

# ADVANCING EQUITY IN YOUTH DEVELOPMENT:

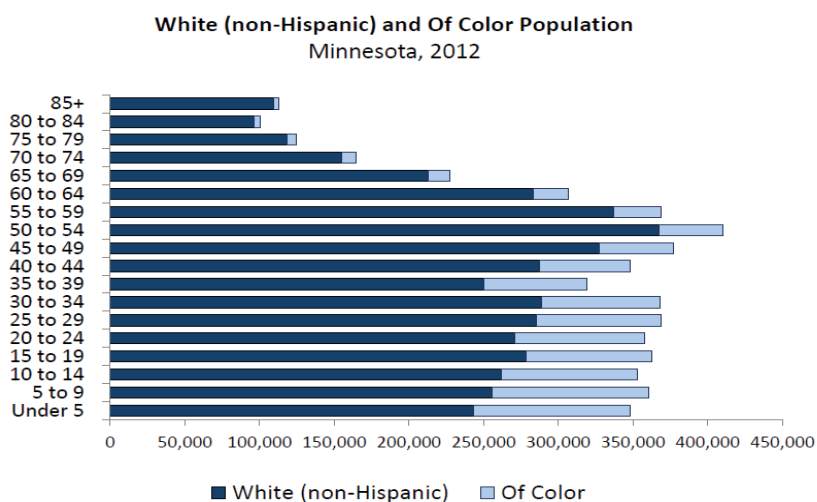
## A Call to Action in a Changing World

By Kathryn Sharpe

*Two Somali young women stand backstage waiting to compete at the State Fair, nervously peering out at the audience seated in front of the stage—mostly white, many wearing John Deere caps or waving fans from the agriculture building in the sweltering heat. The young women practice their lines for their skit about the experience of wearing a headscarf. Then their names are called, they take a deep breath, smile wide, and step onto stage, the new face of 4-H. In an organization historically known for white rural farm kids showing their cows at the State Fair, these young women are part of the process of the organization's evolution as it seeks to engage with today's diverse youth in new ways, thereby transforming not only its demographics but also its way of doing business.*

All over the U.S., similar scenes are playing out in long-standing youth development programs. Figure 1 gives a snapshot of Minnesota's racial makeup, which is reflected throughout the U.S. As demographics change and the population of youth ages 6-21 becomes more racially and ethnically diverse, we are also witnessing an increase in diversity in terms of religion, nationality, immigration status, sexual orientation and gender identity, as well as the range of physical and mental abilities. This presents a dramatically different population than the one that many youth development organizations have evolved to serve, especially the ones I am calling legacy youth development organizations which have 100+ years of existence and a national reach (i.e. 4-H, YWCA and YMCA, Girl Scouts and Boy Scouts, and others). As the demographic makeup of the U.S. undergoes a sea change of diversification, these organizations are facing critical questions: Who are we in the 21st century? Whom will we serve in 20 years?

**FIGURE 1. MINNESOTA BY RACE, 2012**



Source: 2012 Population Estimates, U.S. Census Bureau

As these legacy youth development organizations now seek to engage a more diverse generation, they approach this growth process from the context of a long historical tradition of being predominantly white, middle class, heteronormative, and U.S.-born. Their policies and practices reflect this, and they must wrestle with their own institutional racism and other kinds of systemic discrimination as well. This requires them to realize that diversity and equity are not the same thing, and that simply becoming more inclusive of diversity is not sufficient. In a society with such dramatic disparities and inequities, these organizations must address equity at a deeper level, which requires them not only to shift the demographics of their participants and staff, but also to change how decisions are made and resources are allocated.

If we truly believe that all young people deserve the benefits of youth development programs to help them thrive, how do we need to change what we are doing in order to more equitably serve the diverse youth in this generation? *For these legacy youth development organizations to stay relevant in the 21st Century and engage in best practices for quality youth development, they must work to create equity in their programs.*

Many of these legacy organizations were originally created a century ago to reach out to marginalized young people, such as isolated rural children of immigrant families or low-income youth living in urban tenements. Yet over time they have developed into organizations primarily serving the majority population (Russell & Van Campen, 2011). Now, as the population of youth diversifies, these organizations are seeking to serve these more diverse and marginalized<sup>1</sup> youth, but to do so effectively requires significant self-reflection and the willingness to change in fundamental ways. Their role in advancing equity is especially important because of the significant impact they have, given their size and level of influence in youth development, as well as the large number of youth they serve. In addition, they are also well positioned to bring together youth from dominant culture and marginalized young people to build much-needed interconnectedness in our society.

