The Future of Youth Leadership Development Practice:

A Call to Increase Access and Quality

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DEDICATION

This publication is dedicated to **Dr. Phillip "Coach" Lockhart** (December 19, 1984 – March 4, 2023). Originally from Turrell, Arkansas, Coach was passionate about lifelong learning, earning four academic degrees ranging from educational leadership to reading and was working towards a second doctorate and fourth master's degree at the time of his passing.

Coach served as the School Principal for KIPP Delta College Preparatory School in Helena-West Helena, Arkansas. He also was interim School Principal for KIPP Delta Collegiate High School, received the Phillips County Teacher of the Year Award, and served as a Camp Director for the Common Ground Foundation founded by Dr. Mahalia Hines and her son, Common. Coach also found time to serve as a facilitator for the Aspen Young Leaders Fellowship program in the Arkansas and Mississippi Delta.

Coach was dedicated to investing in the lives of youth and families across the country to ensure that every young person was exposed to opportunity. He served as an inaugural Aspen Index Impact Fellow, but no title can capture the fullness of his commitment to youth and community. He mentored from dusk until dawn giving everything he had to, in his own words:

"This mission is bigger than myself, knowing that if I am able to make a difference today, it could potentially have a dramatic impact on the community my children are able to live in years from now."

We dedicate this publication to Dr. Phillip "Coach" Lockhart and his inspirational belief in the power of community. We hope readers embrace his spirit of generativity and impact in considering how we can collectively act to increase the access to and quality of youth leadership development nationally.

● Introduction

> "Each year we fail to expand the audience for leadership development is a year we decide that we can live with the collateral damage of young people distanced from the very opportunities that would contribute to degree completion, career readiness, civic engagement, and economic security."

- Blake Comeaux*, Juan Zarco*, and Courtney Holder

The opportunity gap for youth leadership development is substantial. Fewer than 16% of youth in the United States access leadership development experiences with demonstrable impact by age 25. This is despite research affirming the positive role leadership development plays in educational completion, workforce readiness, civic engagement, social trust, and cultivating social capital.

That only 16% of youth experience a leadership development program is a function of both access and quality. Access to influential leadership experiences are too few and often too focused on attainment of positional leader roles and basic skill development rather than building *all* young people's leadership talent and potential. Quality is also an issue with more than half of youth leadership

programs demonstrating no meaningful impact on learning or development. This should give every reader pause. Although the percentage of youth participating in high-quality leadership programs increased over the past decade, the rate of increase is shallow and fails to meet demand.

Two critical questions arose through the exploration of these issues:

1. What would need to occur to optimize youth leadership development and increase reach while simultaneously increasing quality?

2. What would it look like to collectively leverage youth leadership development to drive longer-term goals (e.g., educational attainment, workforce readiness, civic engagement, and social trust)?

These two questions guided the inaugural cohort of the Aspen Index Impact Fellowship. Impact Fellows spent more than 25 hours in design-thinking, text-based dialogue, and problem-based learning. Fellows include youth, parents, scholars, and practitioners from across disciplines working across nonprofit, secondary, and postsecondary institutions - all focused on advancing access to and the quality of youth leadership programs.

This publication reflects an urgent agenda focused on the research, interventions, pedagogies, and strategies necessary to accelerate the access to, and quality of, youth leadership programs nationally. The goal of this initiative is to lift youth access to high-quality leadership programs above the 50% threshold in the United States over the next 10 years. This means reaching at least 2.5 million additional youth annually. Although audacious in scope, this goal is achievable through coordinated efforts across sectors to secure the resources, research, and evidence-based practices necessary to expand access and improve quality.

Throughout this publication you will read calls to action from our fellows each collaboratively co-authored by an adult and young person. We hope you hear the voices throughout this report and consider how you can advance this critically important work in your own spheres of influence. This is the start of a movement, and we invite every reader to identify their place in this collective work.
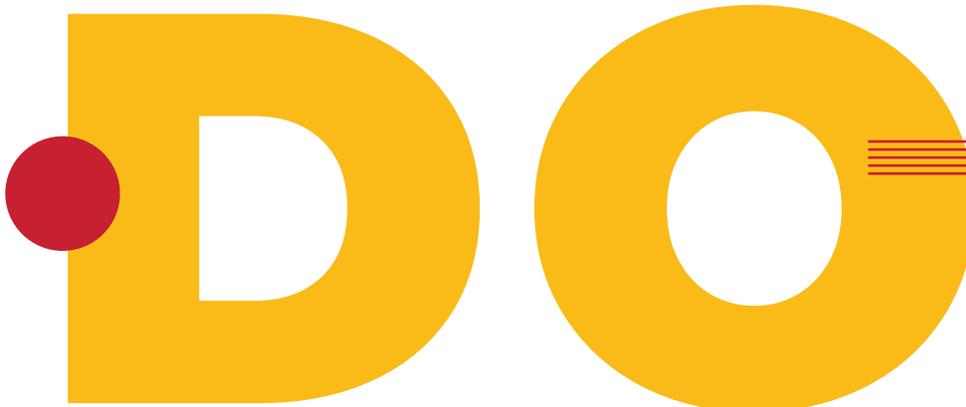
THE MISSED OPPORTUNITY

Leadership learning via academic and co-curricular experiences is a powerful intervention that empowers students to build and apply essential knowledge and skills, access, opportunity, and drive change for themselves and their communities.

BENEFITS OF YOUTH LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

- Learning Outcome Gains (Resilience, Teaming, Empathy, Civic Engagement, Creative-Problem Solving, Curiosity, and more)

