CHAPTER 5

BUILDING PATHWAYS FROM RESEARCH TO PRACTICE

Preparing Youth Development Professionals through a Blended Online Master’s Degree Program

Barry A. Garst, Edmond P. Bowers, William Quinn, and Ryan J. Gagnon
Clemson University

With over 6.5 million youth nationwide participating in some type of out-of-school time (OST) programming, youth work has a tremendous scope (Foundations, Inc. & The After-School Corporation, Inc., 2010). Expansion and recognition of the emerging profession of youth development depends on accumulated evidence that justifies its effectiveness for promoting positive youth well-being (Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak, & Hawkins, 2004). Youth development professionals need a range of knowledge, attitudes, skills, and aspirations to develop the necessary readiness for providing high-quality youth work (Larson & Walker, 2010), and increasing attention has been devoted to properly preparing frontline youth workers.
as well as youth development leaders and professionals (Borden, Craig, & Villarrual, 2004; Garst, Baughman & Franz, 2014; Wisman, 2011; Yohalem, Pittman, & Moore, 2006).

One of the pathways to build a vibrant youth development professional workforce with greater competencies and influence is by establishing university-based degree programs in this discipline (Borden et al., 2004). A diverse set of university-based youth development degree programs have emerged over the past decade, including traditional, blended, and online programs (Allen & Seaman, 2013). Although there has been significant growth in the number of online programs, we know little about the effectiveness of online instruction for achieving educational objectives (Berjerano, 2008).

The work reported in this chapter sought to understand learning outcomes associated with Clemson University’s online Master of Science degree program in youth development leadership (YDL). Specifically, we discuss program design, structure, and outcomes based on an assessment of YDL graduates who completed the program between 2007 and 2014. We address (1) strengths and limitations of the degree program format, (2) youth development competencies that YDL graduates learned in the program, (3) courses and skills applied to youth development practice, and (4) professional impacts that YDL graduates associate with their degree.

**REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

**Theoretical Basis of Youth Work**

In the U.S., there are thousands of community-based programs that seek to promote positive outcomes and in young people (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003; Vandell, Larson, Mahoney, & Watts, 2015) and numerous U.S. organizations that seek to provide such programs, including 4-H, Boys & Girls Clubs, Big Brothers/Big Sisters, Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, YMCA, and Girls Inc. These efforts are often derived from theories and philosophies of the positive youth development (PYD) perspective (Lerner et al., 2013). PYD scholars posit that all young people have strengths and their contexts can provide resources to them (called “developmental assets”) (Benson, Scales, & Syvertsen, 2011). When the strengths of youth are aligned with the resources in their contexts, PYD is promoted. OST programs constitute one of the key contexts for developmental assets that promote PYD. Given the importance of OST activity participation as a developmental asset in promoting positive outcomes in youth (Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Mahoney, Larson, & Eccles, 2005; Vandell et al., 2015),
it is important to understand what characteristics of OST programs facilitate positive outcomes.

**Educational Strategies and Pathways for Youth Workers**

Key to providing high-quality OST programs that promote PYD are skilled, dedicated, and competent youth workers (Yohalem et al., 2006). In turn, a key factor in producing “high-performing” youth workers is professional development (i.e., training and education) to build staff knowledge and competence in such areas as child and adolescent development, programming, and evaluation (Astroth, Garza, & Taylor, 2004; Johnson, Rothstein, & Gajdosik, 2004). However, youth workers often receive little training and report a lack of formal education in relevant content areas (Fusco, 2003; National Afterschool Association, 2006). To address this gap, scholars and leaders in the field of youth development have called for a more formal level of professionalism that requires some educational qualifications (Mahoney & Warner, 2014).