What brings me to this research focus is that so I am part of one of these legacy youth development organizations; I have worked for over eight years at the University of Minnesota Extension Center for Youth Development with the 4-H program. A major focus of my work with 4-H has been in developing strategies to reach out to and engage traditionally underserved communities, to cultivate new youth and families, to recruit and train more diverse volunteers, and to establish partnerships with organizations that serve these communities. As a white, U.S.-born, middle-class, cis-gendered woman who is highly formally educated, this work has brought into high relief for me the critical importance of self-reflection about my own privilege and employing strategies to manage it. I have found important tools for myself in this work in the emerging research around implicit bias and strategies for mitigating bias. As my own organization undertakes this pivot in our internal culture in order to engage traditionally underserved audiences and to create more equitable conditions, I see how my own personal process parallels that of the historically majority-dominated organization and of my colleagues within it, as well.

Therefore, I went in search of research and leaders who could shed some light on best practices, as well as pitfalls, on this journey. Because I could not take on every complex aspect of this topic, I decided to focus my research on the organizations' structures, staff, and leadership. While I fundamentally believe in the importance of being informed by youth and marginalized communities, for this study I am choosing to focus on the processes within the organization. I foresee a future companion study in conversation with community members.

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<sup>1</sup> I am using the term "marginalized" in the same way as Russell & Van Campen: "To denote the ways that some young people are pushed to the margins; that emphasizes the social processes that render youth marginal, rather than focusing on deficits based in the person (i.e. defining youth as 'at risk' or 'vulnerable')." (Russell & Van Campen, 2011)

For this paper, I interviewed four leaders who have invested significant work into advancing equity within youth development organizations. Celina Martina spent 10 years as Community Partnership Director at Girl Scouts of Minnesota and Wisconsin River Valleys, where she was tasked with engaging diverse communities. Dorothy McCargo Freeman has spent her entire career in the 4-H program and now serves at the Associate Dean of the University of Minnesota Extension Center for Youth Development and State Leader for the MN 4-H program, where she has been working to transform it into a more diverse and inclusive program that serves all Minnesota young people. Arnoldo Curiel is the Vice President for Racial Justice and Public Policy at the YWCA Minneapolis, where he provides leadership on racial equity and public policy. And John-Paul Chaisson-Cárdenas serves as the state 4-H Youth Development program leader for Iowa State University Extension and Outreach, where he has spent his first two years undertaking a major initiative to diversify and build a more equitable program. Through my interviews with each of them, I garnered significant feedback on the paths they have taken as organizational leaders. I have also drawn upon my own experience as a front-line youth worker and now middle manager engaged in organizational change and interpersonal transformation.

## EQUITY IN THE CONTEXT OF YOUTH DEVELOPMENT

For youth workers and youth development organizations to advance equity, it is essential for them to build their intercultural competence and to address implicit biases, both as individuals and as organizations. While it is critical that we do personal work to cultivate cultural humility and to challenge our own acquired judgments, it is not enough. Organizations are ingrained with the racism, gender bias, homophobia, sexism, ableism, and xenophobia that the society inculcates; therefore these need to be addressed systemically. Even a group of highly culturally-responsive youth workers will be stymied if they work within an organization whose policies or practices are at odds with their purposes. Similarly, an organization may undertake major systemic changes to become more equitable, but if the staff and volunteers do not have opportunities to engage in a similar process of reflection and transformation, they can thwart the process. Therefore, for an organization to truly transform its own ways of being and become more inclusive and equitable, the process must include all levels of the organization engaging in a process of identifying biases and then actively employing strategies to mitigate them.

These changes are often framed by members of dominant identities as a challenge to be tackled or as a problem to be solved. And yet this mindset keeps us in a reactive, problem-focused mindset. Organizations may ask themselves, “How can we do more outreach to let people know about our program?” or “How do we get more of X community to participate in our programs?” Yet it is important that we transition from a problem-focused approach to diversity (i.e. avoiding discriminatory practices) to a more assets-based approach, seeing diversity as a strategic resource to enhance an organization’s performance (Jansen, Otten, & van der Zee, 2015). We need to move toward asking, “What are the needs and desires of this community? How do we need to evolve and grow in order to partner authentically with them?”

