Core Competencies for Youth Service Professionals: Guiding Youth Toward Employment

The challenges facing youth who are disconnected from employment and education systems are expansive. According to estimates by the Center for Labor Market Studies (CLMS) at Northeastern University, approximately 4.8 million youth between the ages of 16-24 were out of school and out of work in 2000 and that number rose to 5.6 million in 2003 (Sum, Khatiwada, Palma, & Peron, 2004). Recent studies by CLMS indicate that employment prospects for youth, ages 16-19, have decreased dramatically since 2000. Between 2000 and 2008, the employment to population ratio of this age group declined by 14.2 percent; while 45.2 percent of teens found work in 2000, only 31 percent were employed in 2008 (Sum, McLaughlin, Palma, Motroni, & Khatiwada, 2008).

On the education front, a 2011 report on graduation rates by the Editorial Projects in Education Research Center indicates the national graduation rate for the Class of 2008 was 71.7 percent, while nearly 30 percent of all public high school students failed to graduate. This report also highlights that racial gaps exist in these graduation rates, with students from minority groups (American Indian, Hispanic, and African American) having little more than a fifty-fifty chance of earning a high school diploma (Editorial Projects in Education

Research Center, 2011). Young people who leave high school without a diploma or GED find it especially challenging to obtain employment. In 2008, only 45 percent of youth, ages 16-24, without a high school diploma or GED, were employed at all (including part-time jobs) compared to 67 percent of high school completers and 78 percent of those with some college experience (Sum et al., 2008).

This InfoBrief identifies the benefits to the workforce development system, youth, and the community gained through the professional development of youth service professionals. The brief includes a five-step plan for organizations interested in supporting the professional development of youth service professionals.

In today's labor market, without the higher level of skills demanded by employers, opportunities for employment at a living wage and ultimately self-sufficiency are dismal for young people. It is important for the U.S. workforce development system to strengthen its capacity to provide effective training and preparation for young people, in particular those who do not graduate from high school, to enable them to enter and succeed in the labor market. In order to assist the youth behind these statistics, individuals in the programs serving them must be armed with particular knowledge, skills, and abilities to serve all youth, including youth with disabilities.

Youth service professionals, including intake workers, case managers, job developers, teachers, transition coordinators, counselors, youth development group leaders, and independent living specialists, are often

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the first contact or "face" of the workforce development system. They play an important role in connecting all youth to workforce preparation, education, training opportunities, and employment support services. Research has shown the importance of caring adults in youth's lives and interactions with staff have been cited repeatedly as the reason that youth stay in or leave a program (Bouffard & Little, 2004; Eccles & Gootman, 2002; McLaughlin, 2000; Rosenthal & Vandell, 1996; Smith & Akiva, 2008; Tolman, Pittman, Yohalem, Thomases, & Trammel, 2002). Therefore, the ability of youth service professionals to engage and retain youth is a key piece of the workforce development system's ability to prepare young people for adulthood and the world of work.

At this time there is little professional development support for front line workers to effectively serve the most vulnerable youth in the country. The "workforce development system" includes all national, state, and local level organizations that plan and allocate resources (both public and private), provide administrative oversight, and operate programs in order to assist individuals and employers in obtaining education, training, job placement, and job recruitment. The types of organizations and array of settings involved in workforce development are quite varied, including One-Stop Centers and youth development programs, vocational rehabilitation programs, high schools, colleges, after-school programs, and job training programs.

In order to build and maintain an effective workforce development system, it is essential to establish an effective professional development training system for the youth service professionals who are responsible for shaping the future workers and leaders of this nation's economy. We know that having access to professional development training matters. When it occurs, there is a link to increased job satisfaction and retention, more youth involvement, better practice, and improved youth outcomes (Bouffard & Little, 2004; NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 2001; Norris, 2001). In fact, new research from the Next Generation Youth Work Coalition (Next Gen) demonstrates how professional development for individuals who work with youth leads to more effective programming for youth, which ultimately leads to improved youth outcomes such as more community involvement, less risky behaviors, improved academic scores, and better job retention (Next Generation Youth Work Coalition, 2010). These outcomes are not only good for youth and programs; they are good for the entire community.