- Increases in Social Capital

- Ability to Buffer Stereotype Threat

- Increased Social Cohesion
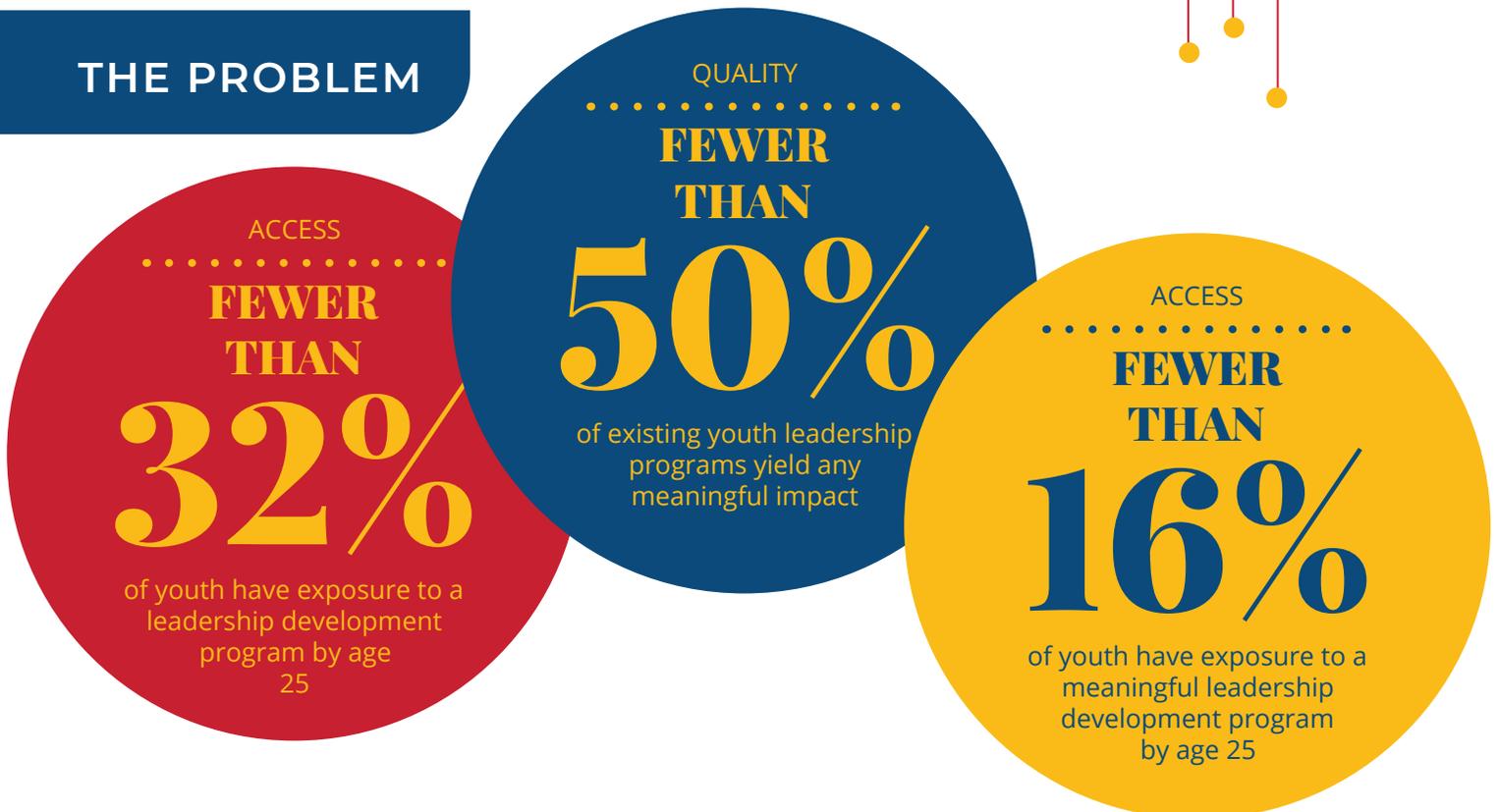
- Educational Persistence

- Workforce Readiness

ACADEMIC CURRICULUM

CO-CURRICULUM

COMMUNITY PROGRAMMING

THE PROBLEM

ACCESS
FEWER THAN
32%
of youth have exposure to a leadership development program by age 25

QUALITY
FEWER THAN
50%
of existing youth leadership programs yield any meaningful impact

ACCESS
FEWER THAN
16%
of youth have exposure to a meaningful leadership development program by age 25

A Call to Increase Access and Quality

OUR IMPACT POTENTIAL

Could we reach

2.5 MILLION ADDITIONAL YOUTH

under age 25 annually with quality leadership development opportunities to lift the national average above the 50% threshold?

Could we partner with

200 EDUCATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

to increase program impact locally while training for sustainability and growth?

What new knowledge, training, and development must occur at the field-level to drive

ACCESS AND QUALITY?

IMPACT STRATEGY

- Reach Beyond Formal Classrooms and Educational Organizations to Increase Access

- Embed Leadership Learning in and Across Academic Curricula to Increase Access

- Address Mental Health and Well-Being by Adopting Holistic Approaches to Leadership Development

- Integrate Career and Leadership Development to Meet the Needs of an Evolving Workforce

- Meet Youth and Families Where They Are by Investing in Place-Based, Community-Driven Leadership Development

- The Time is Now: A Call to Action

Reach Beyond Formal Classrooms and Educational Organizations to Increase Access

Authors: Kayla M. Foster* and Ryan C. Holmes

Background

Scaling access to leadership development requires strategies that reach beyond educational institutions given many youth do not readily find opportunities or social fit in these spaces. Sedlacek (2011) argued that non-cognitive variables that display youth's leadership abilities may not be as evident or valued in the educational context. Additionally, if youth have strained relationships with traditional educational institutions or do not feel accepted by the institutional environment (Ahmadi et al., 2020), they likely have less access to other engagement opportunities housed in the institution (e.g., Future Business Leaders of America, JROTC).

Therefore, scaling access to leadership development is critically important for the creation of strategies to bolster leadership opportunities for youth who can, in turn, better serve the communities where they live and are connected. Leadership development opportunities should be accessible and marketed to every young person, regardless of geographic location, identities, financial capital, or personal access to technology. As community needs are better understood by those in the community, the ability to lead from within is crucial.

Importance

Measure of America estimates that in 2020 in the United States, 13% of young people ages 16 to 24 years old were categorized as opportunity youth, a subset of young people who are not attending school or working (Lewis, 2022). This number is likely higher given the challenges associated with the 2020 census data collection. Within the category of opportunity youth, young people from historically marginalized and excluded groups make up over half of the population with Native American youth representing 23%, Black youth 20%, and Latino youth accounting for 14% (Lewis, 2022). Many opportunity youth also face health concerns, economic insecurity, and housing and food instability (Mendoza, 2022). Opportunity youth risk getting caught in a cycle of lacking the resources necessary for participation in school and the workforce, which in turn leads to greater disconnection.

The primary source for youth leadership development are academic classroom settings and co-curricular experiences delivered via educational institutions. This creates a gap in opportunity youths' abilities to access leadership development programs. Further, outside of opportunity youth there are many young people (e.g., youth with learning differences, minoritized youth, working students, students who are parents) for whom educational systems were not designed, increasing the struggle to navigate and graduate in traditional educational contexts (Lumina Foundation, n.d.; McNair, Albertine, McDonald, Major, & Cooper, 2022). This further limits access to and the impact of leadership development programs for youth and necessitates a shift to delivering leadership programming *both* through educational systems *and* via community and workforce development organizations.

When leadership development opportunities are limited to traditional educational institutions, there is a large portion of untapped promise and potential among young people with ripple effects across generations (e.g., negative impacts on economic health, community vitality, and self-efficacy; Mendoza, 2022; Osofsky et al., 2018). Increased prevalence of leadership development opportunities that transcend traditional educational settings may develop a pathway for youth to re-engage in school and the workforce or avoid disengagement from the beginning. To address youth disconnection, it is necessary to invest in youth leadership development through innovative channels (e.g., community-based organizations, faith-based institutions, sports clubs, summer work programs). The expansion and scaling of leadership development outside of traditional educational institutions also presents an opportunity for the real-world practice of leadership from an earlier age and throughout adolescence and young adulthood.

The racism, biases, and exclusionary policies present within broader society are also present in educational institutions limiting access to leadership development for historically marginalized

communities (Lumina Foundation, n.d.; McNair et al., 2022). In reaching beyond educational institutions and into communities and neighborhoods, more youth are provided with access to leadership development and are able to build ties within their community, enacting change in a real-world setting and developing relationships among community members (Hastings et al., 2011). When youth are treated as the experts of their lived experiences and equipped with the skills, knowledge, and opportunity for leadership development, they increase their sense of belonging, access to mentors, civic engagement, and career prospects (Mendoza, 2022). This presents an opportunity for youth to increase their social capital and in turn their social mobility and potential for influencing change (Hastings et al., 2011; Soria & Cole, 2023). By intentionally reaching beyond classrooms and educational institutions, organizations have the opportunity to adopt the narrative that all youth, regardless of their backgrounds, have the capacity to be impactful leaders and change agents.