Youth development organizations are particularly well-positioned to undertake this work, since it is highly consistent with a positive youth development approach. We need to bring our youth development philosophy and approach to our own organizational systems; we need to live the values we wish to instill in young people. Gisela Konopka (1973) argued in her seminal piece, *Requirements for Healthy Development of Adolescent Youth*, that we must embrace differences in the context of our heterogeneous society, and we should promote egalitarianism as an ideal. Conversely, we must reject all forms of discrimination, since they are destructive to all people, but especially to young people who are just establishing their identities. In particular, marginalized youth experience serious negative impacts on their wellbeing as a result of discrimination, and youth programs are well-positioned to provide the strong interpersonal supports that

can serve as buffers and cultivate resilience in the face of societal discrimination (Russell & Van Campen, 2011). We can approach these changes as a fertile opportunity to reflect on our practices and their result, and to consider what our new best practices might be. The policies, practices, staff, and volunteers we have engaged so far have been successful in bringing the youth and families with whom we are currently working. But if these organizations are truly committed to engaging all youth, how can we expand the definition of who is included in “everyone”? How could we transform our goals, our policies, our staffing, and our practices to create a youth development organization that will attract and retain the full range of young people in the community, and do it in an equitable way? We must engage the voices and listen to the needs of these under-represented audiences.

## ADVANCING EQUITY: BEYOND DIVERSITY OR EQUALITY

I chose to focus this paper on equity within youth development organizations, understanding it is an umbrella which encompasses many aspects of diversity and inclusion. When we talk about diversity, it can be understood as, “[...] a program looks like the population of the area...where you live, work, and play. You have the diversity of the people” (D. McCargo Freeman, personal communication, May 27, 2016). Equality is focused on ensuring that everyone gets the same resources or treatment: “The person at the front line has the same voice as the person at the top who’s making decisions” (A. Curiel, personal communication, April 29, 2016). In contrast, equity instead addresses the root issues: it describes an equalizing of the balance of power, access to programs and opportunity, allocation of resources, and decision-making power, in addition to ensuring a diverse range of people are included:

*Equity/Equitable – The proportional distribution or parity of desirable outcomes across groups. Sometimes confused with equality, equity refers to outcomes, while equality connotes equal treatment. Where individuals or groups are dissimilarly situated, equal treatment may be insufficient for or even detrimental to equitable outcomes. An example of equity is individualized educational accommodations for students with disabilities, which treat some students differently in order to ensure the equitable access to education” (Landrieu et al., 2016).*

This definition calls us to assess not only what we are doing in our programs, but to also focus on what the results are, regardless of the intention of the practice or policy. John-Paul Chaisson- Cárdenas provides a concrete understanding of why it matters that we strive for equity and not simply equality:

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*Equity is what people need, when they need it. So it is different than equality. And in some contexts, equality has been actually a barrier to some of the work that needs to happen....So if we continue to... [use] the common phrase, ‘Rising tides will raise all boats,’ it simply does not work when you have started way below or you have an anchor attached to you” (personal communication, May 6, 2016).*

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Chaisson- Cárdenas expresses that as organizations take on advancing equity more is demanded than simply increasing diversity. The work demands an assessment of how the organization’s ways of functioning may have reinforced the inequities in society, and then the willingness to make sometimes difficult changes

such as in reallocating resources from an even distribution to instead allocating them where there is greater need (D. McCargo Freeman, personal communication, May 27, 2016). An example from my own organization is that 4-H has built a system of competition among youth that is focused on individual competition. While this has largely worked well for the European-American youth who have been the majority population, this approach does not work as well for youth from more collectivist cultures, including many of our immigrant communities where people value working together to achieve, rather than highlighting the efforts of only one member (Russell & Van Campen, 2011). In addition, families who are new to the program might not have the resources or expertise to support their child in producing a competitive project, so the young person may prefer to work on it as part of a group. But where can organizations start in addressing equity? One strategy is to build cultural and intercultural competence.

