

Youth and Adult Leaders for Program Excellence

Frequently Asked Questions



We have worked with a variety of youth-serving organizations on issues of program assessment and improvement using the tools and methods included in this resource kit. Listed below are some questions we've been asked by organization leaders, program staff, and youth – and our answers to them.

*** Organization Leaders ***

Why is it important to engage in organizational self-assessment?

Youth programs are almost always evaluated and judged by people outside the organization – funders, community leaders, politicians. There are advantages to this, of course. But the downside is that the people who operate and attend the programs are rarely involved in program assessments. Their voices are not heard and their expertise is not utilized. This resource kit is designed so that staff and participants can assess the quality of their own programming, and equally important, take steps to improve it. It puts ownership of the process and the action steps in the hands of the people who have the greatest stake in the outcome.

Does this organizational assessment and action planning process really work?

Youth and Adult Leaders for Program Excellence is based on extensive field tests with a variety of youth serving organizations; for example, a drop-in center, a shelter for homeless and runaway youth, a youth activism program, a youth philanthropy program, a community coalition, a large high school, and a 4H community club.

Each time that we worked with a program, we learned something new about how to improve the process and how to work out the bugs. During the development phase of this resource kit, we constantly asked staff and youth what worked for them and what did not. Over time, we have deleted that which did not work well, and have strengthened those aspects of the process that work the best. We are now confident that this resource kit reflects “best practice” in the eyes of youth workers and youth, and is consistent with the lessons of research.

Those organizations that were able to take the time to go through each of the phases and steps of *Youth and Adult Leaders for Program Excellence* were the ones that benefited the most. It is hard for organizations to find the time to devote to assessment and action planning, but those organizations that allocated the time and kept at it were the ones that gained the most tangible results. Throughout this resource kit, we identify proven strategies and tips for success. If you use these tips, and your own creativity, we think that you will be pleased with the results.

What types of programs and ages of youth is this resource kit designed for?

We generally think of “youth” as people between the ages of 12 and 18, although this resource kit has been used successfully with groups serving both younger and older participants. Any program that aims to promote positive youth development would be able to conduct a *Youth and Adult Leaders for Program Excellence* assessment, regardless of the setting or their program activities.

Can you provide other materials to support the process?

Using youth-adult partnerships for program assessment and change is a relatively new innovation in the United States. Many stakeholders – funders, boards of directors, local politicians – are therefore hesitant to endorse the strategy. We are preparing research briefs to provide research-based information to these constituencies on the benefits of this strategy. These briefs, available in early 2005, will also list a range of useful web-sites.

It is, of course, important to involve parents to the extent possible. When young people are involved in collaborating with staff and are also involved in making decisions with their families, positive developmental outcomes are likely. Therefore, we have written a series of four newsletters for parents who wish to engage youth in family decision-making. The newsletters offer practical advice and tips for parents that have been gleaned from interviews with youth and their parents and from the research literature. These newsletters, called “Involving your teen in decision-making,” are available on-line at <http://www.uwex.edu/ces/4h/staff.html> or <http://www.actforyouth.net/publications.asp?type=Newsletters>.

*** Program Staff ***

My program has never done an assessment before. For example, we’ve never collected and interpreted data, and don’t really know how to write assessment reports. How can we do this?

This is not a problem. This resource kit is user-friendly. We do not assume that either the adults or the youth on the Assessment Leadership Team have prior experience with conducting an assessment. We provide you with step-by-step directions for collecting the data. If you are comfortable using Excel for analysis, we have templates that you can use. If you don’t want to use a computer, we have directions for analyzing the data by hand. Similarly, we provide a template to guide you through the process of writing a short report. In several of the more challenging steps, we include “assessment stories” – real-life experiences of other groups that have gone through this process – which should help your Assessment Leadership Team tackle those tasks.

We are not saying that this is easy all of the time. It will be challenging at times because it is new. At the same time, the challenge will often be fun and will always be engaging. We hope it will be a positive learning experience for all who participate.

