

## Welcome to Our World: Bridging Youth Development Research in Nonprofit and Academic Communities

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This commentary discusses the emergence of youth development research and evaluation in the nonprofit arena over the past 10 to 15 years. Included in this discussion is the establishment of the context for youth development research in nonprofits, a brief description of key examples of research from three youth nonprofits that illustrate the mission-driven, action-oriented application of research, and the need for researchers on adolescence to join together to advance the youth development field. Also included are links to nonprofit research and evaluation information online, especially from members of the National Collaboration for Youth.

Over the past decade, a great deal of valuable research and evaluation work has emerged from nonprofit and governmental youth organizations that reflects a shift in priorities in these arenas toward valuing the benefits of research and evaluation (American Camp Association [ACA], 2005; America's Promise, 2007; Bowles & Brand, 2009; Girls Inc., 2006; Herrera et al., 2007; Kosciw, Diaz, & Greytak, 2008; National 4-H Foundation, 2009; Salmond & Schoenberg, 2009). This research has often been conducted in collaboration with other organizations, occasionally universities, and, at times, solely by the nonprofit organization with the intent to address an immediate problem, improve practice, or to address issues important to the organization and the field. However, much of this research is "invisible" within scholarly circles, especially if the research does not find its way into peer-reviewed journals. The premise of this article is that research from nonprofits can make valuable contributions to improved understanding of youth development when considered in concert with academic research, because both strengthen the generation of new knowledge as well as the practical impact on the lives of youth.

### A WORD ABOUT SCHOLARSHIP AND ITS FUNCTION

Many of us doing research and evaluation within nonprofit youth organizations often struggle when

trying to explain what scholarship is in the world of practice. Most of us have been trained during our doctoral programs to view scholarship within the parameters defined by academe: theoretically important (often basic) specialty-focused research that results in peer-reviewed articles in tier one research journals that advance the body of knowledge and the researcher's career. If the research is externally funded through foundations, federal agencies, and corporations, the added prestige of external dollars often adds value. The integration and application of research to practice seldom seem valued in scholarship, especially if the publication of the findings is in field-based practitioner journals or other nonacademic outlets.

This narrow conception of scholarship and its functions has troubled many researchers both in and out of academia. In *Scholarship Reconsidered: Priorities of the Professoriate* (Boyer, 1990), Boyer articulated an expanded concept of scholarship that included more prominently the scholarship of application. Perhaps the scholarship of application has been of interest to scholars tied most closely to professions. Application brings to bear the knowledge needed to address significant societal issues through development and change. In other words, how can the knowledge help individuals as well as institutions? In the scholarship of application, the agenda for scholarship is defined by groups, organizations, communities, or emergent societal issues. Boyer clarified further his thoughts about application when he stated, "the term itself [application] may be misleading if it suggests that knowledge is first 'discovered' and 'applied.' The process we have in mind is far more dynamic. New intellectual understandings can arise out of the very

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act of application” (p. 23). Lerner (2006), citing Jensen, Hoagwood, and Trickett (1999), makes similar points that research needs to be informed by the people and communities we study, and by their knowledge of development in the context of their daily lives and communities, to insure the connection between the scholarship of knowledge generation and the scholarship of knowledge application.

For researchers working in nonprofit organizations, the focus on application offers the richest opportunities for scholarship and intersection with our academic colleagues. Furthermore, the scholarship of application offers those in the academy new opportunities to find concepts and phenomena of interest that are worthy of discovery “in context” (cf. Benson, Scales, Hamilton, & Sesma, 2006; Lerner, 2006).

### INCREASED IMPORTANCE OF RESEARCH IN THE NONPROFIT WORLD

The role of research within many nonprofit youth organizations has experienced a steep rise in importance during the last 10–15 years. A closer examination of the nonprofit landscape points to three changes to which this increase can be attributed: (1) a push for accountability, (2) changing business models, and (3) emerging research centers within nonprofit organizations as “thought leaders.” Each of these aspects is discussed briefly, but one is encouraged to remember that these aspects did not emerge in a linear fashion—rather, they often influenced each other in a spiraling effect that continues to evolve over time.