### THE IMPORTANCE OF CULTURAL COMPETENCE IN EQUITY

In order to work to advance equity within these organizations with decades of established protocols for how they function, which often feel exclusive to non-majority community members, they must work on two fronts: 1) fostering cultural competence and 2) addressing bias at an organizational and individual level. Later in this paper, I will take a deeper dive into implicit bias. But cultural competence is a critical starting point. As John-Paul Chaisson-Cárdenas asserts, “Culturally competent practice is good practice...Good practice is always culturally competent...” (personal communication, May 6, 2016). In the 21<sup>st</sup> Century when working with a large number of youth across the U.S. fundamentally requires working with youth from a wide variety of backgrounds, youth development organizations must grapple with cultural competence in order to serve the youth well. One definition of culturally competent organizations comes from Minnesota State Colleges and Universities:

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*A culturally competent organization values the people who work there, understands the community in which it operates, and embraces its clients as valuable members of that community. The organization promotes inclusiveness, institutionalizes the process of learning about differences and demonstrates a willingness to expand the organization's paradigm for culture (Adapted from Moodian, M.A. (Ed.), 2008).*

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This definition makes clear that cultural competence is something that happens at the organizational level, but also must be embodied by the individuals within that system.

Ignite Afterschool, Minnesota's statewide out-of-school time network, puts a finer point on what the principles of cultural responsiveness look like within a youth development context. It creates a welcoming and inclusive environment, and informs the relationships that staff members have with participants. When describing programs that are responsive to culture and identity, they write, “Programs create a safe and adaptive environment which recognizes that culture, family and personal history are core to a young person's identity formation” (Ignite Afterschool, 2015). This includes staff practices of creating a space where young people are free to explore their identities, cultural beliefs, and practices, as well as to engage with others' in a way that is respectful and builds self-esteem. In addition, the “[p]rogram makes a genuine effort to ensure staff reflect the diverse race, gender, culture, sexual orientation, language and special needs of the young people being served” (Ignite Afterschool, 2015). Therefore, cultural competence and responsiveness calls upon us to grow in our ability to engage productively with questions of identity and culture, but also to change our practices, such as hiring and retaining a diverse workforce.



Some people argue that rather than leaning into difference of culture and identity, we should instead adopt a “colorblind” policy as a way to promote fairness and equality among all people, regardless of identity or background. Yet some studies have found that colorblindness can actually reinforce inequity. In educational settings, colorblind approaches (treating race as taboo or invisible) can actually mask discriminatory classroom practices or school policies (i.e. racial disparities in school discipline if the school does not track incidents of discipline by the race of the student). In addition, teaching children in a colorblind manner makes them less likely to perceive discrimination when it occurs, and it deprives them of learning the language they need in order to communicate effectively about a situation that involves racial discrimination. Similarly, adults with colorblind attitudes are less likely to perceive workplace micro-aggressions (Plaut, 2014). The fundamental flaw of a colorblind approach is that it completely dismissed the fact that our society and so many of its systems are *not* colorblind, and that people have profoundly different experiences (e.g. in hiring, policing, disciplinary action, or housing) based on their race or other aspects of their identity.

So how can we expand the sense of “us” within an organization in order to be inclusive of more diversity, especially in organizations whose staff might not currently reflect the full diversity of the community, and who may not all be on board with the changes necessary to engage youth in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? One strategy shown to be effective through research is called all-inclusive multiculturalism. This approach includes majority members in the definition of multiculturalism, and research has shown it to be more effective than traditional multiculturalism approaches at getting support from members of the majority (Plaut, 2014). This strategy is not simply about making white or other majority members feel more “comfortable,” but rather about helping everyone find their shared common ground. Employing this approach may be particularly helpful in organizations with a high percentage of majority staff members. For example, some organizations have embraced “1<sup>st</sup> Generation” initiatives, focusing both on traditionally-underserved communities and on families who have never been involved in their programs. “[T]hat’s why we have named it ‘1<sup>st</sup> Generation’, because that takes in more broadly than ethnicity, but it also helps us to see our idiosyncrasies that make it less inviting or less welcoming to young people. So the approach is to recognize that there is stuff...that keeps all people from feeling like they are part of us” (D. McCargo Freeman, personal communication, May 27, 2016). This initiative has been highly successful in engaging staff members from rural, vastly majority white communities so that they can see themselves in the work of inclusion. This example illustrates what studies have found: that an all-inclusive multiculturalism approach increased a sense of inclusion for all organization members, and this inclusion, in turn, predicted more support for organizational diversity efforts by majority members (Jansen et al., 2015; Plaut, 2014). At the same time, however, it is essential to acknowledge that changing policies and practices to make them more welcoming to new members of the majority community will not necessarily translate to marginalized communities. A 1<sup>st</sup> Generation initiative should not be seen as a way to side-step critical issues such as race and ethnicity, for example. It cannot erase the differences in experience of youth of color, Native youth, disabled youth, or LGBTQ youth. Addressing often well-entrenched policies and practices requires assessing the impacts they have had, and that process leads us to recognizing the role of implicit bias.