What do you mean when you say “youth are full partners with adult staff” in program assessment and action planning?

Youth are rarely involved in designing organizational assessments, interpreting the data, or in creating action plans for program improvement. These tasks have traditionally been seen as the responsibility of adults.

When we say “full partners,” we mean that youth and adults will share power, decision-making, and responsibility throughout all aspects of this process. This resource kit is not youth-led and it is not adult-led. The assessment and action planning process is designed so that all persons – youth or adults – can participate in ways consistent with their own interests and expertise. It takes everybody to run a successful program.

What do you mean when you say “program excellence?”

Program excellence refers to the actions that organizations take to continuously improve the quality of their programming. *Youth and Adult Leaders for Program Excellence* is based on three assertions:

- * Program excellence is achieved when staff are involved in program assessment and reflection. Staff learn and are more motivated to strengthen their own practice when they are actively engaged in the processes of assessment and change.
- * Program excellence is achieved when youth participate as partners with staff throughout the assessment and action planning phases of improvement.
- * Program excellence is a gradual process. Strategies of shared learning and continuous improvement are needed to sustain motivation and engagement over the long-term.

These assertions are grounded in the experience of practitioners, research on organizational innovation, and the “best practice” literature in the field of youth development

How much time does it take to do this assessment and program improvement process?

All told, this process takes about 24 hours. Most of those hours are for meetings of the Assessment Leadership Team, but there are also three meetings of your entire group, and some hours set aside for a few members of the Assessment Leadership Team to work together to write a report based on the assessment. You can move through the five phases of the process in as little as a month. We recommend that you finish the process within four months.

The important thing is continuity. Once you start, it is critical that you keep the momentum going. This resource kit guides you through a series of five phases, each of which provides a clear sequence of steps and concrete directions that will help you sustain momentum.

Some programs may not have the time to go through the whole process, or they want to conduct a program assessment for a specific constituency. We are, therefore, developing user guides that will help programs use the assessment as a foundation for (a) convening or reporting to political and other local leaders, (b) establishing accountability and strengthening communications with external audiences, and (c) orienting and training volunteers who are new to youth participation and youth development. These user guides will be available in early 2005.

Does one staff member need to coordinate the assessment process?

One member of the Assessment Leadership Team serves as the Assessment Coordinator. This person is responsible for copying pages out of the resource kit for each Team meeting, taking care of practical details like meeting arrangements, and keeping momentum going. Often, this role will fall to a staff member. However, it could also be an adult or youth volunteer. It depends on the make-up of your Assessment Leadership Team. Whoever the Assessment Coordinator is, he or she will need access to a photocopier and other resources to support the assessment process.

I notice that there are four different assessment instruments that our program can use. Could you provide some background on these assessment tools?

There are four assessment tools in *Youth and Adult Leaders for Program Excellence*:

- * **YET**, which stands for “Youth Engagement Tool,” assesses the degree to which youth have legitimate chances to be heard, respected and taken seriously during program design and implementation. It also examines the outcomes that youth derive from their participation.
- * **ORG-YET**, which stands for “Organizational-Youth Engagement Tool,” assesses the extent to which youth are involved in decision-making forums and the degree to which the organization creates structures to support youth engagement over the long term. It also examines the outcomes that the program derives from youth engagement.
- * **PAAT**, which stands for “Program Assessment and Activity Tool,” assesses the developmental opportunities and supports that are provided to youth in the program. Opportunities include the changes to explore new things, be creative, gain membership in a group, and contribute to others. Supports include nurturance, emotional safety, high expectations, standards and boundaries, and strategic support through transitions.
- * **kidPAAT**, which stands for “Program Assessment and Activity Tool (for Younger Participants),” assesses similar opportunities and supports as PAAT, but in a more simplified format. We recommend using the kidPAAT for children under the age of 12; 12-year-olds may need assistance to complete the full PAAT, but may feel they are too old for a smiley-face survey.