Recommendations for Action

#1: Identify community spaces that can be positively influenced by problem-based and problem-posing pedagogies of leadership development.

This recommendation requires innovative social investment strategies that incentivize cross-sector partnerships to build pathways for *all* youth to engage in leadership development.

Community spaces include: community agencies, religious congregations, civic engagement organizations, public libraries, local government, recreation centers, chambers of commerce, museum programs, and online engagement platforms. The goal is to encourage leadership education to be diffused throughout an ecosystem so the likelihood of youth access and impact increases exponentially. Community-based leadership programs often thrive when they center problem-based and problem-posing learning as core pedagogies to ensure that all participants have ownership and authority in the space rather than a hierarchical, authority-driven approach.

#2: Identify gaps and challenges to youth access to leadership development opportunities.

Youth understand better than anyone the obstacles and barriers they face in accessing high-quality leadership development opportunities. Barriers most often come in the form of constraints on time and financial resources, competing responsibilities with work, family, and other commitments, and the toll on emotional well-being that often accompanies leadership learning and enactment (Dugan, Randolph, Hightower, & Rossetti, 2020). However, to what extent are these challenges understood by adults? Leadership educators must work with youth and families to understand and mitigate the unique pressures that limit access to leadership development. Establishing an opportunity ecosystem is crucial for this.

Opportunity ecosystems represent a documented and actionable set of strategies *"for accelerating educational and economic mobility constructed by constituents of a system for constituents of a system. The elements that comprise an opportunity ecosystem draw on both community assets and strategies for mitigating constraints on potential... Creating an opportunity ecosystem is not just about the transfer of economic capital: it involves streamlining pathways to success"* (Dugan et al., 2020, pp. 25-26).

#3: Evaluate the effectiveness of leadership development opportunities as determined by the community.

"Shifting the narrative from local people and communities as the beneficiaries and recipients of development efforts, to understanding their critical role and inherent ability to drive and own development efforts in their own context becomes paramount" (People First Community, n.d.). This requires that the outcomes set for a program and approach for evaluating all aspects of leadership program design, content, delivery, and impact *through* community co-created lenses. Does the community agree on the issues to be addressed? Has the community come to at least a loose understanding of what a successful program looks like? If so, what are measurable outcomes *for the community* that would demonstrate impact?

Case Example

The Center for Justice Innovation is a national non-profit organization that works with communities and justice systems to advance equity, increase safety, and help individuals and communities thrive. The Queens Community Justice Center is an operating site that serves as a hub of community-based and court-based programming. The unifying goals of this work are to provide off-ramps from the justice system, reduce recidivism, and help people lead successful lives. The Justice Center runs a diverse portfolio of programs for youth and families, including a youth leadership development program called Youth Impact. The Youth Impact model is anchored in the belief that those closest to problems are most able to lead, develop meaningful solutions, and engage their peers to act. As such, the program develops young people, many of whom are directly and indirectly affected by the criminal legal system, to step into roles as transformative leaders.

Through a year-long, paid internship, young people in Queens learn about advocacy and develop a community impact project to create change. The young people get to know their community and peers by discussing various issues within the community. They then take time to research the issues and meet with a wide array of stakeholders to find out how they think youth can help bring about the needed change. Through this iterative and community participatory process, the youth are able to define and narrow the problem and devise an action plan for creating change. Examples include a community benefit project teaching people how to grow food and an informational campaign on the impacts of social media and mental health. Throughout this process, young people develop as leaders through hard conversations about leadership, advocacy, impact, and movement work. The Youth Impact program reaches beyond traditional educational institutions out into the community to activate young people, as transformative leaders and change agents.

The Youth Impact program is offered out of several of the Center for Justice Innovation's sites in New York (Brooklyn, the Bronx, Staten Island, and Queens) and New Jersey (Newark).

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Embed Leadership Learning in and Across Academic Curricula to Increase Access

Authors: Bubuney Havi* and Ramsey G. Jabaji

Background

If our communities are successful in confronting the world's wicked problems, grand challenges, and the existential crises, leadership will need to be exercised at all layers, levels, places, and spaces. Long gone are the days where leadership learning is reserved for a select few – the problems faced today require leadership to be exercised everywhere and by all through both individual and collective efforts (Dugan, Turman, & Torrez, 2015; People First Community, n.d.). Leadership learning cannot remain optional or a hopeful byproduct of education and work experience. Rather, leadership development is precisely what is required to fix and heal our communities and address the grand challenges of our time.

Leadership educators must own their responsibility to make leadership learning available and accessible to all. Leadership educators need to consider who is

not showing up to their programs, why this is occurring, and how to meet young people where they are rather than expecting students to come to them. By embedding leadership learning in academic curricula at the primary, secondary, and post-secondary levels, we (1) increase access exponentially for those who might otherwise be unable to participate, (2) nest leadership learning in the particular career field and community in which it is manifest, and (3) can increase the quality and impact of learning opportunities.

Importance

The more than 35 million students enrolled in secondary and postsecondary education in the United States (NCES, n.d.) have one thing in common: they are enrolled in courses and engage in curricular spaces often organized

"We need to expand leadership development to include youth both within and outside of the education system."

- Blake Comeaux*, Juan Zarco*, and Courtney Holder

around a particular discipline or field of study. Educators must shift their approach in how they operationalize leadership learning. An over-reliance on

out-of-classroom, co-curricular experiences to drive leadership development via optional programs for a select few will never scale access to opportunities nor meet the demand of generations of youth ready to impact the world. Educators must make leadership learning unavoidable and one of the best ways to do so is to embed leadership learning directly into academic curricula in primary, secondary, and postsecondary education.

To reach the broadest engagement and be accessible to all students, leadership educators also need to situate leadership learning within the disciplines where youth are already engaged. This maximizes both their workforce readiness and ability to impact their field, rather than positioning leadership education as an add-on experience that is simply nice to have.

Leadership educators can help develop a computer scientist who feels a sense of responsibility to make technology more accessible, a doctor who centers their care around improving the health outcomes of disadvantaged communities, a civil engineer who understands how structural forms of racism play a role in our transportation systems that divide neighborhoods and disproportionately impact communities of color, a survey methodologist who centers inclusion in how they design survey questions, and a business leader who recognizes how gender bias can play out within organizations and implements inclusive hiring practices to promote greater gender equity within their workplace.

If leadership learning is integrated into the academic curriculum, it has the potential to significantly enhance educational outcomes and improve our ability to solve humanity's greatest challenges. Leadership educators can play a role in embedding leadership learning within academic disciplines, influencing the matriculation and retention of students, and helping students feel a greater connection to their disciplines (Guthrie & Jenkins, 2018). Many regional and national accreditation organizations have expected outcomes related to leadership (Seemiller & Rosch, 2023), and leadership outcomes are prominently reflected in the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) outcomes most sought after by employers (NACE, n.d.). Leadership educators have an important role in scaling up and making leadership learning available and accessible to as many people as possible.