### **WHEN WE DON’T EVEN KNOW WHAT WE ARE THINKING: IMPLICIT BIAS AND ITS ROLE IN EQUITY**

Neurosocial research has revealed that human beings are influenced constantly by both positive and negative subconscious associations about others, based on characteristics such as race, gender, age, accents, and many other aspects of our identity. This phenomenon is known as implicit bias and has significant implications in our behavior and judgments. Implicit, or unconscious, biases occur involuntarily and are beyond both our awareness and our conscious control (Staats, Capatosto, Wright, & Contractor, 2015). In fact, they often are contrary to what we *think* we believe. The brain naturally has two major systems for thinking: System 1 is quick, instinctive, happens in the back of the brain with little effort, and tends to be

highly biased because it is based on inputs from the world around us. System 2 thinking is slower, occurs in the front of the brain with more effort, and can serve as a brake on System 1's bias, allowing us to question our own judgments (Staats, 2015). While everyone has implicit biases, the good news is that we can address them and even mitigate their effects (Lieberman, Rock, & Cox, 2014).

Youth development organizations are uniquely well-positioned to do the work of addressing implicit bias because it is consistent with the process of youth development. Based on what neuroscience is teaching us, addressing implicit bias requires us to utilize the inherent plasticity of the brain, interrupting existing neural networks of unconscious judgments, engaging in intentional reflection, and establishing new neural networks employing the "System 2" thinking using the prefrontal cortex. The same brain plasticity that we are working with in educating young people is also our best tool in addressing and reducing implicit biases (J. P. Chaisson-Cárdenas, personal communication, May 6, 2016). So how can we address implicit bias in order to advance equity in legacy youth development organizations?

## THE POWER TO MAKE CHANGE FOR EQUITY

As organizations address implicit bias to advance equity, we must address the question that Celina Martina posed: "What is the intersection of power and equity? Is it that only power can propel effective equity work? Can equity happen organically without a power structure, without the forces of power?" (personal communication, May 23, 2016). This power can come from leaders who have positional power within an institution or from a movement among the grassroots staff and volunteers. But ultimately they must work at both the organizational/policy level and the individual staff/practice level. Chaisson-Cárdenas expressed this interconnectedness between individual and organizational change:

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*[I]t is both/and. I mean, we are trying to change the culture. It's not only a system. If you go back to the research on implicit bias, it is individual, but the same processes are paralleled within a system... because systems are living organisms. So the biases of individuals extend up to the biases of the organization. You cannot separate those. Any time you try to separate those...is when you get in trouble. That is why training has to go hand-in-hand with the policy change. It is the 'so what?' of policy change (personal communication, May 6, 2016).*

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Training can help staff and volunteers to engage in personal reflection, confront their unconscious judgments, and transform their habits of thinking. The changes, however, must be addressed at multiple levels of the organization because if they are not, policy-level changes that are not supported by the actions of staff will be empty policies, and conversely, staff who transform their attitudes and practices will find themselves running up against inequitable policies. I will lay out strategies for building equity and mitigating implicit bias that can be applied by people at various levels within the organization.