These assessment tools (except kidPAAT) are designed to be completed by youth and adults. Having youth and adult staff complete the same surveys makes the analysis much easier. It also allows organizations to quickly see the commonalities and differences in how youth and staff view their programs.

These assessment tools are research and practice-based. That is, they reflect the lessons of research and the wisdom of exemplary practitioners about what is most important to measure when assessing program quality. It is important to note that we have been using the PAAT for over five years and the YET for close to three years. They have been field tested with diverse youth in diverse settings.

Our organization hires youth on a part-time basis to help run the program. When analyzing the data, do you consider these “youth staff” to be youth or staff?

It is ultimately your choice. When your group members fill out their surveys (except on the kidPAAT), they will be asked to indicate their age range and whether they consider themselves program participants or staff members. This gives the Assessment Leadership Team the flexibility to pinpoint those staff members who are under 18 or under 25, and choose whether to consider their responses together with other youth or with adult staff.

Our rule of thumb is this: If the “youth staff” have significant management or implementation roles in the program, we consider them to be staff. If the “youth staff” attend staff meetings, we consider them to be staff. If these criteria are not met, we would recommend that you analyze the “youth staff” as youth.

How can I get assistance?

If you have questions or concerns about using *Youth and Adult Leaders for Program Excellence*, we recommend that you first visit the Act for Youth website (www.actforyouth.net) that is operated by Cornell University. This website provides detailed information on the resource kit, as well as guidance on obtaining additional materials and assistance. You may also contact Shepherd Zeldin at rszeldin@wisc.edu or call 608.263.2383. A member of our team will be happy to talk with you.

*** Youth ***

I have a pretty busy schedule, and “program excellence” isn’t really one of my priorities for how I use my time. Why should I get involved in this program assessment?

It can be hard to see the point of using your time on a program assessment when there are so many other things you could be doing. But there are plenty of good reasons to care about program assessment and action planning, and you could get a lot out of being part of the Assessment Leadership Team. For example:

- * Even great programs need to take time to assess what they are doing well and where they have room to improve, so that they can continue to be great. If you’ve had a good experience with your program, this assessment is a way for you to be sure that other kids will have good experiences with it in the future. If you can see ways your program could improve, then this is a great way to find out whether other people agree with you and start to work toward those changes.
- * Members of the Assessment Leadership Team learn how to do research, like how to get from a number showing the average score on a series of questions to a concrete recommendation for program change. They also learn how to facilitate a group discussion and write a report on the assessment. These are valuable leadership skills for school, work, and life in general!
- * Youth and adults work side by side on the Assessment Leadership Team in a true partnership. We’ve heard from both young people and adults that their experiences on the Assessment Leadership Team resulted in deeper friendships and better understanding of people in the other age group. For young people, developing those relationships with adults can also be very valuable when they look for jobs, apply for college, or need help with a problem in their community.

Our program is entirely youth-run and does not have any adult staff members. Can we still use this resource kit for a self-assessment?

We’ve never tested *Youth and Adult Leaders for Program Excellence* with an all-youth program. But we would still encourage you to use the resource kit for program assessment and action planning. If there are no adults involved in your program, you should just make sure that your Assessment Leadership Team includes youth from a broad range of ages, and try to include some participants who are not part of the program’s usual leadership group. If you are affiliated with a larger organization that employs adult staff, or if you sometimes work with adults in your community, you might want to consider involving adults in your Assessment Leadership Team. Adults may have a different perspective that could be helpful in the assessment process.

Can we write our own survey questions?

This resource kit includes four assessment tools (YET, ORG-YET, PAAT, and kidPAAT – all described above) which were written based on research and practical experience. Each of the assessment tools leaves room for your group to add questions. Your group might choose to add more specific questions that are similar to the ones already in the tool. Or, you might choose to ask about something else that's important to your program. It's up to you.