While evaluation has long been connected with programs, organizations often were more focused on determining satisfaction levels of youth and their parents/guardians with the program rather than how well the program met its goals. Annual reports documented the various ways organizations were spending the money, and people felt good about the work being done on behalf of children. However, during the mid-1990s, funders began to ask for documentation that showed programs supported by their money were actually achieving desired goals. For example, the United Way began to call for evidence of program outcomes achieved for any organization funded in part with United Way dollars (United Way of America, 1996).

This interest in accountability also extended into the organizations’ business models and evolved into the need for “evidence” that could be used for all types of decision making, including budgeting, programming, and staffing. Organizations began to

hire researchers with advanced degrees to not only help collect data but to infuse the organization with an appreciation for evidence arising from systematic research and evaluation, whether conducted within the organization itself or drawn from the work of others. The landscape of nonprofit youth organizations evolved from one focused on programming based on tradition and professional judgment, and perhaps even at times sheer *belief*, toward one focused more on documented results and improvement processes designed to maximize the quality of the experiences that contribute to positive development.

Researchers in nonprofits often formed teams, departments, or centers within their organizations to deal with the growing need for data to address increasingly complex social issues affecting youth and families (see the Resource List at the end of the article for many examples). In addition, some organizations focused on gathering or generating credible knowledge related to their mission that could speak to the concerns of the general public, policy makers, and other interested parties implementing interventions affecting youth. Research data became pivotal when documenting issues, potential solutions to problems, and the resources needed to make the necessary changes to meet ever-changing demands in working with youth.

As these research centers became more prominent, ways to share and collaborate with other nonprofit youth development researchers emerged. In response to this need, the National Collaboration for Youth Research Group was formed as a forum for researchers from over 50 leading youth development organizations to come together in a collegial and collaborative atmosphere to discuss research challenges, share resources, and explore collaboration efforts. For example, this group submitted conference proposals for panel presentations (Society for Research in Adolescence, 2006) based upon their collective youth research work as a way to reach the academic audience often missing from their dialogue.

Communicating the results of the research coming from nonprofits occurred primarily through reports, executive summaries, and briefings that often translated the most salient messages into implementation strategies and action steps for practitioners. As is typical, little of this research was published in peer-reviewed scholarly journals read by the academic community; however, the research more commonly was presented at professional conferences such as the Society for Research on Adolescence, the American Educational Research Association, and the American Evaluation Association, as well as being published in independent reports.

### KEY RESEARCH IN NONPROFIT ORGANIZATIONS

As mentioned earlier, the focus of research and evaluation in the nonprofit context is almost always tied to the mission orientation of the organization or group conducting or sponsoring the work. Therefore, research has a goal that reaches beyond the research project itself. Because it is tied to this mission orientation, nonprofit research often operates under a heightened sense of urgency: the research is often propelled by initiatives involving program launches, connections to policy discussions, interventions supported by funders, or issues under public discussion that are time sensitive. The focus of nonprofit research leans more heavily toward "Research to Action" than creation of knowledge as an end unto itself. In the nonprofit context, research is most highly valued when it is connected to program development, practice, improvement, implementation, and at times positively moving policy or public opinion related to the mission of the organization. The advantage of research and evaluation conducted in nonprofit settings is that these efforts are often conducted in situations where real change is happening that influences youth development or on issues affecting youth and communities in settings that serve as a "living laboratory" or "naturalistic" setting for the research (cf. Benson et al., 2006; Lerner, 2006). Researchers working in these settings are usually keen to maintain the standards they have learned in their academic training that are essential to doing solid, credible work. Furthermore, these researchers rely upon concepts and techniques developed in academic settings to advance the work they do in the applied context. However, researchers in nonprofit contexts often struggle with settings, and topics, in which the application of traditional "scientific" standards can be quite challenging.

To illustrate the range and variety of research work conducted in nonprofits, we have selected three examples to describe in detail: research conducted by the ACA, the Girl Scouts of the USA, and the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN). A full taxonomy of the kinds of research and evaluation conducted in nonprofits is beyond the scope of this commentary, though it would certainly be a worthwhile undertaking. Instead, we are presenting the examples to demonstrate the links between mission orientation, research focus, and possible implications for youth development research, practice, and policy arenas.