One strategy for addressing the educational and training needs of youth workers has been the development of core competency models and then mapping educational opportunities to specific competency areas. Core competencies are clearly identified knowledge and skills that “articulate what it is that adults working with children and youth need to know in order to deliver high quality, developmental programming” (Starr, Yohalem, & Gannett, 2009, p. 3). Youth work competencies establish standards of practice that serve as a basis for career development systems. The National Afterschool Association (2011) developed a set of core knowledge and competencies for afterschool and youth development professionals, and these competencies outline knowledge and skills youth workers need to provide high-quality afterschool and youth development programming and support the learning and development of children and youth. These competencies include child and youth growth and development; learning environment and curriculum; child/youth observation and assessment; interactions with children and youth; youth engagement; cultural competency and responsiveness; family, school, and community relationships; safety and wellness; program planning and development; and professional development and leadership. Competency models such as this have been used to design professional development opportunities for youth workers (Garst, Hunning, Jamison, Hairston, & Meadows, 2007; Stone & Rennekamp, 2004; Vance, 2010). Little research has examined whether professional development and education are related to growth in these youth development-related competencies. In addition, some argue
that practical fieldwork and experience-based training is a more suitable path to professionalization of the youth development workforce (Astroth et al., 2004; Wisman, 2011). Several university–community collaborations have developed to link these paradigms (e.g., Mahoney & Warner, 2014).

**Institutions of Higher Education (IHE) Degree Programs**

Education and professional development opportunities for youth workers are a patchwork of state, university, and organizational initiatives, and these entities “approach the professionalization of youth work from a variety of angles, sometimes together and sometimes separately” (Wisman, 2011, p. 7). Although a small number of IHE programs supporting the needs of youth development professionals have existed since the 1980s, credit-bearing options have increased in recent years (Foundations, Inc. & The After-School Corporation, Inc., 2010), with credentialing and certificate programs emerging in community colleges.

Assembling relevant academic courses has not always been easy for those interested in becoming youth development professionals. Borden et al. (2004), in an overview of the history and evolution of IHE degree programs, reflected on the challenges associated with compiling the necessary courses to prepare oneself for youth development work. They noted that professionals had to cobble together courses from a myriad of disciplines and that existing degrees were often not specific to youth development work.

A 2010 report about higher education opportunities for OST youth development professionals noted that IHEs were partnering with after-school programs providers to develop certificate programs, OST-focused courses, and OST-based practicums, which would be integrated into existing IHE degree programs. These programs are often interdisciplinary and housed in diverse academic departments (Foundations, Inc. & The After-School Corporation, Inc., 2010). The IHE benefits of serving youth development workers are numerous, including increasing nontraditional student enrollment, building a robust system of skill-building and professional development for OST youth workers, introducing youth workers to a career path linked with a network of related fields, and ultimately improving experiences for youth through the preparation of more highly skilled staff.

**IHE Online and Blended Degree Programs**

Unfortunately, many youth development professionals working in OST settings are often not connected with educational opportunities available through higher education (Foundations, Inc. & The After-School Corporation, Inc., 2010). To address the needs of these working professionals,
many IHE youth development-related degree and certificate programs offer courses scheduled in the evening, on weekends, online, and/or as intensive, compressed courses.

A growing number of web-facilitated, blended/hybrid, and online certificate and youth development degree programs have been designed for individuals whose professional schedules will not allow them to attend traditional in-person classes or who live too far away to do so (Borden et al., 2004). Traditional courses are those where no online technology is used and content is delivered face-to-face either orally or in writing. With web-facilitated courses, 1–29% may be delivered using web-based technology to facilitate what is basically a face-to-face course. Blended or hybrid courses generally blend 30–79% of online instruction with some amount of face-to-face delivery. In addition, blended/hybrid courses incorporate online discussions and often have a reduced number of face-to-face meetings. IHE online courses are defined as courses in which at least 80% of the course content is delivered online (Allen & Seaman, 2013).

Blended courses use more than one modality to maximize student learning outcomes and overcome weaknesses of fully online instruction by using a range of instructional sequencing and delivery strategies to enhance student learning and satisfaction. This is important, as evidence suggests that blended delivery methods have been found to provide “clearer and more learner-centered instructions” (Lim, Morris, & Kupritz, 2006, p. 35) than online delivery methods. Singh and Reed (2001) proposed a typology of blended learning that describes the variety of this form of instruction. The typology includes: (1) offline and online learning; (2) self-paced, live, and collaborative learning; (3) structured and unstructured learning; (4) custom content with off-the-shelf content; (5) work and learning; and (6) ingredients blending synchronous physical formats, synchronous online formats, and self-paced, asynchronous formats. The authors proposed that the benefits of blended instruction include easy access to information, increased student interaction, improved pedagogy, personal presence, and cost effectiveness. With IHE blended courses in mind, we now examine a youth development leadership Master of Science graduate degree program designed by Clemson University using a blended approach to instruction.

