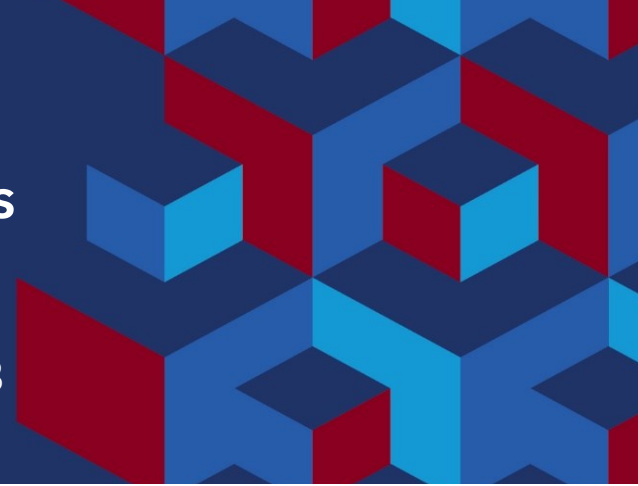# Authentic Youth Engagement within Organizations: What Does It Look Like in Practice?

Empowering Youth Study Brief | September 2023

This brief examines the understanding and practice of authentic youth engagement within organizations. Through small-group interviews and a review of relevant literature and programmatic materials, the authors identify the core components of authentic youth engagement as well as the potential barriers, recommended strategies, and examples to guide organizations in the practice of authentic youth engagement.

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Introduction

Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago is an independent policy research center that partners with communities impacted by youth and family homelessness to prevent future homelessness. A crucial part of this effort involves engaging youth with lived expertise as paid consultants on various research and policy projects. In addition to Chapin Hall, a growing number of research, policy, and advocacy organizations nationwide have prioritized including individuals with lived expertise as partners in program development, research and evaluation, policy development, and systems change efforts (Skelton-Wilson et al., 2021).

Research suggests that there are many benefits to hiring persons with lived expertise as consultants. Individuals with lived expertise have systems and experiential knowledge (Carlson et al., 2001; Barker & Maguire, 2017), strengthen community connectedness (Skelton-Wilson et al., 2021), increase community trust (Ehrlich et al., 2020), and improve systems, services, and programs delivered to impacted communities (Skelton-Wilson et al., 2021). Within the context of youth-centered organizations, young people with lived expertise have diverse identities, backgrounds, and skill sets that benefit organizational practices. Young people with lived expertise may also benefit from opportunities for professional and personal development within youth-centered organizations.

However, while a growing number of youth-centered organizations hire youth consultants with lived expertise to work on research, policy, and advocacy projects, there is limited understanding of how these organizations can best engage youth with lived expertise in a manner that is authentic, empowering, and equitable.

> **Lived expertise** refers to the "representation and understanding of an individual's human experiences, choices, and options and how those factors influence one's perception of knowledge" based on "perspective, personal identities, and history, beyond their professional or educational experience" (Given, 2008; Skelton-Wilson et al., 2021; Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, Office of Human Services Policy, 2022).
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> **Authentic youth engagement** refers to "an inclusive, intentional, mutually respectful partnership between youth and adults whereby power is shared, respective contributions are valued, and young people's ideas, perspectives, skills, and strengths are integrated into the design and delivery of programs, strategies, policies, funding mechanisms and organizations" (USAID, 2022, p. 30).

Chapin Hall launched the Empowering Youth Study to better understand what authentic youth engagement means and how it can be practiced at Chapin Hall and other youth-centered organizations. This brief highlights the core components of authentic youth engagement as well as what steps organizations can take to authentically engage youth with lived expertise.

Study Methods

To better understand how organizations can authentically engage youth with lived expertise, Chapin Hall reviewed programmatic materials (such as youth consultant job postings), scanned the literature on authentic engagement of individuals with lived expertise within organizations, and conducted small-group interviews with staff and youth consultants from several nationally renowned youth-centered organizations. Table 1 shows the objectives and descriptions of these data collection activities.

Table 1. Study Objectives, Data Sources, and Descriptions

Objective	Data Source	Description
Assess the roles/responsibilities and wages of youth consultants within various youth-centered organizations	Programmatic materials	Job postings, job descriptions, study recruitment flyers, training resources
Understand the benefits and barriers to authentically engaging youth consultants with lived expertise within organizations	Literature	Toolkits, briefs, reports, peer-reviewed articles on authentic engagement
Learn what youth consultants with lived expertise identify as potential barriers and recommend as strategies for authentic youth engagement	Youth consultant interviews	6 small-group interviews with 12 youth consultants ages 20 to 27 at Chapin Hall, Point Source Youth, and True Colors United
Learn what staff with lived expertise identify as potential barriers and recommend as strategies for authentic youth engagement.	Staff interviews	4 small-group interviews with 9 staff members at Chapin Hall and True Colors United

