

Engaging Youth in Leadership Panel

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The Loyola University Chicago Center for Experiential Learning hosted a panel titled, Engaging Youth in Leadership in April. The panel was moderated by Ashley Slupski, Community Youth Support Specialist at Loyola University Chicago and focused on the why, what and how of engaging youth in leadership.

The panel members represented various youth organizations around Chicago, and included Sara Kerastas, Education Programs Director at About Face Theatre; Gwyn Siebert, Community Programs Coordinator at Concordia Place; Ayoka Samuels, Senior Program Director at Gary Comer Youth Center; Lindsay Hayden, Membership Specialist at Girl Scouts of Greater Chicago and Northwest Indiana; Jackie Rosa, Youth Council Program Director at Mikva Challenge; Ilana Zafran, Director of Leadership and Justice at Umoja Student Development Corporation; and Jamilyn Bailey, Program Director at Posse Foundation Chicago.

This is a summary of their main points:

WHY?

First of all, why should we invest our time, knowledge, wealth, and sanity to teach youth leadership skills and provide them with leadership opportunities? Sara Kerastas referenced the late Whitney Houston's song *Greatest Love of All* when giving her answer – the children are our future, and it is our responsibility to provide them with the skills necessary to succeed in life. The panelists all agreed that it's not just in the best interest of youth to learn how to be leaders, but it is in all our best interests to ensure that the youth of today are prepared to be the leaders of tomorrow.

WHAT?

Although these organizations provide their own approaches to instilling leadership skills in Chicago's youth, they share a common perspective of what leadership means for youth – the ability for youth to make their own decisions, have an impact on what happens in life, and to take action for themselves and their communities (alone or with peers). Engaging youth in leadership and empowering them to take action allows them to become agents of change. The youth participating in these organizations work on a variety of real social issues within their communities such as access to healthy food, violence, relations with law enforcement, educational equity, and more.

HOW?

Panel member Jackie Rosa mentioned that one has to be passionate about working with youth because it's hard work. As someone who works with Chicagoland youth, I have to agree with Rosa. As adults, we have been there, done that, and want to tell youth how it's all done. When working with youth to instill leadership, critical thinking, and problem solving skills, we have to let go of our

experiences at times and allow youth to make their own decisions, even if it means allowing them to make mistakes. However, there is a difference between telling youth what to do, letting go completely, and guiding them in the right direction. To create a leader, it takes mentoring and guidance. It also takes reflection. Ayoka Samuels said she constantly checks herself when working with youth. She continuously reminds herself not to look down on youth because of their age, but to be understanding and respectful as they are young human beings. Since it is imperative for youth to understand what it takes to make informed decisions, Ilana Zafran emphasizes the *process* of making a decision over the actual decision. Most importantly, Gwen Siebert reminded the audience that when working with youth, we must tell them they are a valuable resource and acknowledge when they are doing well.

RESOURCES

If you are interested in learning more about engaging youth in leadership, the panel members recommend the following resources:

- Advancing Youth Development: A Curriculum for Training Youth Workers
<http://nti.aed.org/curriculum.html>
- Tutor-Mentor Connection - <http://www.tutormentorconnection.org>
- Education for Liberation Network - <http://www.edliberation.org>
- The Youth Program Quality Assessment - <http://etools.highscope.org/pdf/YouthPQA.pdf>