Clemson University’s Youth Development Leadership (YDL) Graduate Program

The academic discipline of youth development has been visible and growing for many years at Clemson University. A multidisciplinary faculty, representing education, human development, family science, parks and recreation, sociology, and psychology, built a collaboration to promote the well-being and success of young people. This initiative was intended to strengthen youth-serving organizations by preparing professionals with
leadership skills to reflect the growing movement in PYD. To be leaders of organizations, it was determined that a graduate-level program would be optimal for preparing such professionals.

A conceptual framework for the program was built that included youth development theories, human development, youth program development and assessment, and cultural and ethnic diversity. In addition to content courses to prepare professionals in the field of youth development, additional courses were included with the aim of preparing professionals who would have the competencies to be leaders of youth-serving organizations. Therefore, additional courses included grant-writing, staff and volunteer recruitment and retention, and leadership skills and organizational development. Because the proposed curriculum reflected a graduate-level education, a statistics course was included as a requirement of the degree that would prepare professionals to both interpret and evaluate research pertaining to youth development that would contribute to valid policy and program decisions. The youth development research and evaluation emphasis is an essential part of the development of a discipline or profession. Finally, a master’s project capstone experience was embedded into the curriculum to provide students with an opportunity to conduct an independent research project advised by a faculty advisor. Some examples of independent projects include program evaluations, community youth master plan initiatives, and environmental scans of youth well-being.

Clemson University was an early adopter of distance education technologies and methodologies. The faculty envisioned that such an approach would accommodate current youth-serving professionals who would be considered nontraditional students (e.g., professionals working full or part time while also pursuing an academic degree) and would not be expected to leave a job or uproot their families to move to campus. The rapid evolution of online learning technologies would accommodate such working professionals.

The first cohort of M.S. youth development leadership degree students enrolled in January 2006. A cohort model was used in which all students enrolled would begin the first course together. This model was economically feasible as a way to deliver each course in sequence building one upon another. In addition, this model provided nontraditional students with opportunities to overcome geographical distance to build a professional network of like-minded professionals who could share their experiences and challenges with each other. In the Clemson YDL program, the cohort accepted each year was required to participate in a 3-day on-campus orientation. During this visit, students would meet and get to know their classmates personally, meet the faculty, learn distance education technologies from the computer center staff, and begin the first course, Foundations of Youth Development. In addition, students completed team-building activities in a camp setting that provided shared experiences for the students to build cohesion.
The YDL courses were offered in an accelerated format in which courses were taken consecutively with each course being seven weeks long. A weekly 90-minute synchronous class was required in each course during which the instructor and students were engaged online in real time through the Adobe Connect platform. Instructors supplemented synchronous meetings in some courses with recorded lectures for students to review prior to the weekly meeting. Student teams often made presentations to the class during these synchronous meetings. Whereas each faculty member created a unique structure for a course with varied activities, all instructors used the Blackboard platform to incorporate weekly discussion board questions to encourage class interaction. Instructors assigned scholarly papers to facilitate critical thinking and administered quizzes or exams to assess acquisition of knowledge. Two courses were completed each semester including summer sessions, which allowed students to complete the required 12 courses in six semesters (or two years). Thus, the first YDL cohort graduated in December 2007, and between that time and December 2014, a total of eight student cohorts or 122 students completed a YDL MS degree. While online nontraditional programs such as Clemson University’s YDL graduate program have grown, few have evaluated the impact of their programs in preparing youth development leaders to strengthen youth-serving organizations within communities.