Professional development of staff is not only important for youth development; it is also a smart financial investment for organizations and funders. Advertising for, selecting, and training a new employee can cost an organization three to six months of productivity and 29 to 40 percent of a position's salary (Fitz-Enz, 2009). This does not even take into account the burden on other staff in covering the missing staff person's responsibilities when a program is short-staffed. Finally, funding spent on computers, curriculum, and program space is wasted if an effective youth worker is not there

to connect youth to these resources. Just as a house is not a home, a building and supplies alone do not constitute a program. Skilled professionals are necessary to make the most of any program dollars invested. Research has shown that the professional development of staff leads to better practice with youth, improves program quality, and increases the positive outcomes of youth (Next Generation Youth Work Coalition, 2010; Center for School and Community Services, Academy for Educational Development, 2002; Hall & Cassidy, 2002; Westat & Policy Studies Associates, 2001).

Identifying Knowledge, Skills, & Abilities Across Systems

Serving youth effectively calls for both general and specialized knowledge. Certain knowledge, skills, and abilities are necessary. Youth service professionals must keep pace with constant changes in the labor market as the nation's economy shifts and new technologies evolve, as well as with the demands of more rigorous academic standards and the evolving needs and culture of today's youth. Therefore the range of necessary competencies must include knowledge drawn from the fields of education, disability, workforce development, and youth development.

In addition, as the U.S. Census estimated in 2006 that up to one in six youth have a disability (some hidden or undiagnosed), it is important for youth service professionals to be prepared to work effectively with all youth. This is especially important as programs are increasingly emphasizing serving "the neediest youth" in response to the White House Task Force for Disadvantaged Youth Final Report, the Workforce Investment Act Reauthorization, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act Reauthorization, and recent research findings (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2003; U.S. Department of Labor, 2005; U.S. Department of Education, 2010; National High School Center, 2007b; Swanson, 2004). There is considerable overlap between these targeted populations and youth with disabilities. *See shaded box.*

OVERLAP AMONG DISADVANTAGED POPULATIONS

- 23-47% of youth in foster care attend special education classes (National Working Group on Foster Care and Education, 2006).

- 35% of high school dropouts have learning disabilities and 61% have emotional or behavioral disorders (U.S. Department of Education, 2006).

- The dropout rate for students with emotional/behavioral disabilities is approximately twice that of general education students (Cobb, Sample, Alwell, & Johns, 2005).

- Up to 75% of youth in the juvenile justice system have some type of disability (National Center for Mental Health and Juvenile Justice, 2005; Quinn, Rutherford, Leone, Osher, & Poirier, 2005).

Therefore, success in today's workforce development system requires that all staff: have some familiarity with the field of disability; have knowledge of adolescent development; follow appropriate youth employment and disabilities laws; communicate with, motivate, engage, accurately assess, and place youth; connect to employers, communities, and families; and complete all the paperwork required in their jobs. Youth service professionals with the necessary competencies can provide all youth with a wider variety of opportunities, resources, and services to best reach their potential and make a positive transition to adulthood and the world of work. Programs and organizations can be more effective when youth service professionals are equipped with the critical knowledge, skills, and abilities to do their jobs.

As connecting youth to the workforce development system requires a mix of competencies from the youth development, education, disability, and workforce development fields, no one system can (or should) do it all. Cross-system collaboration is the key to providing youth with all the opportunities, supports, and services they need to successfully transition from adolescence to adulthood and the world of work. In addition and as was demonstrated by the system overlap statistics on the previous page, as so many of the "neediest" youth are engaged in several systems at once, cross-system collaboration makes financial and administrative sense.

As part of the Youth Service Professionals' Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities (YSP/KSA) Initiative, the National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth (NCWD/Youth) looked at what youth service professionals from across these three fields need to know to work effectively together on behalf of youth. The "YSP/KSAs" are the knowledge, skills, and abilities that youth service professionals need to work successfully with all youth in the workforce development arena. The YSP/KSAs are organized into ten competency areas which were compiled from a review of over 70 initiatives from the fields of youth development, workforce development, education, and disabilities. All the initiatives reviewed identify competencies, train professionals, and/or provide certification. The initial draft list of competencies was validated by a national group of youth professionals, program managers, and stakeholders from the field through focus groups, conference calls, meetings, and an online feedback relating to relevancy, proficiency, and available training. This validation process confirmed the YSP/KSAs relevancy to the daily activities of youth workforce development programs.