## PROVIDING LEADERSHIP FROM THE TOP: ENGAGING IN ORGANIZATIONAL-LEVEL CHANGE

People in a position of organizational leadership can make a powerful contribution to the work of advancing equity and addressing implicit bias by setting it as a key priority, inspiring change, and establishing accountability. Chaisson-Cárdenas stated:

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*I think really [taking] things from a systemic approach has been very successful, and so I think we are starting to change the tone and the culture of the organization. And I would say, actually, we took it from the top-down. At the beginning I was the flag bearer for equity and inclusion. And it's not because there's not great allies or folks in the organization, but because I felt that it really does have to [come from] the State Leader for a reason....But little by little, it began to be saturated or consumed by really wonderful folks in our organization...It is the buy-in that really makes the difference (personal communication, May 6, 2016).*

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He makes a strong argument for the role of a leader with positional power who can work on multiple facets: lead the strategy, spearhead execution, and establish accountability. Celina Martina explains further the organizational dynamics that make it advantageous to have a leader:

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*...[I]n my successful experiences working with equity, there is a level of power that has to be there in order to move the work forward. So whether it is a designated staff, whether it is a leader within a department, or even a youth participant that works toward that, it has to be assigned. It is work that has to be assigned and defined because [otherwise] it is overlooked and we are sucked into the current systems. So by dedicating money, time, staff, salary, title...we move towards equity work versus trying to have it happen organically. It may happen organically by...some, by movements of people, but it is harder...it is just hard to overcome some barriers. Because...the organic movements of equity work also have to know how to navigate the system, so within that movement also there is a leader (personal communication, May 23, 2016).*

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She highlights the fact that much of equity work depends on navigating systems of power so as to change them, and while this can happen from the grassroots, it is more efficient if it happens from a leadership level with positional power. This is the level at which HR policies and hiring decisions can be analyzed for their impact and changed as necessary. For example, if one of the qualifications for a job is having previous experience in the organization, and if the organization lacks diversity, then that is an inherent barrier to hiring more diverse staff. Simply by removing that expectation, an organization can transform its staffing (J. P. Chaisson-Cárdenas, personal communication, May 6, 2016).

The danger, however, of having efforts led by someone who is designated as the leader, either an individual or team, was expressed by all of my interviewees: the leader can become the scapegoat if things do not go well; they can be overloaded and under-resourced; their colleagues can see them as the “experts” to whom everyone else then defers; or it can be seen that equity work is “their work,” rather than work on everyone’s plate. McCargo Freeman suggests a way to counteract this danger: “My vision is that everyone is responsible for [equity]. The organization has to set a responsibility. But the leader can’t make it happen until everyone in the organization is expected to drive that vision forward” (personal communication, May 27, 2016). Chaisson-Cárdenas describes how equity work is operationalized throughout their program: “It’s a job expectation that got included in everyone’s position description, so there is nobody who doesn’t have it in our system now as...part of their work. If they’re not doing it, then we’re going to have words...It’s a big part



of their review” (personal communication, May 6, 2016). This approach of collective accountability was agreed upon by each of my interviewees as critical for truly transforming the culture and functioning of an organization.

One of the most effective roles that a leader for equity can play is that of “disrupter,” using their role to pose critical reflective questions to engage people in deeper thinking (J. P. Chaisson-Cárdenas, personal communication, May 6, 2016). McCargo Freeman explains her approach:

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*My way, when I hear odd things, is just to turn around and ask questions...So I try not to argue with people about their idiosyncrasies because it's a bias that they carry, and the only way that you can deal with that is to help them to think, to bring it from the back of the head, as John-Paul tells us, to the front. And the only way you can do that is to begin to ask them questions. You can't get angry because we all have biases, and anger doesn't...do anything but cause people to want to hang onto their biases. So you have to engage them in thinking, you have to engage them in experiences if you can so that they come to a different understanding for themselves (personal communication, May 27, 2016).*

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This process of engaging critical thinking is actually moving people out of their more biased System 1 thinking, and engaging their analytical System 2 thinking which is able to reflect upon their initial judgment, and allows them a greater array of cognitive tools to revise their thinking.

It is also critical for youth development programs to be engaging directly with the youth and community members who are the target audience, and to listen to their voices in order to get beyond biased perceptions of them:

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*The ones that are not very effective, certainly, are the ones that are top-down without representation... of the youth you want to serve or the communities you want to reach. So basically, if you define a strategy, define a program without the impacted youth...if you don't know what they need and what they want, why would [you] develop a program? If you don't consider the needs and wants, and the authentic needs and wants (not what you learned, what you stereotype as a community), but authentic needs and wants...you might be surprised (C. Martina, personal communication, May 23, 2016).*

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Too often, organizations create programs without truly partnering with communities and youth, and they make the mistake of assuming that they can simply invite young people from different backgrounds into their existing programs, and then don't understand why no one comes or stays long-term.