Purpose

In this chapter we examine the results of a 2015 Clemson University assessment of the YDL program. The purpose of this project was to better understand how the program may be linked to the practice of youth development leadership; to identify individual, organizational, and community outcomes associated with the program; and to discover strengths and limitations of the current YDL program model. The following research questions were explored:

1. How satisfied are graduates with the YDL program model and what are the strengths and limitations of that model?
2. How does YDL program completion relate to youth development leadership competencies?
3. What courses and related skills have YDL program graduates learned and applied to the practice of youth development leadership?
4. What professional opportunities do YDL program graduates associate with degree program completion?
METHODS

Data were collected via an online survey from 95 graduates of Clemson’s YDL program based on contact information in an Alumni Relations database. The survey was developed by YDL faculty and informed by the relevant literature based on the study questions. Graduates were recruited via three emails (initial email plus a follow-up email 2 and 4 weeks later) distributed through Clemson Alumni Relations, two Facebook posts to the YDL Facebook page, and direct emails from the YDL program coordinator. Sixty of 95 graduates completed surveys for a response rate of 62% (Shiha & Fan, 2009).

The survey instrument included 47 questions that measured self-reported changes in knowledge, skills, and aspirations. Respondents answered questions about demographics, past and current youth work experience, opportunities associated with YDL degree completion, satisfaction with program characteristics and instructional support, levels of youth development competencies before and after YDL degree completion, skills use of specific skills from YDL degree courses, and challenges associated with YDL degree completion.

RESULTS

Participants

This section details the major findings from the YDL program assessment across the quantitative and qualitative survey data. Survey respondents were primarily female (n = 42, 72.4%). People provided racial identifications as White (n = 36, 62%), African American (n = 17, 29.3%), Hispanic (n = 3, 5.2%), or representing multiple races (n = 2, 3.4%). Respondents’ ages ranged from 25 to 65, with most respondents in the 25–34-year-old category for an average age of 37.56 years (SD = 10.15). A majority of respondents reported an annual household income of $25,001–$50,000 (28.8%). Representation from each cohort group was as follows: 2006—5.1%; 2007—6.8%; 2007—3.4% 2008—8.5%; 2009—13.6%; 2010—6.8%; 2011—18.6%; 2012—28.8%; and 2013—8.5%.

Ratings of YDL Program Components

The first research question was, “How satisfied are graduates with the YDL program model and what are the strengths and limitations of that model?” with a response scale of 1 = Unsatisfied to 5 = Completely Satisfied. Respondents were asked to rate various YDL program components (Table 5.1). The on-campus orientation (4.70, SD = 0.54), the cohort model (4.68,
SD = 0.70), course offerings (4.46, SD = 0.61), use of Adobe Connect (4.53, SD = 0.64), and evening synchronous meetings (4.50, SD = 0.75) were the five highest-rated program components. The next five highest-rated components included self-directed readings (4.46, SD = 0.66), Blackboard platform (4.44, SD = 0.84), master’s project (4.44, SD = 0.82), spring campus visit and research forum (4.33, SD = 0.93), and support services (4.29, SD = 1.03). Group assignments (3.73, SD = 1.12) and prerecorded lectures (3.67, SD = 1.36) were the two lowest-rated program components, yet these ratings were still above the 3.0 (neutral) average for the scale.

### Competencies Developed Through the YDL Program

The second research question was, “How does YDL program completion relate to youth development leadership competencies?” Respondents were asked to rate their level of competence as a result of participation in the YDL program based on the aforementioned ten core competencies (National After-school Association, 2011) used to guide the YDL program curriculum. A retrospective posttest approach was used to allow respondents to reflect on their competence level before starting the program and compare it with their competence level after completing the program on a 1 = poor to 5 = excellent Likert scale. Retrospective approaches are an effective strategy for identifying program outcomes that also reduce the influence of response-shift bias.
Skills Learning Through the YDL Program and Applied to Practice