Once the initial list of competencies was validated, online feedback was obtained from professionals, managers, and administrators regarding the relevancy, proficiency, and level of training for each area to begin to identify training priorities for youth service professionals. This survey found communication with youth, connection to resources, and assessment/individualized planning were the three competency areas ranked most relevant to the work of youth service professionals. In addition, the feedback revealed that a significant gap existed regarding the relevance of the "relationships with employers and between employer and employee" competency area and the amount of training currently being offered.

The feedback further revealed that professionals were receiving a significant amount of training in the administrative competency area, and most were receiving at least some training in the KSAs. This suggests that some system for professional development is already in place in most organizations and may just need to be supported or expanded to ensure that all youth have access to youth service professionals with the required KSAs needed to meet their needs. *For a full list of the 10 competency areas, please see the table on page 9.*

With this in mind, NCWD/Youth designed and field tested eight KSA training modules with the intention of supporting professionals who provide direct service to young people, ages 14-25. Each interactive training module includes objectives from one or more competency areas, experiential activities, and resource-rich handouts. Part of NCWD/Youth's strategy for building and growing the youth service profession

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includes building a cadre of trainers to deliver the training content. In August 2009, a select group of trainers from the youth development, disability, and workforce development fields were invited to participate in a Training of Trainers three-day workshop in Washington, DC. The modules offer new techniques, opportunities for group discussion, and real-life connections to the daily work of youth service professionals. The latest report from Next Gen supports this kind of model, concluding the most successful professional development strategies for youth workers involve direct skill enhancement and ongoing coaching aligned with program assessments (Next Generation Youth Work Coalition, 2010). NCWD/Youth and NYEC, with endorsement from the National Association of Workforce Development Professionals (NAWDP), will continue to offer the training and update the module content to support youth service professionals in their mastery of KSAs.

The Role of Organizations and Systems in Professional Development

Professional development within a field is often driven by a combination of professional need, industry demand, training availability, and government regulation. Professional development in the fields of youth and workforce development is beginning to take hold and is being driven by similar forces. As demonstrated by the validation process for the KSAs, most youth service professionals want to access professional development, network with other professionals, and strengthen their skills. The series of KSA focus groups, conference calls, and stakeholder meetings found widespread support for the KSAs as well as for a system of youth service professional training and certification. Local organizations, such as the San Diego Workforce Partnership (SDWP), the Jefferson County Workforce Center in Colorado (JCWC), and the Oregon Youth Conservation Corps (OYCC), have begun to recognize the need for those working with youth to develop certain skills by setting aside funding, convening regional trainings, and promoting professional development.

National organizations within the youth and workforce development fields, such as the National Collaboration for Youth, the Next Generation Youth Work Coalition (Next Gen), and the National Association of Workforce Development Professionals, have also recognized the need for specific knowledge, skills, and abilities to work with youth and have developed lists of competencies, trainings, and certifications to meet these needs. On the federal level, the Workforce Investment Act recognized the need for professional development by authorizing the use of federal funding for professional development and a June 2011 training and employment guidance letter from the U.S. Department of Labor highlighted "enhancing staff capacity to serve youth with disabilities" as the leading strategy for improving services. Lacking, however, is a coherent system and the consistent support necessary for youth service professionals to access professional development in a meaningful way. It is important for youth-serving organizations and systems to identify the training needs of their youth service professionals, support professional development to meet those needs, and then validate the importance of that professional development.

Programs and organizations can be more effective when youth service professionals are equipped with the critical knowledge, skills, and abilities to do their jobs.

Identifying the Need for Professional Development: The San Diego Workforce Partnership used the *Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities Assessment for Youth Service Professionals* to assess the professional development needs of the staff of each of its providers and to provide a series of trainings for all of its funded programs. Individual staff used the assessment to rate their own proficiency in each KSA area, the amount of training they have received, and the relevancy to their work. SDWP compiled the results across programs and then provided training from the KSA training modules related to the highest areas of need. JCWC includes professional development as a critical piece of each person's job, not just an "add on" that you work in on your own time, if you can.