Recommendations for Action

#1: Engage with local school boards & municipal school systems to embed leadership development into the K-12 curriculum.

School boards, school systems, and leadership educators often share the belief that if students are given the tools they need, they will develop into active citizens who can lead and bring about change throughout their communities. Local school boards and municipal school systems often influence and decide on the K-12 curriculum. Educators should partner with school boards and systems to realize the advantages of including

leadership education in the academic curriculum as early as possible. Leadership training can never start too soon and educators should design leadership experiences that are scaffolded throughout one's K-12 experiences and tied to major developmental and maturational milestones.

#2: Leadership educators should link leadership outcomes with regional and disciplinary accreditation outcomes.

Among the biggest priorities for senior administrators is ensuring institutions maintain accreditation and that applicable degree programs receive disciplinary accreditation (e.g., ABET accreditation for engineering; AACSB accreditation for business; or CACREP accreditation for counseling programs). For example, the Middle States Commission on Higher Education's Standard III.5 (n.d.) requires institutions to "expand their cultural and global awareness and cultural sensitivity; offers a curriculum designed so that students acquire and demonstrate essential skills including at least oral and written communication; and the general education program also includes the study of values, ethics, and diverse perspectives." ABET's (n.d.) accreditation criterion 3 requires engineering programs to document how they develop students' ability to "recognize ethical and professional responsibilities in engineering situations and make informed judgments, which must consider the impact of engineering solutions in global, economic, environmental, and societal contexts" as well as

"function effectively on a team whose members together provide leadership, create a collaborative and inclusive environment, establish goals, plan tasks, and meet objectives." Leadership programs should be responsive to these accreditation requirements and document how their efforts contribute to them.

#3: Prioritize partnering with high enrollment majors (e.g., business, engineering, and computer science) and general education programs to develop a clear strategy for embedding leadership education in post-secondary education.

To rapidly scale up leadership development across educational institutions, educators should embed leadership development into the curricular requirements of high enrollment majors and general education programs. Embedding leadership education and outcomes into existing courses and curricula will ensure greater access. This will require a shift in how leadership educators currently operate–designing conferences, courses, programs, and experiences for small numbers of students to partnering with academic units to embed the leadership learning into curriculum students must complete to graduate. Focusing on high enrolled majors and general education will ensure scarce resources are used to impact the greatest number of students.

Case Example

As director of global leadership in the A. James Clark School of Engineering at the University of Maryland, I'm responsible for developing and implementing our strategy for leadership training for nearly 4,000 undergraduate engineers. For nearly a decade, I led a leadership minor and associated courses that reached 150 - 200 unique students per year. In a good year, we would graduate 15% of our engineers with some sort of formal leadership training during their time at the University of Maryland with the overwhelming majority of our students receiving no formal leadership training by graduation.

In 2018, we shifted our resource investment and strategy to embed formal leadership training into a required onboarding program for all new students, and we recently started embedding leadership training into existing engineering courses. This approach led to more than 80% of our students receiving some form of formal leadership training by graduation. The outcomes of these efforts are also now included as part of our ABET accreditation submission and leadership training is part of the culture of the engineering school now that it's more accessible to a greater number of students.

- Ramsey Jabaji

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Address Mental Health and Well-Being by Adopting Holistic Approaches to Leadership Development

Authors: Allison M. Schipma and Runzhi Hu*

Background

Approaching leadership development solely by looking at a young person's skill sets is outdated. As the civil rights pioneer Grace Lee Boggs once said, "Transform yourself to transform the world." Youth leadership development is too often approached from the lens of a single workshop, class, or training session assuming immediate learning uptake and the ability to successfully replicate behaviors across contexts.

Further complicating matters is the disconnected language of leadership between and across educational, community, and workplace contexts. Much of the scholarly work on leadership development used in postsecondary education aligns with the scholarly work on socioemotional learning from K-12 education. Socioemotional learning is "the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions" (CASEL, n.d.). Yet, leadership development and socioemotional learning continue to be treated as distinct bodies of literature with distinct interventions.

What if the approach to leadership development considered the whole person? Consistent with both the literature of leadership development and socioemotional learning, this requires attention to the well-being of those engaging in leadership. As Heiftez and Linsky (2002) noted, "The intellectual, physical, and emotional challenges of leadership are fierce" (p. 35). They go on to name how engaging in leadership while simultaneously experiencing substantive life changes (e.g., transitioning to college, seeking employment, losing a family member, having children) can erode one's internal stability and require a high level of executive functioning as well as

emotional regulatory capacities. Additionally, meta-analytic research demonstrates that "leadership development programs can be optimized to favorably impact followers' overall mental health" (Montano, Schleu, & Huffmeier, 2023, p. 103) providing direct evidence that how one leads influences everyone engaged in the leadership process. But, where do we teach this in youth leadership programs?

What if youth leadership programs positioned a person's mental health and wellbeing as just as critical to the process of leadership development? What if there were considerations of the leader's ability to steward and care for the mental health of those they engage with in leadership?

Importance

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the power that mental health and well-being play in our everyday lives became increasingly evident along with its connection to leadership development. Supporting mental health means providing adequate access to and working knowledge of resources that support individual and collective mental well-being (Montano et al., 2023). Access to affordable, quality mental health resources, especially for young people, is lacking. The World Health Organization (2021) estimates that 1 in 7 young people aged 10 to 19 experience mental health issues. Going to therapy is one of the many conventional options for getting help for mental health, but it usually requires a great deal of effort from the patient's side due to cost, proximity, and time

commitments. This especially applies to young people who are often burdened by financial and familial responsibilities while pursuing their education. However, simply increasing the concentration of mental health resources in an area will not be sufficient to meet demand.

Mental health resources must be discreet, able to accommodate busy youth schedules, and modifiable to best aid young people based on their identities and experiences. One of the most powerful actions is to simply check-in with a young person, asking them if they are doing well and sharing a conversation to reinforce that they matter. To provide mental health resources of true significance, though, one must not simply resolve the person's current issues, but also equip them with the tools to actively identify and solve future mental health problems that may arise. With every bit of mental health support that a young person obtains, the more confidence they gain to continue their journey in leadership development, both to help lead themselves and to lead others.

Of particular importance is addressing the ways in which one's social identities inform mental health and well-being. Ample empirical evidence demonstrates the emotional toll that engaging in leadership takes for those from historically marginalized and minoritized identities as well as the ways in which collective identities associated with poverty, oppression, and violence manifest detrimental individual-level effects (Felter, Chung, Guth, & DiDonato,
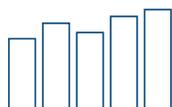
2023; Ginwright, 2015; Kulick, Wernick, Woodford, & Renn, 2017; Sinha & Rosenberg, 2013). This is exacerbated by the fact that these same adolescents are among the most underserved populations by mental health providers. Dugan and Henderson (2021) argued that we must name and address "the historical and contemporary dangers, emotional toll, and daily battles for those engaging in leadership from minoritized identities" (p. 381). This involves the adoption of intersectional

> ## "We need to explicitly address mental health by taking a holistic approach in our leadership development endeavors to consistently cultivate adaptability, persistence, and resilience among youth."