For leaders who are interested in addressing implicit bias at the organizational level, there are strategies that research has found to be effective:

- **Crowdsourcing:** Groups who work together on a decision tend to make better and less biased decisions than an individual's decision, therefore engaging larger numbers of people can help to reduce bias (Lieberman et al., 2014).
- **Engaging in deliberative processing:** Implicit biases tend to be strongest in situations where a decision-maker is under time pressure or stress, so it can be helpful if the organization can intentionally slow down major decision-making processes in order to allow time for more deliberative, less biased thinking (Staats et al., 2015).
- **Mitigating objectivism biases:** Known as the “blind spot bias”, this bias is the result of us believing that our experience of the world is a direct and accurate representation of how things are in the world. Because we are convinced that our version of reality is the true one, it can be extremely difficult to acknowledge other people's realities. To mitigate this type of bias, it is helpful for an organization to establish decision-making processes that intentionally engage others' perspectives by requesting outside opinions (Lieberman et al., 2014).
- **Mitigating self-protection biases:** Known as “in-group/out-group biases”, these come from our natural tendencies to view people who are similar to us positively, and to have more negative perceptions of people who are different from us. These biases can be particularly harmful in organizations, especially as they are diversifying. One strategy for organizations to counteract these biases is to promote opportunities for people from different backgrounds to highlight the values and goals that they all share. Another strategy is to make it a policy in hiring processes to remove identifying features from applications in order to prevent potential bias (Lieberman et al., 2014).

While organizations are made up of a collection of individuals, organizational bias reflects larger societal issues of systemic racism and other prejudices, and these can only be transformed by insuring they are addressed consistently at an organizational level.

### THE IMPORTANCE OF THE GRASSROOTS: TRANSFORMATION FROM THE INDIVIDUAL LEVEL

In order to be effective, efforts to increase equity and de-bias an organization must also engage individual staff and volunteers, since policies alone will not transform the organization. One of the strongest themes that emerged from my interviews was the importance of building relationships among people from different backgrounds as a de-biasing strategy in order to work effectively across differences. The benefits of diversity don't come from merely co-existing in the same organization, they come from having meaningful interactions beyond their own comfort zones; and those experiences often need to be facilitated in order to occur (Bruni, 2015).

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*But the implicit [goal] is to get our staff in contact with the [diverse] youth, so they can see that they're youth, so they can get past the fear....It's amazing what happens when we have staff that sometimes have struggled with that fear, just have contact and conversations. Their whole way of looking at the world changes. One of the mistakes I had made in previous positions... is that I did too much theoretical work where you don't have the chance to actually do the hands-on and work with kids who may be different. I don't believe that kind of training in absentia works very well. I think...this is just one of those things you've just gotta do. You gotta throw yourself in the pool (J.P. Chaisson-Cárdenas, personal communication, May 6, 2016).*

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Here he highlights the need for lived experience—many of these changes are not ones that come on an intellectual level, but rather that come from relational experience.

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*[On addressing bias] It is more about taking time to learn from one another, intentionally... You cannot always be the cultural broker, you cannot always be the person that really paves the way, because it is tiring. So how you develop opportunities for relationship building, for common understanding, that will eventually eliminate bias, and your unconscious bias will certainly be diminished...Then people take ownership of their own education, then people really do feel empowered....(C. Martina, personal communication, May 23, 2016).*

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Here she explains how building relationships allows individuals to take on their own active learning about diversity and equity, and it no longer needs to be mediated by a “cultural broker”. It is also at this individual level where transformation is most evident to the participants and community members we are trying to engage in our programs. “In equity work, there is this theory that you change policies and practices and that will then modify behavior, but I guess people of color are more particularly inclined to see individual change” (C. Martina, personal communication, May 23, 2016). Ultimately, it is this personal encounter that tends to define how people experience an organization and its ethics.