Supporting and Providing Opportunities for Professional Development: JCWC schedules time for professional development, just like they do for other job "duties", including cross-training staff to provide coverage while employees attend trainings and workshops so they do not have the burden of uncovered shifts or back-logged work while they are away. OYCC believes it "makes funders happy to have professional, well-qualified, and trained staff." OYCC uses funding from the 15% governor's reserve in the Workforce Investment Act to pay for training and crew's wages while training. Other organizations use county, state, or federal money that is set aside annually for professional development. OYCC pays school principals for the time that staff is out of school for training to cover the costs of substitute staff.

Validating Professional Development: OYCC, the Goal Academy in Westminster, CO, and several other organizations have connected professional development courses to Continuing Education Units or other college credits which benefit the staff and the organization. JCWC and other organizations also offer performance incentives for completing training, connecting it to certifications, pay raises, and promotions. JCWC, SDWP, OYCC, and others all had systems for tracking professional development and applying it to internal organization recognition, such as performance appraisals, benefits, and leadership opportunities, as well as program outcomes and continued funding. Internal support, funding, tracking, and recognition are all key components to creating meaningful professional development.

Organizations can use the *KSA Professional Development Assessment for Organizations and Systems* to put in place the components necessary to provide real professional development that increases employee satisfaction, program quality, and the organization's outcomes for youth. This ten-question assessment includes steps for identifying staff development needs, focusing organizational development needs, creating professional development plans, developing a training agenda, and creating stakeholder buy-in. To get a jump start, organizations can use the five-step plan on the next page.

A Five-Step Plan for Youth-Serving Organizations and Systems

A common refrain from youth service professionals is that although they would like to attend trainings and other development opportunities, they don't have the time, funds, or organizational support to do so.

Organizations can use the steps below to support the creation of a system of professional development for youth service professionals.

Step 1: Create a Culture of Professional Development. Systems, organizations, directors, managers, and supervisors can include professional development as part of the daily operations, main functions, and expected outcomes of youth service work.

Step 2: Setting Requirements. Some systems and organizations have already started to set training and competency requirements for youth service professionals. The KSAs could be used as a framework for setting these requirements in a particular area or jurisdiction.

Step 3: Maximizing and Blending Funding Streams. Systems and organizations can compare the needs identified within their programs with the professional development resources available (training capacity, as well as funding allowances within current regulations) and create a professional development agenda that maximizes current resources. This may include collaborations between agencies to support common trainings, convening, or knowledge-sharing.
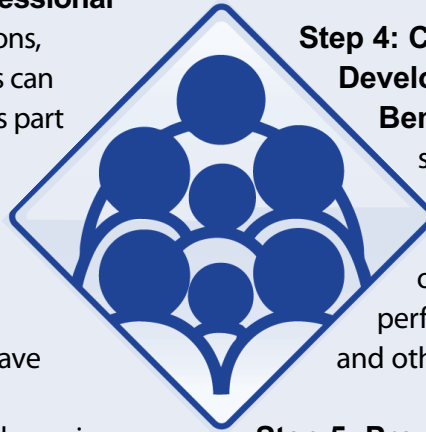
Step 4: Connect Professional Development to Staff Evaluation and Benefits. Professional development should be part of each staff member's job description and connected to leadership opportunities, certifications, performance appraisals, promotions, and other benefits.

Step 5: Providing Opportunities and Funding for Training. Many organizations have included time and staff coverage for off-site professional development in their program planning. In addition, they have provided professional development on-site through staff meetings, retreats, learning lunches, and departmental cross-training. The KSAs could be used as a framework to assess the training needs of staff and create a series of professional development activities.

