

Needed:

Calluses, Credits and Credentials

By Karen Pittman, June 2002

"Those who can, do. Those who can't, teach. Those who can't teach, do youth work."

These three sentences pretty well sum up the underlying sentiments that existed a decade ago when the Center for Youth Development received two grants that led to the Advancing Youth Development curriculum, and later the National Training Institute for Community Youth Work.

A DeWitt Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund grant helped national youth-serving organizations that received funds for major staff development and capacity-building find the common ground among their efforts. A U.S. Department of Justice grant helped to develop a curriculum for front-line staff working with "high-risk" youth.

Why the history lesson? Because the needs and tensions that plagued the field more than a decade ago are still there. Youth Today's article last month about the benefits of college-linked training ("College-Linked Training Spreads, but Does it Improve Youth Work?") makes four points:

- 1) There is a movement to raise standards and pay and to codify practice in youth work. Training and college degrees are a part of that movement.
- 2) Program directors and staff believe that training improves practice by giving youth workers knowledge and tools to help them reflect and assess.
- 3) Practice, however, is inevitably grounded in experience.
- 4) Credentials and degrees, as in all fields, can be deceptive and can lead to false positives and false negatives in hiring, especially as agencies struggle to justify higher salaries.

The report recently commissioned by the National 4-H Council turns a legitimate spotlight on college-based degree programs in youth development, suggesting that they are aimed more at managers than front-line workers and are not skill-specific. Such findings are important but not surprising, given that many of the college-based programs are outgrowths of the American Humanics program designed to train nonprofit managers.

A recent report by the National Training Institute for Community Youth Work, on the other hand, shows that youth workers who have gone through training aimed at improving front-line practice benefit, whatever their educational levels. Are these findings contradictory? No.

There is a key word missing from the resurfaced debate over credentials and training: Competence.

Decades ago, the Brits figured out three things that we still haven't. First, there are specific competencies needed to do youth work, and they differ from those needed to teach, do clinical social work or do early childhood education.

Second, specific competencies are needed to manage youth programs and especially youth organizations, and they differ from those needed to do front-line work.

Third, there are multiple paths to competence, but ultimately both front-line and management youth workers need training and experience.

Great Britain's Community and Youth Workers Union is strong, and when I visited in the early 1990s it was knee deep in discussions about revising the competency standards for youth work to make sure they were relevant, achievable without a college education and reflective of experience. (The Advancing Youth Development curriculum adopted this approach.)

There was a range of certificate and degree programs for volunteers, part-time youth workers, full-time youth workers, outreach workers and managers. There were heated debates on college campuses about a movement to insist that all degree students take organizational management courses — a move that many saw as a threat to the legitimacy of front-line work as a long-term career. There were innovative programs to help naturally gifted young inner-city workers get college degrees. Pay scales rewarded competence. Government funds paid for training and a government-linked system for accrediting training and degree programs.

The U.S. has come a long way in a decade. But we're not where we need to be. And we won't get there if we let the calluses versus classrooms debate obscure the goal.

There is no turning back the clock: Youth workers, like everyone else, will need college degrees (in something) to be competitive and earn a decent wage. But they will also need good, relevant training and good, relevant experience.

Read More:

The National Conversation on Youth Development in the 21st Century: Final Report (May 2002). Available online at: http://www.doc.n4h.org/National_Conversation/National_Conversation/nationalreport.pdf. (44-page PDF)

This report, produced by the National 4-H Council, recommends a greater focus on mentoring, education, diversity, civic engagement and improved coordination between youth development programs.

BEST Impact Study. Available online at: <http://nti.aed.org/ImpactStudy.html>.

What impact can a local system of youth worker professional development have on a youth-serving sector? The Academy for Educational Development's (AED) School and Community Services conducted a two-year national study to answer this question by evaluating the influence of the BEST (Building Exemplary Systems for Training Youth Workers) Initiative on youth workers, youth-serving organizations, and their communities in the participating BEST sites.

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