- Blake Comeaux*, Juan Zarco*, and Courtney Holder

approaches that recognize the compounding effects of identity and positionality and the integration of trauma-informed practice. Trauma-informed practice "incorporates three key elements: (1) *realizing* the prevalence of trauma; (2) *recognizing* how trauma affects all individuals involved with the program, organization, or system, including its own

workforce; and (3) *responding* by putting this knowledge into practice" (SAMHSA, 2014, p. 4).

The need for a holistic, person-centered approach is essential. How are we drawing these considerations into our work with youth leadership development? By making mental health and well-being with a lens of trauma-informed practice a focus of leadership development, youth will not only be more adequately prepared for the complex and adaptive contexts they navigate but also positioned to sustain their leadership development long-term.

Recommendations for Action

#1: Create tactical strategies to support youth leaders engaged in leadership and leadership development.

It would be quite ironic to have *youth* leadership development without implementing *youth* voice. On the other hand, it is important to also recognize that these same youth leaders may also be among the youth who would most benefit from mental health resources. Leadership can be exhausting, especially for young people who are balancing school, work, and family responsibilities at the same time. When these students burnout and decide to take a step back, the goal should be to support their mental health and ease them back into their leadership commitments.

Reach out to youth leaders and activists in your community and school—they are bound to be full of ideas on what they and their peers want to see in youth

leadership development and the mental health issues that are most relevant to them. When approaching the mental health and well-being of young leaders, think about the age that they are starting their leadership journeys, especially their previous life experiences and the challenges they face as they progress towards adulthood. Use these details to personalize the support for young leaders and help them brainstorm ideas on how to continue their passion for leadership while balancing their mental health and other responsibilities.

#2: Improve the application approach for youth leadership opportunities.

Many leadership development programs and leadership positions, especially the most "prestigious" ones, have extensive requirements for consideration such as GPA and past leadership experience. This leads one to question: If this is for leadership *development*, then why does it favor those who are already well-versed in leadership over those who may need the experience the most to truly blossom as a leader? Though some may argue that these requirements ensure that all those who participate in leadership development are truly invested, it also preemptively weeds out applicants with extenuating circumstances that may have hindered them from excelling in their academics. By doing this, the pressure upon young people to overburden themselves for the sake of leadership development drastically increases in severity. Especially for young people whose responsibilities outside of school,

such as familial responsibilities or work, this can be overwhelming and lead to a collapse in mental health.

The solution for this issue, however, is quite simple. Instead of asking young people to do more, give them space to show more. Leave space on applications and interviews to let their cocurricular activities shine, whether that is a club, a sport, a job, or their familial responsibilities. In addition, give applicants time to explain how leadership development would positively benefit their lives, and fully integrate these answers into your decision to create a truly holistic approach to leadership development. This allows for leadership programs and positions to have a well-rounded view of the applicant to make a holistic decision. By decreasing the pressure on applicants to do more, young people can have more time to take care of their mental health and well-being.

#3: Destigmatize making mistakes in leadership and make space for young people to share both their achievements and struggles.

People learn from making mistakes. This is true for everything from the subjects taught in school to the lessons that people learn throughout their lives. The logical conclusion is that this applies to leadership development as well, but making mistakes in leadership can come with significant stigma associated with failure. This stigma especially affects young people who are just entering new contexts such as school or work as the pressure to perform can create an echo chamber for anxiety. Not

only can the stigma for mistakes in leadership create mental health concerns for youth, but it also makes future leaders less confident in key components of leadership such as public speaking and decision-making.

Therefore, it is vital that brave spaces are provided for youth engaged in leadership development to allow them to make and learn from their mistakes. Not only does this help young people grow by giving them time to reflect on and analyze their actions, but it also gives them an opportunity to exchange their valuable experiences with other youth leaders. This reinforces the fact that these youth leaders are not alone, and it also normalizes making mistakes to decrease the pressure on young leaders' mental health. By providing brave spaces for developing young leaders, leadership will become less of a formidable challenge and more of an exciting learning experience.

Runzhi's Story

I met Ms. Potts my freshman year of high school because she was my geometry teacher. Although I was doing well in the class, I was quite quiet for the first few days and Ms. Potts made sure to check in on me to ensure that I was doing well. She helped me grow out of my shell that I created after going through a low in self-esteem caused by middle school, and even after I finished geometry honors I liked taking time between my classes to talk to Ms. Potts while she waited for students to file into her classroom.

Whether it was about school or life in general, it felt like Ms. Potts had an answer for everything. When I wasn't asking questions, she always had a funny story to share that would bring a smile to our faces. Junior year of high school, during remote learning, she brought forward an opportunity for me. She believed that I was a good fit for the Bezos Scholar Program, though I didn't have an ounce of belief in myself, I thought it would be good practice for college applications. When I was selected as a 2021 Bezos Scholar, I couldn't believe it. But Ms. Potts certainly did. She was there for me (virtually, through the computer screen) for the entire application process and responded to any questions I emailed her with record speed.

Throughout the Bezos Scholar Program, we encountered obstacles like we've never seen before. Though this time, Ms. Potts didn't have the answer for everything. But, she did teach me one important thing: pivot. Pivoting around impenetrable obstacles and looking for a different path to see where that takes us became our mantra. If it doesn't take us where we wanted to go, pivot again. She helped me gain confidence in myself and become resilient beyond my wildest dreams, and bring our project, *Let's Connect! Rancho*, which was just a simple wish on a piece of paper into a reality.

Now that I have moved away for college, Ms. Potts and I share fewer in-person experiences together. But that doesn't stop us from checking in with each other all the same—with a funny video that we would think the other would enjoy, or asking for advice for something just to see the other's opinion, regardless of whether or not the other had a direct answer. Our conversations still bring a smile to my face, and I'm sure it brings a smile to Ms. Potts, too. As I reflect on what I learned from my time working with Ms. Potts, I appreciate that she taught me the importance of pivoting around obstacles and powering through challenging situations alongside me so I could remain hopeful.

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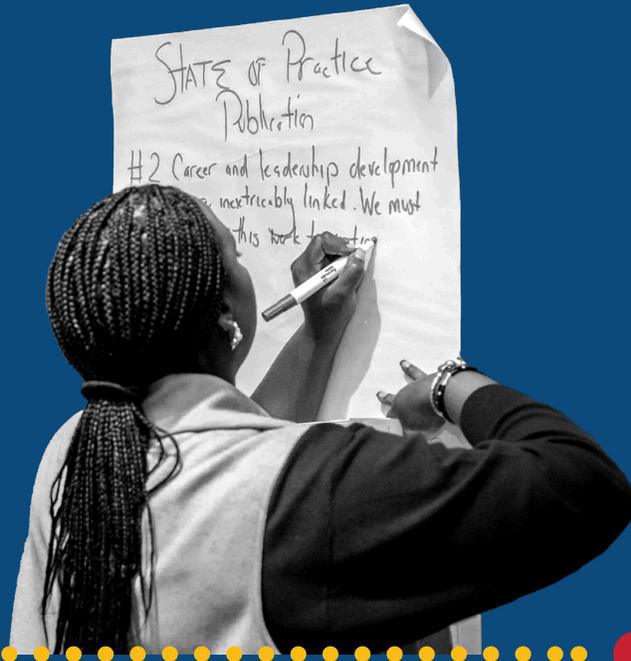
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Integrate Career and Leadership Development to Meet the Needs of an Evolving Workforce