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With the important role that caring adults play in improving and achieving positive youth outcomes (higher community participation, lower risk taking), the increasing policy focus on and investment in opportunities for our "neediest youth", and the high costs of staff turnover (lower productivity, lost relationships with youth), youth-serving organizations and systems cannot afford NOT to provide professional development for workforce development professionals. Strategies like those listed above can help youth-serving organizations with limited professional development funds [One survey found the average professional development budget of human service organizations was $5000 a year (Test, Flowers, Hewitt, & Solow, 2004)] find new ways of identifying, supporting, and validating the necessary competencies for their most valuable asset – the youth service professionals who work daily to connect young people to workforce development opportunities and transition success.

For more information on cross-system collaboration and implementing professional development for youth service professionals in your local area, please contact the National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth at www.ncwd-youth.info.

TABLE 1:
SYNTHESIS OF COMPETENCIES FOR YOUTH SERVICE PRACTITIONERS

Baseline competencies for all youth service professionals are listed in the first column. These were synthesized from the work of The John J. Heldrich Center, the YDPA Program, the National Association of Workforce Development Professionals (NAWDP), and others. The second column contains the additional competencies for youth service professionals working with youth with disabilities. These competencies are a combination of those suggested by the Council on Rehabilitation Education (CORE), the Center for Mental Health Services, the Association for Persons in Supported Employment (APSE), and others.

KSAs Needed to Serve All Youth Effectively	Additional KSAs Needed to Serve Youth with Disabilities Effectively
Competency Area #1: Knowledge of the Field	
• Knowledge of youth development theory, adolescent and human development • Understanding of youth rights and laws including labor, curfew, and attendance • Knowledge of self as a youth development worker, including professional ethics and boundaries, confidentiality, and professional development needs and opportunities	• Understanding of the values and history of the disability field • Understanding of disability laws including 504, ADA, IDEA, and TWWIIA* • Knowledge of key concepts and processes including IEP, IPE**, transition, due process procedures, parents' rights, informed choice, self determination, universal access, and reasonable accommodations • Understanding of privacy and confidentiality rights as they relate to disability disclosure
Competency Area #2: Communication with Youth	
• Respect and caring for all youth, including the ability to be open minded and nonjudgmental, develop trusting relationships, and maintain awareness of diversity and youth culture • Ability to recognize and address need for intervention (e.g. drug or alcohol abuse, domestic abuse or violence, and depression) • Ability to advocate for, motivate, recruit, and engage youth	• Knowledge of issues and trends affecting youth with disabilities (e.g. low expectations, attitudinal or environmental barriers, need for social integration) • Understanding of disability awareness, sensitivity, and culture • Understanding of how to communicate with youth with various physical, sensory, psychiatric, and cognitive disabilities

* **Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, Americans with Disabilities Act, Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, and Ticket to Work and Work Incentives Improvement Act**

** **Individualized Education Program, Individualized/Individual Plan for Employment**

TABLE 1: (CONTINUED)
SYNTHESIS OF COMPETENCIES FOR YOUTH SERVICE PRACTITIONERS

KSAs Needed to Serve All Youth Effectively	Additional KSAs Needed to Serve Youth with Disabilities Effectively
Competency Area #3: Assessment and Individualized Planning	
• Ability to facilitate person-centered planning, including the ability to assess goals, interests, past experience, learning styles, academic skills, assets, independent living skills, and needs (e.g. transportation, etc.) • Ability to involve youth in their own planning process by helping youth to set realistic goals and action steps, make informed choices, exercise self-determination, and actively participate in own development (includes financial/benefits planning and educational requirements) • Knowledge of various assessment tools and strategies and ability to administer assessments (or make referrals, as needed) • Ability to track progress and change plans as needed	• Ability to ensure appropriate assessment of young peoples' disabilities (in-house or through referrals, as necessary) • Understanding how to use information from assessments and records and recognize implications for education and employment, including any potential need for accommodations and assistive technology • Ability to assess independent/community living skills and needs, including accommodations and supports • Understanding of benefits planning, includes Social Security income and health benefits and their relation to working
Competency Area #4: Relationship to Family and Community	
• Engage/build relationships with family members or other significant persons • Resource mapping/ability to connect youth to community institutions, resources and supportive adults • Ability to engage youth in community service and leadership activities	• Involving families, guardians, and advocates, including connections to disabilities specific resources & groups • Community resources, including disabilities specific resources and organizations