The third research question was, “What courses and related skills have YDL program graduates learned and applied to the practice of youth development leadership?” Because this study sought to identify courses that were most useful for youth development practice, respondents were asked to rate each YDL course based on skills both learned and applied to their current youth development practice on a 1 = not at all to 4 = a lot Likert scale. Table 5.2 shows the skills and associated courses based on respondents’ ratings. Based on this list, skills that were both learned and practiced by graduates were associated with the following courses: “Creative and Ethical Leadership” (3 skills), “Child and Adolescent Development” (2 skills), “Youth Development Programming” (2 skills), “Youth Development in a Global and Diverse Society” (2 skills), “Foundations of Youth Development” (2 skills), “Management of Staff and Volunteers” (1 skill), “Assessment and Evaluation of Youth Programs” (1 skill), and “Special Topics in Youth Development Leadership” (1 skill). In general, YDL graduates reported that they learned and/or applied each of these skills “some” or “a lot”; however, responses to individual items varied.

Professional Opportunities Associated With YDL Degree Completion

The fourth research question was, “What professional opportunities do YDL program graduates associate with degree program completion?” Respondents identified opportunities that became available to them because of their degree. The three reasons for pursuing a YDL degree identified most often were to pursue a position outside of their current organization (25.4%), for academic advancement toward a higher degree (25.4%), and to advance within their current organization (15.3%). Respondents were then asked, “What opportunities became available to you as a result of completion of the YDL program?” Almost 35% of respondents (33.9%) indicated that they maintained their current position with greater responsibility. Close to 30% (28.8%) received a pay increase or were promoted to a higher...
position (15.3%) by their current employer. Ten respondents (16.9%) left their previous employer for a higher-level position in another organization, and 6.8% received a higher pay at their new position.

### DISCUSSION

The purpose of this chapter was to provide an overview and basic evaluation of a graduate degree program designed for youth development professionals.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Skill</th>
<th>Mean (SD)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Professionalism in youth work</td>
<td>3.72 (.75)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Application of theories and principles of child &amp; adolescent development</td>
<td>3.61 (.77)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recognizing physical, cognitive, and psychosocial processes of development</td>
<td>3.58 (.72)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modeling ethical leadership behaviors and encouraging others to follow</td>
<td>3.55 (.83)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Considering diversity of program participants</td>
<td>3.50 (.72)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural competency skills</td>
<td>3.49 (.88)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Application of the theory of youth development</td>
<td>3.45 (.75)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership methods or approaches</td>
<td>3.39 (.82)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identification of causal factors of stress between staff and volunteers</td>
<td>3.27 (.88)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Application of program evaluation and assessment skills</td>
<td>3.21 (.82)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creating organizational partnerships</td>
<td>3.16 (1.04)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implementing an outcome-based youth program</td>
<td>3.15 (1.07)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluating program results to inform program or organizational improvement</td>
<td>3.12 (.98)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Using strategy to become more innovative or specialized</td>
<td>3.10 (.99)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creating a logic model to guide a youth development program</td>
<td>3.04 (1.00)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Application of research or evaluation skills to organizational programs</td>
<td>2.98 (1.05)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizational collaborations to create innovative or specialized programs</td>
<td>2.88 (1.30)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recruitment of family members to participate in organizational programs</td>
<td>2.79 (1.01)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding statistical tests or methods used in research and/or evaluation</td>
<td>2.75 (.86)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Initiation of grant related activities</td>
<td>2.69 (1.14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaboration with organizations to raise funds</td>
<td>2.69 (1.21)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Development of program offering targeting parents or family members</td>
<td>2.69 (1.07)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improving staff management systems</td>
<td>2.61 (1.11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Using statistical findings in research and/or evaluation</td>
<td>2.59 (1.08)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Establishing volunteer management systems</td>
<td>2.44 (1.17)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaborating with other organizations on a research or evaluation project</td>
<td>2.35 (1.24)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The results suggest that the Clemson YDL program completion is linked to increased youth development leadership competencies in a sample of program graduates that represented cohorts across 8 years of the program from 2006–2014. These findings also address a significant gap in the literature, as the impacts of online or blended youth development degree programs on youth development leadership competency growth have been understudied (Vance, 2010). Not only was growth reported across all youth development core competency areas from pre- to post-program, but participants indicated that completion of the degree program led to new professional opportunities and advantages. In this study, the growth that respondents reported across competencies was based on the core competency model that guided the program curriculum; this finding also speaks to the fidelity of the program, a critical dimension of program quality (Berkel, Mauricio, Schoenfelder, & Sandler, 2011; Gagnon, Franz, Garst, & Bumpus, 2015).