Authors: Jana Lithgow and Jasmine S. Adams*

Background

Too often, career readiness and leadership development are seen as automatic byproducts of earning secondary or postsecondary educational degrees rather than purposefully cultivated and essential areas of youth development. Simultaneously, career readiness and leadership development are treated as separate processes rather than intrinsically linked (Jaunarajas & McGarry, 2018). According to the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE), career readiness is "a foundation from which to demonstrate requisite core competencies that broadly prepare the college educated for success in the workplace and lifelong career management." However, it is important to remember that 60% of youth do not pursue a higher education degree (NCES, 2022). Substantive attention to career readiness, then, must start in secondary education contexts as well. Demonstrating competency in career development includes proactive self-development and learning, a strong sense of self-awareness, and a keen ability to build relationships with others (NACE, n.d.).

Parker and Carroll (2009) noted that "the developmental perspective in either career or leadership

development implies a sequence of choices made over time" (p. 278) and that "careers and leadership today are both predicated on awareness of self, of others and of the environment" (p. 279). As individuals advance in their careers, demonstrating leadership capacity is an inherent expectation in workplaces; similarly, as individuals develop their leadership capacity, career growth is an inherent expectation of employees. These processes of career and leadership development should be linked as ongoing and intentional efforts for further intellectual, professional, and social-emotional development. Adults made discrete categories of career and leadership development through organizational and administrative structures (Jaunarajas & McGarry, 2018), but youth do not experience their learning in this siloed way nor is it complementary to integrated learning.

Importance

The future of work is continuously and rapidly changing, fueled by developments in technology and attitudes toward work in the aftermath of COVID-19 pandemic. Organizations are experiencing disruption, conducting work in new ways because of technology developments, and learning to be more agile after the onset of COVID-19. The workforce is undergoing a similar phase of adaptation to a post-COVID-19 reality. There is an emerging need to support workplace leaders to retain talent and halt the "Great Resignation" phenomenon (Tessema et al., 2022).

In addition to these systemic challenges, it is critical to consider organizations' greatest assets: people. There are reservoirs of potential left untapped. Poorly defined workforce entry points cause confusion pertaining to job attainability and stability. Entry points must be demystified so the on-ramps are clear. This should be coupled with education and investment strategies that provide direct on-ramps to the world of work for youth whether through summer employment, first jobs, vocational programs, along with the traditional time-defined entry points after completion of high school and postsecondary education.

Beyond identifying clear pathways to employment, there is a need to integrate career and leadership development to enhance career readiness, employability, and support immediate contributions to the workplace from youth. Central to career development is the objective of increasing social capital for young professionals. This becomes attainable when career development is paired with leadership development programming, most notably among first-generation students (Soria & Cole, 2023). If the collective understanding of leadership development does not shift to consider what diverse professionals, particularly entry-level workers, need to thrive, then it is likely that the unemployment rate will continue to increase and gaps of economic inequity will widen.

NACE identifies eight career readiness competencies that combine to provide a framework

○○○○○ for talent development (See Table 1), including career and self-development, communication, critical thinking, equity and inclusion, leadership, professionalism, teamwork, and technology. This framework creates a shared understanding for employers and job candidates and helps emerging talent understand their transferable skills. In the current employment market, it is clear that the intersection of career and leadership development matters for talent acquisition now more than ever. Leadership is not only one of the eight competencies identified by NACE, it is also infused across all of them as leadership capacities are necessary to build skills, mindsets, and behaviors in each of the competency areas.

Table 1: NACE Career Readiness Competencies

Competency	Definition
Career and Self-Development	Continued personal and professional development to include self-awareness, social capital creation, and curiosity
Communication	Concisely and clearly exchanging ideas and information with others within and across organizations through dialogue, critical questioning, and active listening
Critical Thinking	Engage in creative problem-solving and decision-making grounded in situational understanding and logical analysis
Equity and Inclusion	Demonstrate cultural competence and the ability to engage in sociocultural discussions while addressing systemic and individual practices to promote equity
Leadership	Drive to engage in leadership grounded in one's personal commitment to a group or community's desired outcome.
Professionalism	Act with integrity and personal responsibility in service of one's larger community and workplace
Teamwork	Create and sustain collaborative relationships that lead to cohesive and supportive teams
Technology	Recognize and leverage technology in ethical ways and remain adaptable to evolving technologies over time

Adapted from NACE: National Association of Colleges and Employers. (2021). Competencies for a Career-Ready Workforce [Report].

Recommendations for Action

#1: Vertically integrate career development across educational institution types

Traditional, four-year institutions of higher education are critical to developing young talent for future work, but these institutions only encounter a fraction of the emerging workforce population. Community colleges are key partners in integrating career and leadership development to meet the needs of an evolving workforce. They are accessible, low-cost or even free for attendance, and their focus is on breadth, serving as many people as possible with programs that meet the local population's needs. A community college can be a bridge to the workforce or to a transfer institution. Through the reach and influence of community colleges, this work can be infused into career centers, workforce development initiatives, public-private partnerships with civic entities, career exploration programs, vocational training, and more.

Career and leadership development education should be integrated vertically throughout educational systems, from K-12 education to community colleges, vocational training, and baccalaureate colleges and universities. The intersection of leadership and career development can be used as a conduit through which youth can connect to younger students who have fewer connections and less experience.

#2: Align career discernment with workforce needs.

It is time to shift thinking about career readiness from competencies to purpose. Youth are invested in purpose-driven career decision-making that aligns with their personal values. In addition to seeking flexibility in workplaces, youth are also seeking responsible leadership, particularly with an emphasis on sustainable investments and business practices. As the U.S. population continues to grow smaller (Congressional Budget Office, 2023), youth will have more freedom to discern their career choices based on values and priorities rather than necessity or desperation. Workforce demands will continue to evolve over time, and employers who embrace technological advances and adapt to more flexible practices can expect workforce recruitment and retention.

#3: Advance cross-sector relationships that meet community workforce needs while underwriting costs through public-private partnerships.

Numerous metropolitan areas have emerged as technology hubs and are attracting young talent in droves. However, recognizing that millions of youth in the United States reside outside of major metropolitan areas, there are opportunities for cross-industry partnerships in all types of communities. The K-12 educational system provides opportunities for teachers and administrators to weave vocational skill-building and soft skill development into

curriculum. Working directly with local corporations allows school districts to focus on the workforce needs of the geographical region and invest in their own communities.

Additionally, high schools should consider experiential learning programs as a way to invest in talent development for their students. Examples of vocational preparation programs could include earning high school or community college credits while pursuing licensure for a career path like skilled labor, cosmetology, or health care support. Regardless of the industry, schools can focus on developing both hard and soft skills much earlier in a student's educational journey. The career readiness needs for various industries will vary greatly; however, schools are well positioned to create pathways to post-secondary education or employment by leveraging regional relationships.