The research for the ACA is driven by the mission, vision, and end statements that focus on enriching

the lives of youth of all social, cultural, and economic groups through a high-quality camp experience. While ACA has been offering resources and services for professional members and the public for over 100 years, no systematic research had been conducted on the actual outcomes from the camp experience and the contribution of camp to the developmental experience of youth. To address this need, ACA worked with Philliber Research Associates to conduct a national study funded by Lilly Endowment, Inc., during 2002–2005 that focused on youth outcomes that resulted from the camp experience. The theoretical framework for the study was grounded in the positive youth development literature. The study design followed a typical pretest, posttest, follow-up design with a stratified sampling of 80 ACA accredited camps. These camps included day/resident, single and multiweek camps, single gender and coed camps, nonprofit and for-profit camps, and religiously affiliated and nonreligious camps. Campers were from diverse backgrounds including race, ethnicity, economic status, age, and gender. Data were collected from over 5,000 campers, their parents/caregivers, and camp staff, including the directors. The paper-pencil survey focused on 10 constructs that fell into one of four domains: positive identity, social skills, physical and thinking skills, and positive values and spirituality.

The overall results suggested that a stay at a summer camp typically benefits youth by helping them become more confident, increasing self-esteem, developing more social skills, growing more independent, demonstrating leadership qualities, becoming more adventurous and willing to try new things, and realizing spiritual growth, especially at camps that emphasized spirituality (Henderson, Bialeschki, Thurber, Schuler-Whitaker, & Marsh, 2007; Thurber, Schuler, Scanlin, & Henderson, 2007). The overall positive growth occurred across all four domains, with most of this growth maintained 6 months later. The positive growth in the outcomes was indicated by the campers as well as their staff and parents (small to moderate effect sizes; Henderson, Schuler, Bialeschki, Scanlin, & Thurber, 2007). When structural elements of the camp experience (session length, sponsorship, director/staff tenure, camp fees) were analyzed, no significant differences in outcomes' change were found. Camper demographics also showed almost no relationship to the amount of growth in the outcomes measured.

This study was critical to documenting and understanding the areas where camps contribute to positive youth development. The research was a first

step in raising the performance bar for camps and identifying areas to build further capacity. For example, the findings were instrumental in bringing changes to the way camps implemented intentional effort and focused staff training around outcomes related to the camp's goals, as well as the needed supports and opportunities to build environments of positive youth development. The study was also the springboard for several other mission-driven national research studies (ACA, 2006a, 2006b) including a project conducted with Youth Development Strategies, Inc., that followed the Community Action Framework for Youth Development (Gambone, Klem, & Connell, 2002). This project examined the extent as well as identified the strategies applied within camps that offer the kinds of experiences research has shown to be critical to adolescent development. The findings from these projects were immediately translated into practices and resources for the youth development field such as the ACA Youth Outcomes Battery, workbooks, online courses, and webinars that reinforced the need for outcomes documentation and continual program improvement strategies that improve the quality of the camp experience. New professional development opportunities have incorporated the research-based information into guided studies that allow individuals to pursue their own learning around positive youth development and quality programming. The findings have also been instrumental in public policy and legislative efforts to position camp as a learning site where youth acquire "learning readiness" and 21st century learning skills (Wagner, 2008). These studies helped ACA understand better the context of the camp experience within positive youth development, the dynamics of structural and personal elements related to the experience of youth in a camp setting, and new directions for future research and public policy that support the mission.

