious issues facing young people in the community, such as teen pregnancy, school failure, violence, and drug use. We also hope that the community understands that youth workers do not only focus on youth problems. We also support young people to make good decisions, keep their heads in their academics, and their eyes to the future. Yet our efforts remain largely invisible to the majority in our community. Even the job title 'youth worker' is unknown to many.

Through ***The Value of Youth Work*** project we aim to increase our effectiveness **and** the community's awareness of our knowledge, skills, contributions, and professionalism. This symposium is a first step. From here, we will continue to develop a youth worker community of practice by launching a youth worker network and creating a youth worker certificate program. A key signature of this community of practice is its focus on the everyday and extraordinary dilemmas of youth work, grounded in a social justice perspective. It is our hope that these efforts will help the community support us in maintaining the health and wellbeing of the thousands of young people growing up in our city.

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**The ‘What is the Value of Youth Work?’ Symposium was made possible by:**

**The Seymour N. Logan Faculty Fellowship for Faculty in the Humanities and Social Sciences** Todd and Linda Logan, two Clark alumni, established this award in 1988 in memory of Todd's father and as an expression of their appreciation for the outstanding and inspirational teaching that they experienced during their years at Clark. The Logan Fellowship provides direct support over two years to develop an innovative new undergraduate course and to organize a symposium on the related topic. The goal is to bring Clark faculty and undergraduate students together with other prominent scholars for lively intellectual exchanges.

In addition to the Seymour N. Logan Fellowship, the following Clark departments and community partners provided critical support for the Symposium:

- International Development, Community, and Environment
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**The Seymour N. Logan Faculty Fellowship** which allowed for the creation of the "What is the Value of Youth Work" symposium is an example of Clark University's commitment to making a difference in our community.

**TO OBTAIN MORE INFORMATION ABOUT THE "VALUE OF YOUTH WORK"**

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