These findings support the broader literature recognizing the importance of academic and professional education to further advance the youth development field (Diem, 2009; Garst et al., 2014; Wisman, 2011). Although Borden et al. (2004) highlighted the work of a consortium of colleges and universities offering online youth development degrees and certificate programs, they did not provide evidence of program impacts. Thus, there is recognition that tying degree programs to youth work competencies is a contemporary issue facing youth work, yet few formal assessments have explicitly identified this link. Becoming professionally prepared through an academic degree program was clearly impactful for respondents in this study as suggested by the finding that a YDL program degree from Clemson was valuable for career advancement and enhancement. Approximately 69% of respondents reported that their degree helped them to advance in their current position, attributing such benefits as greater responsibility, a promotion, or increased pay as an outcome.

The goal of this assessment was to illuminate more than program-relevant outcomes; it was important to understand the knowledge and skills most relevant to youth development leadership and practice. Notable in the findings was the fact that the courses and associated skills identified by respondents as most applicable for their youth development practice reflected a broad swath of the MS degree curriculum, with eight different courses represented in the list of most relevant courses. These findings suggest the broad relevance of Clemson’s YDL program and of a successful model that has been adapted over time. The success of the program can be attributed to both stability and change. The campus orientation, synchronous meetings, cohort model, and course content were stable forces provided with consistent quality.

Also notable are the study findings that the most relevant and applied skills that respondents learned in the YDL program were related to
leadership/professionalism, child and adolescent development, and diversity/cultural competence, skills that have been identified among those central for success in the new global economy (Symonds, Schwartz, & Ferguson, 2011). Application of these skills within youth development leadership settings may also address some of the challenges of youth work identified by Larson and Walker (2010) such as maintaining consistency and professionalism in leaders’ interactions with youth, reconciling organizational systems and youth development, accommodating different leadership styles and philosophies among front-line staff, and mediating youth’s relationships with community members and institutions.

The fact that some course-related skills, such as those associated with collaboration, staff/volunteer management, and research/evaluation, were identified as less applicable to respondents’ youth work may reflect the nature of respondents’ positions (i.e., they work in positions in which these skills are not central to their work). It may also suggest that some respondents’ youth-serving organizations place lesser value on those skills. For example, the need for youth-serving organizations to pay greater attention to program evaluation (Bialeschki & Conn, 2011; Rennekamp & Arnold, 2009) and to build their overall capacity for program evaluation has been noted in the literature (Arnold, 2006; Taylor-Powell & Boyd, 2008). Respondents may also have identified some skills as less applicable to their youth work because the skills addressed in specific YDL courses may have been less useful relative to the demands of current youth development practice.

Contemporary literature about IHE online blended courses suggests that group or individual projects, learning and discussion activities, and class assignments are instructional activities that students found most helpful (Lim et al., 2006). Although the program components identified as most valuable in this study differed from those identified by Lim and his colleagues, the importance of the social dimensions of IHE online blended courses appears to be consistent. In this study, three out of the five program components rated most favorably by respondents (on-campus orientation, cohort model, and evening synchronous meetings) involve student and faculty interaction and communication. It appears that, although nontraditional students may want the flexibility of an online degree they can complete while maintaining their professional and family responsibilities, they also value rich contact with faculty and peers. This finding supports the perspective of Lim et al. (2006), who suggested that “an important consideration in designing online or blended instruction is to include instructional activities and collaboration opportunities that enhance the learners’ emotional engagement with peers and instructors” (p. 35). This study provide additional support for the importance of interactive applications as a part of IHE online degree programs.
The blended model highlighted in this chapter, in which students completed a majority of their coursework through a self-directed online format but who also had the opportunity for meaningful interaction with peers and adults (through both on-campus visits as well as weekly synchronous meetings during each course), appears to be a particularly strong approach. As working professionals engaged in youth work, students are able to learn from each other as well as from faculty. Through their degree program cohort, these students extend their professional network and gain an experienced peer group through which they can share tips and brainstorm solutions to youth work challenges.