Jasmine's Story

My lived experience as a young woman of color from East Saint Louis, Illinois, is like many young people, I always understood the value of education. I earned an associate's degree while still a full-time high school student and my single mother lost her job just months into my degree program, so I started supporting myself by working full-time while taking a full-time course load each semester. Hard work became an integral part of my daily life.

It was not until I became an Aspen Young Leaders Fellow (AYLF) that I comprehended the systems that had excluded me from opportunity. During the four years that I spent as a member of AYLF, I primarily learned about the historical context of leadership. I recall developing my own community initiative during the AYLF community impact project summer program as well as an improved sense of self. My stipend from that summer as well as from future facilitation opportunities further supported the cost of my education, allowing me to continue as a successful student and working professional. I experienced an immediate increase in my grades and quality of life from this support. My leadership development experiences played a key role in my ability to advocate for myself professionally, identify personal areas of growth, and develop plans for my future career, which would not have happened if career and leadership development hadn't happened for me in concert.

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Meet Youth and Families Where They Are by Investing in Place-Based, Community-Driven Leadership Development

Authors: Leonette Henderson and Gabriel Ryan Beaver*

Background

Communities best understand and are positioned to address the issues they face when they are resourced to do so. Prioritizing intentional investment in community-led leadership development that is tailored to meet the unique needs of each community is crucial. This requires a shift away from a "standardized program" approach, avoiding the one size fits all model, and towards a more flexible, adaptable model that is rooted in place and centered around the strengths and challenges of each community.

The term "one size fits all" refers to an approach that automatically assumes that a singular strategy, framework or solution is applicable to all without regard to individual or community variation. Initiatives that provide resources, mentorship, and a focus on mental health and well-being for youth and families - particularly those most distanced from opportunity - must be supported to holistically develop youth leadership. By investing in this way, communities will build their own capacities to address the issues they face and create positive, collective, and sustainable change (People First Community, n.d.). Importantly, the types of resources needed for quality, community- and place-based leadership programming vary by ecosystem with some needing greater financial resources, others needing human resources to deliver this critical work, and still others requiring content or training. Building a brighter

future for communities starts with investing with intentionality.

Importance

Place-based education is an approach that links learning to the community, where education is based on the unique characteristics of a particular place or location (Corboy, Warner, & Benge, 2019; Pigg et al., 2015). A notable strength of place-based education is its adaptability to the unique cultural and contextual nuances of a community (Smith et al., 2010). Cultivating a sense of place in the learning environment can enhance the significance of a topic and its impact on learning (Rote, Schroeder, & D'Augustino, 2015).

In today's education system, standardized assessments and test scores have become the primary focus and educators are coerced to "teach to the test." Youth are disengaging because they are not convinced that tests nor school-based knowledge are applicable to their livelihood (Rote et al., 2015). One way to address this is by investing in and incorporating place-based, community-driven leadership development. By connecting leadership development to local contexts, youth can see the direct impact of their learning, making it more meaningful and engaging. Sobel (2005) noted that by anchoring learning and youth development in the local community and environment, place-based education engages youth, promotes academic achievement, and fosters citizenship and community vitality.

Recommendations for Action

#1: Commit to co-creating impact through place-based initiatives grounded in community.

To effectively develop community-led leadership, we must consider the opportunity ecosystem (i.e., a shared strategy for accelerating educational and economic mobility constructed by constituents of a system for constituents of a system to capitalize on community assets and mitigate constraints on potential) and address the underlying factors that influence individuals', families', and communities' abilities to learn and lead (Dugan, Randolph, Hightower, & Rossetti, 2020). The key is listening to the community first. This requires cultural humility (i.e., the developmental capacity to engage in self-reflection and critique that employs perspective-taking, curiosity, and openness when engaging across cultural differences to address power imbalances), (Haynes-Mendez & Engelsmeier, 2020; Yeager & Bauer-Wu, 2013) and a willingness to surface the community's knowledge and expertise, rather than relying solely on the resources and solutions of outsiders.

Engaging youth and families in decision-making processes that affect their lives and giving them a voice in shaping the policies and initiatives that impact their communities is crucial. This requires investing in civic education and leadership development programs that build the capacities, efficacy, and motivation of youth and families to be active participants in their communities.

"When youth have the opportunity to engage in community-based, justice-oriented leadership they then become community and justice-oriented teachers, lawyers, electricians, neighbors, parents, doctors, and journalists. Now, more than ever, it is evident that we need to cultivate a future with more of these people in our schools, communities, and workplaces."

-Blake Comeaux*, Juan Zarco*, and Courtney Holder

It also requires advocacy for policies that support community-led development and funding to resource and support these initiatives. Advocacy for policies that encourage collaboration between communities, non-profits, businesses, education, and government agencies to leverage resources and create greater impact is essential.

#2: Identify the unique needs of youth in a region through asset and community mapping.

Identifying the unique needs of youth in a region can involve asset and community mapping. These approaches provide valuable tools for understanding the strengths, resources, and opportunities available within the community, and can complement the process of meeting youth and families where they are. *Asset mapping* involves identifying and documenting the existing assets and resources within a community, including physical, social, and cultural assets (RHIHub, n.d.). This can include parks, schools, community organizations, local businesses, and community leaders, among others. By conducting asset mapping, leaders can gain a comprehensive understanding of the strengths and resources that can be leveraged to address the needs of youth in the region. This information can inform the development of tailored strategies and interventions that build on the community's existing strengths and assets while purposefully moving away from deficit-based assessments of community assets.

Community mapping, on the other hand, involves engaging with community members to gather insights and perspectives on the local context (Lung-Amam & Dawkins, 2020). This can be done through surveys, interviews, focus groups, or other participatory methods. Community mapping aims to capture the diverse perspectives and experiences of community members, including youth and families, to understand their needs, aspirations, challenges, and root causes of local issues. This process can provide valuable insights into the unique characteristics of the community,

such as its culture, history, and social dynamics, which can inform the development of relevant and effective youth leadership initiatives. By combining asset and community mapping with the approach of meeting youth and families where they are, communities can gain a holistic understanding of the unique needs of youth in a region.

#3: Sharing best practices and the importance of networking/creating cross-community relationships.

Investing in place-based, community-driven leadership development requires sharing knowledge and best practices across communities to build a strong, interconnected network of youth who can learn, adapt, and support each other's leadership development. This can be achieved by investing in platforms and tools that enable communities to share knowledge and connect with each other, regardless of geographic or cultural boundaries. When different communities come together, they bring unique resources and points of view, sparking success in one community and inspiring the next.

Another approach is through intentional networking opportunities that bring people together, including youth and families, to share their experiences and knowledge. It is important to remember that such networking opportunities are not just occuring in "obvious places" like professional associations and the workforce. Rather, they take place all across ecosystems in diverse environments from barber shops, churches, and grocery stores to local gathering hubs, coffee shops, and recreation centers. By actively engaging with community in these environments and forging multi-generational learning circles, leaders can gain greater insights into the preferences, aspirations, and challenges faced by the youth. Sharing these insights between, among, and across communities creates a powerful learning laboratory for identifying commonalities, differences, and partnership strategies.