Fortunately, the implicit bias literature offers a variety of approaches for mitigating bias at the individual level, as well, as is recognized by Staats et al. (2015):

- **Intergroup contact:** By sharing experiences with people from the group about whom we have subconscious judgments, we can establish new associations. To be effective, the individuals should share equal status, common goals, and be in a cooperative rather than a competitive environment.
- **Sense of accountability:** Having the sense that one will need to justify one’s decisions, feelings, or behaviors can decrease the influence of bias.
- **Taking the perspective of others:** This strategy can reduce bias because the practice of considering others’ viewpoints or taking into account multiple perspectives moves the brain from automatic biases into more reflective processing.

These strategies need to be taught and implemented, and people need to have opportunities to practice them consistently in order to have them become truly transformative.

### GROUP APPROACHES FOR BUILDING CAPACITY AMONG STAFF

One effective strategy to facilitate this evolution is developing an employee-led learning cohort focused on equity and cultural competence. This strategy provides for a supportive space to learn together, take risks and make mistakes, and to build an organized group of change-agents within the organization who can help it to address issues of policy and practice. This makes the learning more personal and not just abstract, and can provide both the challenge for learners to grow, and also the support they need to rise to those challenges (Drago-Severson et al., 2001). Within this cohort, an essential focus should be on recognizing and mitigating implicit bias, both as individuals and also identifying ways in which the organization may address collective biases. A staff-led process which originates from the grassroots of the organization and which engages staff in multiple levels of power within the organization can help to address internal issues of power and privilege. This is a necessary step in order to make new power relationships possible, as well as to

open the space for questioning how the organization engages with power and privilege with youth and communities.

In my own organization, we have created two separate learning and action cohorts on the themes of diversity and inclusion. They have been tremendously important opportunities for taking risks, learning collaboratively, and creating an affinity group of staff with whom we have been able to engage in ongoing collaborations related to diversity and inclusion, as well as to lobby for policy changes. In the first state-wide yearlong cohort, 100% of participants reported that they had gained a deeper understanding of their culture and privilege, were better able to understand the role of diversity and culture in their work, and had improved their ability to shift between perspectives (Landrieu et al., 2014). The second cohort is still in process at the time of this writing, but it has had an increased focus on addressing implicit bias and addressing themes of power and oppression. Both of these cohorts have demonstrated that people have agency to make change in their own spheres of influence through collaborative learning, as well as creating a collective voice to make organizational change.

## **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

As legacy organizations adapt to the new reality of working with youth and communities in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, they need to evolve in order to stay relevant. In order to effectively serve the broad range of diverse youth in the current population, these organizations and their staff and volunteers must embrace equity in their work. Ultimately, the process of organizational change will depend on where the primary awareness and leadership exist to provide the impulsion for change, but long-term it must be carried out at all levels of the organization if it is to be sustainable for the future.

While it can be highly effective to have an inspirational leader who is spearheading the changes, it also can leave the organization vulnerable to identifying the work as only “their crusade” (A. Curiel, personal communication, April 29, 2016). It also can be disempowering to staff and volunteers, much like adult dominance can disempower youth in youth programs. A bottom-up approach may be more grounded in the community and led by the frontline staff who have those direct contacts, but it may not be effective at changing the policies that can sustain change even when staff turnover occurs.

Topics I suggest for future research include engaging marginalized youth and communities to provide leadership in the transformation of youth development organizations; learning from the wisdom of organizations founded by and for marginalized communities; and exploring the science of organizational development and change literature to learn about processes that can facilitate this transformation. These topics will become increasingly salient as our country changes and youth development organizations find their changing place in it.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**KATHRYN SHARPE** is an Extension Educator with the University of Minnesota Extension Center for Youth Development, based in the Urban office. Her primary focus in youth development is on advancing cultural competence and equity through efforts such as a statewide Diversity and Inclusion cohort and a Cultural Exchange program that she piloted, and on building the capacity of caring adults to work with young people through youth worker and volunteer training. In addition, Kathryn has led the development of many civic engagement/youth leadership clubs and experiences focused on engaging traditionally underserved communities, especially immigrant communities. Her graduate research in human geography focused on immigration and social movements. Through 4-H, she seeks to provide youth with opportunities to discover their own passions and to enlarge their sense of what is possible in life.

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