A few study limitations need to be acknowledged. Of particular note is that this work is based entirely on self-reported data. This decision was deliberate, given that the purpose was to assess youth workers’ perceptions, attitudes, and thoughts about their experience in the Clemson YDL program, and given the lack of prospective and concurrent data on this sample. The retrospective posttest approach, although methodologically sound for addressing concerns associated with response-shift bias, may not have entirely controlled for threats to validity (Campbell & Stanley, 1963) such as social desirability on the part of the respondents as well as changes that the respondents may have experienced due to history and/or maturation effects that could result in inaccurate recall of past behaviors or thoughts. This approach may have also introduced measurement errors that were due to reporter bias, or different points of reference. For example, “a little” may mean to a respondent that he applied a skill several times a year in his work, whereas to another respondent, applying that skill once connotes “a little.”

Finally, as these responses are the sole source of data for this study, results could be biased due to common method variance. In future work, prospective data collection procedures through other methods or multiple informants such as supervisor ratings or researcher observations could complement the professionals’ self-reports.

The lack of a pre-post design is understandable in this case, as youth development degree programs are in an incubation state and it may be premature to expect more rigorous designs as the model is still unfolding. Still, some of the findings in this study may have been different through the lens of a different design that would have allowed for better measurement of changes over time. Although this study’s response rate of 62% was quite good, a self-selection bias may also have influenced the study results as the respondents may represent some unique characteristic (e.g., most empowered in their jobs by the degree; more academically inclined) when compared with nonrespondents. Therefore, generalizations should not be made to the entire population of youth workers in the U.S., or to a more diverse sample of youth-serving professionals.
CONCLUSIONS

Online degree programs can make important contributions toward preparing youth development professionals, yet many youth workers are unfamiliar with the availability of these programs. Promoting the educational and professional benefits of IHE online degree programs is an important step for engaging middle- and upper-level youth work administrators who aim to become better prepared to develop high-quality programs and more poised to guide high-functioning organizations. When graduates of IHE youth development degree programs complete their academic programs, we expect them to return to their organizations and communities better prepared to strengthen the organizations with which they are affiliated and contribute to healthier youth, families, and communities. The study described in this chapter provided a clearer, and much needed, understanding of how IHE youth development degree programs may equip youth workers to become successful youth development leaders and, hence, promote stronger youth-serving organizations. This study may benefit higher education leadership by pointing to ways to develop online academic opportunities for working professionals in the field of youth development. In particular, high student satisfaction can be reached with on-campus visits, a cohort model, and weekly synchronous meetings. However, there is more to be learned about the relationship between degree completion (and associated competency development) and organizational and community change. Understanding the organizational and community-level impacts made by program graduates will provide evidence needed to better promote these programs.

REFERENCES


BECOMING A YOUTH WORKER IN A UNIVERSITY-BASED COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

Laurie Ross
Clark University

Learning is not just a matter of accumulating knowledge. Learning is ontological in the sense that learners become different kinds of people as they learn.
—Wortham & Rhodes, 2014, p. 1247

Expert youth workers appear to have a magical ability to read young people’s minds and understand their motivations and triggers. When confronted with a difficult or potentially harmful situation, these youth workers are able to “diagnose” what is happening and choose effective responses more times than not. Unlike novices who can get stuck in figuring out what to do and sidetracked by a desire to be liked by the youth, experts steadfastly keep the young person’s interests and well-being at the center of their analysis and actions. How does one become such a youth worker? Are some people just born for this work? Is time on the job what it takes to eventually “get it”? Is there a role for higher education to prepare youth workers to resolve complex dilemmas of practice?
As part of a multiyear collaborative action research project, the author and groups of youth workers enrolled in her youth work course at a small, liberal arts university in the northeast region of the United States collected and analyzed hundreds of youth worker dilemma stories. Two related patterns have emerged out of the dilemma analysis with important implications for the professional education of youth workers. One, early experiences in informal settings such as families, neighborhood-based peer groups, and youth programs are important sites where particular forms of youth worker knowledge and expertise begin to develop (Ross, 2013). Lave and Wenger (1991) describe this type of learning as a situated, social process in which participation and a movement from periphery to center in a “community of practice” fosters identity development in which one learns the language, actions, and practices that constitute the community. Two, the analysis of dilemma stories shows that reflection-on-action is critical for youth workers to make meaning of their life experiences in ways that contribute to and strengthen their practice (Emslie, 2009; Schön, 1990).