The mission of Girl Scouting is to "build girls of courage, confidence and character, who make the world a better place." Girl Scouting underwent an intensive strategy development process during 2004–2006 and reaffirmed its nearly century-long commitment to promoting *girl leadership development* through its program and policy efforts. Coming out of this intensive process, Girl Scouting carefully identified 15 program outcomes linked to girl leadership development, based on a comprehensive review of the youth leadership, girl leadership, and positive youth development literature (Girl Scouts of the USA, 2008; Schoenberg & Salmond, 2007). One of the conclusions of this review was that a "gender lens" had not yet been applied sufficiently in the

youth leadership research to understand specifically how girl leadership development can best occur (Schoenberg et al., 2007). At various points in the process, academic researchers were also drawn in to comment and advise on the development of the program model, on the conceptual clarity of the outcomes and their connection to previous research, and on the age appropriateness of various indicators and measures (Girl Scouting engages girls in grades K-12). At the same time, Schoenberg and Salmond (2008) conducted original research to examine what "leadership" means to girls and to identify the form of leadership to which they most aspire. The nationwide survey of 2,475 girls and 1,513 boys, ages 8–17, found that more than half of the girls were ambivalent about taking on leadership roles in the future, but that this ambivalence was based on the prevailing view of leadership as "command and control." On the other hand, the majority of girls (68%) said they would want to be leaders who "stand up for their beliefs and values" and that they would like to be a leader "who tries to change the world for the better" (59%). Overall, the research revealed that girls aspire to a kind of leadership focused on personal principles, ethical behavior, and the ability to affect social change while collaborating with others (also see Salmond et al., 2009, on the values of teens and tweens). In many ways, the views of girls and boys on leadership were similar, but there were some noteworthy, statistically significant differences. For example, girls were more likely to want to be leaders because they want to help other people (67% vs. 53%), share their knowledge and skills with others (53% vs. 47%), and change the world for the better (45% vs. 31%). Boys, on the other hand, were significantly more likely than girls to be motivated by the desire to be their own boss (38% vs. 33%), make more money (33% vs. 26%), and have more power (22% vs. 14%).

The information from the original research and reviews of literature was fed forward into program development discussions. New Girl Scout program materials continue to be developed that focus on attaining the 15 identified outcomes. The framework has been shared with curriculum writers who specifically construct activities that are intended to generate those outcomes, while also understanding how girls are most likely to engage in leadership.

Measures of the outcomes and program processes (James & Bastiani, 2009) have been developed and piloted over the past two years. They are now being fielded nationally to identify and measure program strengths, progress, and areas for improvement. An online survey system containing these measures is

being launched (potentially accessible to all Girl Scouts). Through this system, girls' progress through the Girl Scout program can be tracked at multiple points in time and data can be summarized at the local (i.e., Girl Scout council) and national level. As the implementation of new program occurs, careful monitoring will help gauge progress toward the program goals and will suggest interventions at both local and national levels to improve goal achievement. Girl Scout councils are also engaged in a series of program, volunteer development, and research/outcomes webinars to help ensure that implementation of the model occurs with fidelity.

The Girl Scout work builds on positive youth development research (cf. Benson et al., 2006), and it connects with positive psychology investigations into the development of values, character, and youth civic engagement (cf. Lerner, 2007; Peterson, 2006; Peterson & Seligman, 2004). At the same time, the Girl Scout work takes on a different vantage point that is relevant for applied research and program development due to the direct link between research and action impacting over two million girls. Nonetheless, there is still much to do to connect this work more vigorously with applied developmental science and to share the learning that has occurred through this process, methodologically and in terms of content, with other programs.

Research by the GLSEN (Kosciw et al., 2008) points to pervasive and continuing harassment of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) middle and high school students. The mission statement for GLSEN is to "strive to assure that each member of every school community is valued and respected regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity/expression." The GLSEN survey of over 6,209 LGBT middle and high school students (grades 6–12) included students from all 50 states and the District of Columbia from 2,651 unique school districts. In an effort to reach as representative a sample as possible, several methods were used to recruit participants for the study, including outreach through community-based groups or service organizations serving LGBT youth as well posting an online survey which was advertised through LGBT youth-oriented listserves and MySpace. The survey found that nearly 90% of LGBT students (86.2%) experienced harassment at school during the previous year. In addition, 60.8% felt unsafe at school and 32.7% skipped a day of school in the previous month because of feeling unsafe. Harassment also appeared to impact school performance: Those youth who reported being more frequently harassed had a reported grade point average almost half a grade lower

(on a 4-point scale) than youth who were less frequently harassed.