TABLE 1: (CONTINUED)
## SYNTHESIS OF COMPETENCIES FOR YOUTH SERVICE PRACTITIONERS

KSAs Needed to Serve All Youth Effectively	Additional KSAs Needed to Serve Youth with Disabilities Effectively
Competency Area #5: Workforce Preparation	
• Ability to facilitate job readiness skill-building and assess employability strengths/barriers • Ability to teach job search skills, including use of technology and the Internet • Ability to coach youth, assist in job maintenance, and provide follow-up support • Ability to match youth with appropriate jobs and careers, including job analysis and skills standards • Ability to involve employers in preparation process	• Ability to conduct job analysis, matching, customizing, and carving for youth with disabilities, including accommodations, supports, and modifications • Knowledge of support required to place youth in jobs, including what employers need to know about reasonable accommodations, undue burden, assistive technology, funding streams, and tax incentives
Competency Area #6: Career Exploration	
• Knowledge of technology and online search skills • Knowledge of tools and processes for career exploration • Ability to engage employers in career exploration • Knowledge of workplace and labor market trends	• Knowledge of workplace and labor market trends, including options for youth with disabilities such as supported employment, customized employment, or self-employment
Competency Area #7: Relationships with Employers & Between Employer and Employee	
• Ability to develop relationships with employers • Ability to communicate effectively with employers • Ability to mediate/resolve conflicts • Ability to engage employers in program design and delivery • Ability to train employers in how to work with and support young people • Customer service skills	• Ability to identify, recruit, and provide support to employers willing to hire youth with disabilities • Ability to advocate for youth with disabilities with employers including negotiating job design, job customization, and job carving • Ability to train employers and their staff in how to work with and support young people, including providing disability awareness training and information about universal access and design, reasonable accommodations, auxiliary aids and services for youth with disabilities

TABLE 1: (CONTINUED)
SYNTHESIS OF COMPETENCIES FOR YOUTH SERVICE PRACTITIONERS

KSAs Needed to Serve All Youth Effectively	Additional KSAs Needed to Serve Youth with Disabilities Effectively
Competency Area #8: Connection to Resources	
• Ability to identify a range of community resources (people, places, things, & money) that can assist youth • Ability to create relationships and network with other community agencies and potential partners • Ability to market own program as a valuable resource to community and a viable partner • Ability to build collaborative relationships and manage partnerships • Knowledge about different funding streams for youth	• Knowledge of community intermediary organizations to assist with disability-specific supports and resources
Competency Area #9: Program Design and Delivery	
• Knowledge of workforce development system, including technology of workforce development (service management, performance measures, and assessment) • Ability to work with groups, foster teamwork, and develop leadership and followership among youth • Ability to manage programs and budgets • Ability to design programs using best practices (considering age, stage, and cultural appropriateness) • Service management skills, including how to set measurable goals with tangible outcomes • Ability to evaluate and adjust programs based on outcome measurement and data	• Ability to access resources from special education, vocational rehabilitation, community rehabilitation programs, disability income support work incentives, and other disability-specific programs • Knowledge of universal access and design, reasonable accommodation, auxiliary aids, and services
Competency Area #10: Administrative Skills	
• Ability to complete referrals and service summaries using common reporting formats and requirements • Written and verbal communication skills • Time management skills • Strong interpersonal skills/ability to work within a team	• Ability to complete disability-specific referrals and service summaries, such as IEP, transition plan, IPE, and IWP*** ***** Individual Work Plan (under Ticket to Work)**

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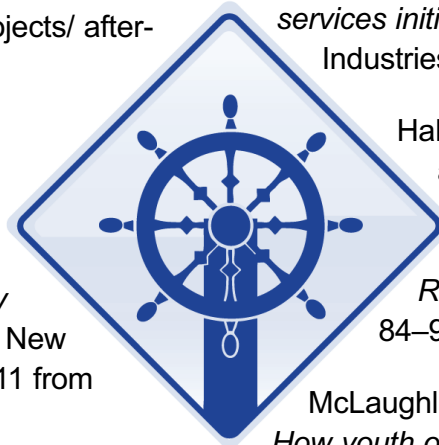
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