ACTIVATING PERSONAL KNOWLEDGE

In this chapter, three youth worker dilemma stories are shared. The stories reveal the importance of personal knowledge in resolving complex youth development dilemmas, how reflection activates personal knowledge, and the design features of a university-based community of practice that supports the cultivation of the knowledge, skills, and disposition needed for transformative youth work.

Reflection Activates Personal Knowledge

Reflection is a process in which one critically examines prior experience in order to improve practice (Wood, Westwood, & Thompson, 2015). Reflecting on practice allows youth workers to become more aware of patterns in youth behaviors and intentional about their responses to daily challenges. While reflection is generally thought of as a technique used during experiential learning and/or on the job, reflecting on one’s nonprofessional life experiences is critical in transforming rich personal knowledge into practical, actionable youth worker expertise.

Personal knowledge is knowledge “about oneself as a person and in relationship with others” (Higgs, Titchen, & Neville, 2001, p. 5). Personal knowledge is not simply a matter of having had a collection of life experiences that may be similar to the youth’s. Rather, youth workers with personal knowledge have made meaning of their own life story (Hildreth &
VeLure Roholt, 2013; Krueger, 1997), have engaged in self-reflection to understand their own biases and preconceived notions about young people (Cusick, 2001), and have synthesized social learning from accumulated life experiences with formal education. Fusco (2012) has stated that the use of self in youth work can be defined as “a nexus of interaction and activity that occurs intentionally, purposefully, and relationally in order to bring about human change” (p. 34) and involves “observing, listening, questioning, communicating, reflecting, acknowledging, accepting, empathy and self-awareness” (p. 37). It is in knowing oneself that one can “know” and “be” with the young people (Fusco, 2012; Krueger, 1997; Spence, 2008).

**Design Features that Activate Personal Knowledge in a Classroom Community of Practice**

Lave and Wenger (1991) argue that learning is not the acquisition of knowledge by individuals so much as a process of social participation and a movement from periphery to center in a community of practice. It may seem contradictory for a university classroom to function as a community of practice; however, in the youth worker program described below, two design principles have allowed novices to learn from experienced youth workers’ situated knowledge and for experienced youth workers’ learning to deepen through reflection (Ross, 2012).

First, the classroom-based community of practice needs to have experienced youth workers participating alongside traditional college students. Aside from years of experience, youth workers tend to bring gender, age, and racial diversity to the community of practice. While the need for youth workers’ participation may be self-evident, it is worth emphasizing particularly because there can be financial and academic history barriers to youth workers entering a university setting (Ross, 2013).

The second design feature is the incorporation of the ecological dilemma resolution (EDR) model (Ross, Capra, Carpenter, Hubbell, & Walker, 2016). The EDR is a dilemma-based pedagogy that helps students (1) activate their personal knowledge; (2) develop patterns of thought needed to conduct comprehensive, yet rapid analysis of dilemma situations; and (3) recognize and navigate the ecological complexity of youth work dilemmas. The EDR centers a youth work curriculum on youth worker dilemma stories in the form of case studies. Case studies have been used in other fields to make tacit knowledge explicit, sharable, and actionable (Cianciolo, Matthew, Sternberg & Wagner, 2006; Curry, Schneider-Munoz, Eckles, & Stuart, 2011; Walker & Walker, 2011). Real-world situations trigger learning and cases simulate reality in a way that forces students to exercise judgment, consider multiple