The GLSEN (Kosciw et al., 2008) study also points toward some contextual supports that improve the conditions experienced by LGBT students: schools with a Gay-Straight Alliance, with a presence of supportive staff, and/or with a safe school policy based on sexual orientation and/or gender identity/expression experience fewer problems and often have a greater sense of belonging, among other positive indicators. However, only about a third of the students who were surveyed reported that these contextual supports were in place in their school. As can be seen on the GLSEN website (<http://www.glsen.org>), the results of the research have been used for several purposes, such as advocating for comprehensive safe-school and antidiscrimination legislation at the state and federal level, advocating for training of school staff to improve rates of intervention when harassment and bullying occur, and supporting the efforts of Gay Straight Alliances in schools to improve school climate for all students.

The resource list included at the end of this article highlights a cross section of youth-serving nonprofits active in a variety of research efforts. A perusal of the sites shows the research areas have breadth as well as depth in youth development issues and that much of the research is mission driven with the intent of gathering or producing evidence upon which to base practice and/or policy. For example, Child Trends maintains a comprehensive database of research and evaluation studies with the mission of improving "outcomes for children [and youth] by providing research, data, and analysis to the people and institutions whose decisions and actions affect children, including program providers, the policy community, researchers and educators, and the media." For anyone interested in 4-H research, Dr. Scholl (n.d.) from Penn State University has tracked every research project ever conducted with 4-H. Much of the research conducted by these nonprofits could be viewed precisely as the kind of application research recommended by Boyer (1990).

#### THE NEED FOR RESEARCHERS ON ADOLESCENCE TO COME TOGETHER

The fact that nonprofit research and evaluation is typically carried out in settings where real change is happening presents an opportunity for academics and nonprofit researchers to come together to do translational research that results in application and integration scholarship. Researchers in nonprofit youth organizations envision translational research

operating in a two-way relationship: nonprofit researchers benefiting greatly from the conceptual substance and methodological rigor of the academic approach and academics gaining insights into relevant issues, access to settings and audiences, and a way to influence practice by applying developmental science through collaborations with the nonprofit field. We see the translation involving an arc in which theory and practice are in close communion. This kind of work would stand in a long tradition of action research (Brydon-Miller, Greenwood, & Maguire, 2003; Lewin, 1946) and relates closely to work in applied developmental science (Lerner, 2006) and the positive youth development field (Benson et al., 2006). Now that research and evaluation have become prominent within nonprofit organizations, intellectual and institutional structures are developing that provide the basis for ongoing, productive collaboration among nonprofit and academic researchers. These collaborations will present some challenges given the differing reward structures and systems within which we work, but we are optimistic that engagement will be productive.

The recognition that research on adolescence is conducted in multiple types of settings by a variety of researchers who often operate under different structures, varied reward and value systems, and multiple perspectives on why the research needs to be done is an important step. The discussion about the gap between research and practice will continue, even as greater attempts are made to build bridges. However, one thing is clear: recognition and awareness of the research conducted in and out of the academy and how that research gets shared are critical to the creation of a more complete body of knowledge. There are many challenging issues and questions concerning adolescence that require ongoing inquiry and the generation of new knowledge. These efforts will require the best thinkers no matter in which world—the academy or nonprofit—they choose to work.

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- Girl Scouts of the USA/Girl Scout Research Institute. Retrieved from <http://www.girlscouts.org/research>
- HIPPY: Home Instruction for Parents of Preschool Youngsters. Retrieved from <http://www.hippyusa.org/research.php>
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## RESOURCE LIST AND WEB SITES OF SELECT YOUTH NONPROFIT ORGANIZATIONS

The list below contains links to research work mostly conducted by or for nonprofits that represents the range of work described in this article. Though comprehensive, this list is not exhaustive. Most of the organizations listed below are members of the National Collaboration for Youth

- Afterschool Alliance. Retrieved from <http://www.afterschoolalliance.org/research.cfm>
- Alliance for Children & Families. Retrieved from <http://www.alliance1.org/>