Gabe's Story

Throughout 2019, I along with 19 of my fellow film students set out to create a short documentary on the crisis of those experiencing housing insecurity in Cleveland, Ohio. Our goal was to create awareness and promote action around the topic of the unhoused. We knew the traditional approach could have included fundraising or researching different nonprofits, but we decided against that. We went straight to the people. We utilized our resources and skills as film students and began to interview those who were experiencing homelessness. Building relationships with members of this community became the first and most essential step on this journey.

Q, someone who was experiencing homelessness, told us early on: "You don't really know the needs of the people. So you just give, give and give. Everywhere we go: Coffee, donuts, cereal. Coffee, donuts, spaghetti. Coffee, donuts, chicken. But nobody's asking us questions." We learned quickly how pushed away from society these individuals were and how their needs were not being met. More importantly, we learned about the critical importance of engaging *with* communities who best know the issues they face.

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The Time is Now: A Call to Action

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It is often said that "youth are the leaders of tomorrow" and yet, only 16% of youth attain meaningful leadership learning experiences by the age of 25. If we are to create a more just, thriving, sustainable, innovative, and caring world in our future, we have to start with developing those who will lead it. The future of youth leadership practice requires a more expansive approach focused on enhancing both the access and quality of leadership development. Those responsible for youth leadership development must embed leadership learning within academic disciplines, include robust opportunities for leadership learning both *within* and *outside* of the education system, connect to career readiness in preparation for an ever-evolving workforce, center communities as a key driver of leadership development, and acknowledge the holistic nature of leadership by addressing mental health and well-being. In doing so, we advance leadership development access to those that have been historically excluded and enable youth to lead lives of impact.

Although many existing youth leadership programs create deep, tangible benefits for participants, they often only reach those who resonate with the concept of leadership or who are already acknowledged as leaders. We have to move beyond polishing diamonds in leadership education - reaching the same people over and over - and refocus on creating the necessary conditions to create more and more diamonds. Although effective leadership is widely recognized as relevant and needed within nearly every job, family, and neighborhood, opportunities for leadership learning are most heavily concentrated in business and political science curricula and through traditional education institutions. This neglects the many youth who will lead our world in other career fields, at a younger age, or are unable to consistently be in school or the world of work for financial, familial, workplace, or other obligations. Each year we fail to expand the audience of leadership development is a year we decide that we can live with the collateral damage of young people distanced from the very opportunities that would

contribute to degree completion, career readiness, civic engagement, and economic security.

Increasing access must not sacrifice the quality of youth leadership development. For youth leadership practice to be effective, it is necessary to rely on the knowledge, experiences, and relationships of those we hope to affect - youth. We must address the realities, complexities, and struggles facing youth today and the ever-evolving workforces they will enter. Resiliency, adaptability, well-being, and emotional awareness will be key. Having access to these quality leadership learning opportunities ourselves as youth from underserved and under-resourced communities demonstrates just how transformative it can be. When youth have the opportunity to engage in place-based, community-driven, and justice-centered leadership they then become the collaborative, innovative, and thoughtful teachers, lawyers, electricians, neighbors, parents, doctors, and journalists that their communities and our world needs.

Where Do We Go From Here?

This publication opened with the alarming statistic that only 16% of youth from the United States engage in any form of leadership development by age 25 despite its demonstrated impact on educational completion, workforce readiness, civic engagement, and more. In an address at the University of Pennsylvania in 1940, President Franklin Roosevelt shared, "We cannot always build the future *for* our youth, but we can build our *youth* for the future."

The authors and editors of the publication offer a number of key strategies and recommendations for changing the current trajectory of opportunity for youth in the United States. However, this list is neither exhaustive nor can the goals of greater access and quality be achieved by maintaining the status quo. The next phase of youth leadership development necessitates:

- Centering youth and communities as co-creators of content, research, and strategy;

- Dedicated attention to issues of power, identity, and opportunity that influence access to and the quality of youth leadership programs;

- Boundary-spanning partnerships that transcend bureaucratic silos that constrain learning; and

- A collective campaign to generate both low-potency and scalable interventions that expand reach along with novel interventions that increase quality.

Where do we go from here? The inaugural Aspen Index Impact Fellowship catalyzed a movement bringing together 92 stakeholders from across more than 70 organizations. Now, we must expand the aperture. Thirty years ago, there was a major movement in the United States to prioritize and understand youth leadership development. From the Eisenhower Grant that led to the creation of the Social Change Model of Leadership Development to the Kellogg Foundation's investment in the design, implementation, and study of 31 youth leadership programs nationally, there was a concerted effort to advance the work of youth leadership development.
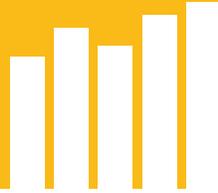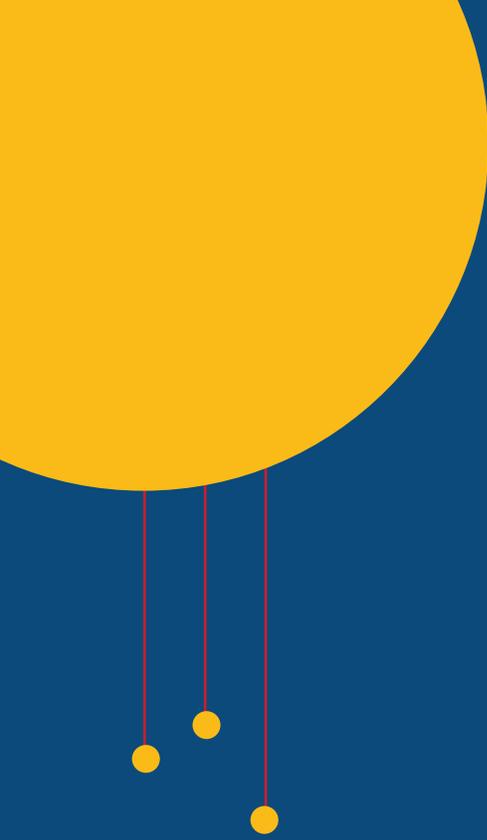
Now, we are presented with an opportunity to expand on these important foundations to harness our collective knowledge in service of advancing the field once again. If you are reading this publication, you are likely already engaged in these efforts locally, nationally, and internationally. But, what if we did this together? How do we ensure that this publication does not join the long list of position papers and thought pieces on the state of youth leadership but actually leads to tangible action and impact?

We are pleased to announce the opening of the new **Center for Expanding Leadership & Opportunity (CELO)**, a nonprofit, 501(c)3 organization committed to advancing access to and the quality of youth leadership programs. Spinning out from and in ongoing partnership with the Aspen Institute, CELO will begin operations in summer 2023.

The work of CELO will include **The Index**, a scalable, low-potency leadership learning intervention and assessment tool built on 20 years of research through the Multi-Institutional Study of Leadership (MSL) that yields a catalytic impact for individual users while retaining rigorous psychometric standards. The Index was born out of Youth Leadership Programs at the Aspen Institute, was built in partnership with youth and community, and will be a primary vehicle for scaling access while also driving quality. We look forward to co-creating the future of CELO in partnership with youth, educators, and communities committed to the work of expanding access to and the quality of youth leadership programs. We invite you to join us in these collective efforts in this next phase of youth leadership development.