Findings

Empowering Youth Study youth consultants and staff identified five core components to authentic youth engagement: 1) equitable compensation, 2) accommodations and supports, 3) respect for youth skills and leadership, 4) transparency, and 5) rapport building (see Figure 1). Table 2 describes the potential barriers, recommended strategies, and examples for each authentic engagement component.
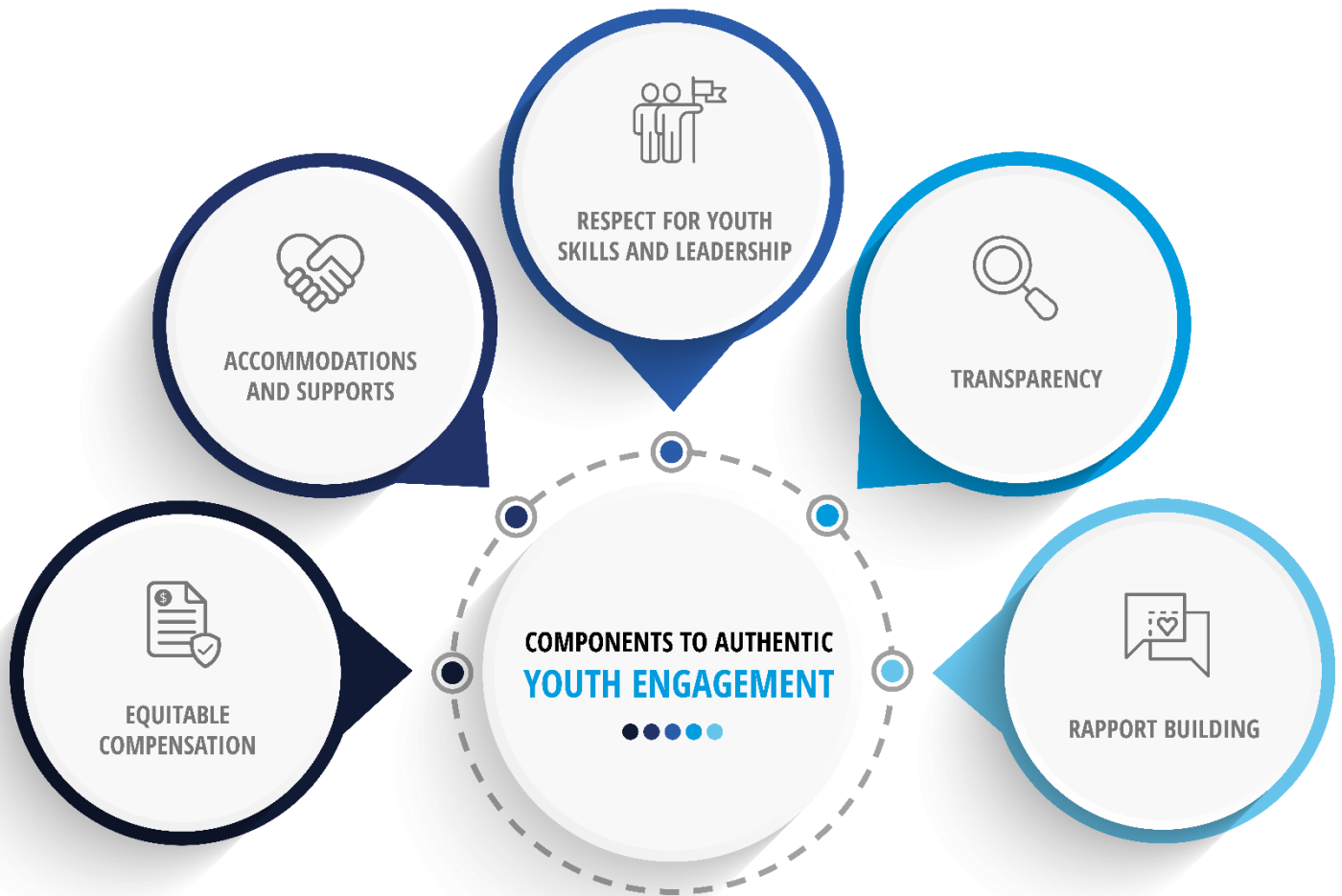
Figure 1: Core Components to Authentic Youth Engagement

Table 2. Authentic Youth Engagement: Potential Barriers, Recommended Strategies, and Examples

Engagement Components	Potential Barriers	Recommended Strategies	Examples
Equitable compensation	- Unfair wages - Inconsistent pay	- Establish pay equity policies - Practice wage transparency (include pay rate in job description) - Provide choice on payment options - Conduct ongoing reviews of wages and payment structures	- Retainer model (for example, guaranteed number of hours per week) - Stipend payments (biweekly, monthly) - Flexible payment options (such as direct deposit, VISA gift cards, Venmo, PayPal)
Accommodations and supports	- Lack of awareness of the needs of young people - Limited available funding - Limited partnerships with direct service providers	- Develop a youth-facing resource guide with national and local supports that youth may access - Administer accommodations and supports questionnaire during onboarding to assess youth needs - Provide direct/indirect access to financial, housing, health, professional, personal, and other supports aligned with youth needs - Establish meaningful partnerships with youth-centered direct service providers to facilitate service referrals - Be flexible with working arrangements (consider meeting times and locations)	- Financial hardship stipends - Self-care kits - Crisis intervention supports - Referral to wraparound services
Respect for youth skills and leadership	- Adultism - Tokenism	- Incorporate youth voices in key organizational decisions and practices. - Invest in youth professional development - Invest in adequate youth representation - Train staff on authentic youth engagement, including adultism and tokenism	- Youth involvement in staff hiring processes - Youth co-development of youth and staff job descriptions - Youth pairing with staff mentor and supervisor based on professional goals - Youth speaking engagements - Youth conference presentations - Authorship credit - Acknowledgements in presentations and written products (such as briefs and reports)
Transparency	- Unclear channels of communication - Withholding or gatekeeping of information	- Set clear roles/responsibilities informed by youth voice - Openly address workplace conflict- - Train staff to improve critical skills (such as active listening, conflict resolution) - Acknowledge past mistakes - Encourage feedback for continuous quality improvement - Provide the "why" behind organizational decisions - Give regular updates on organizational practices, successes, and opportunities for growth	- Monthly "Share Outs" on organizational updates and equity practices - Office hours with staff liaisons (for example, senior leadership, youth program director) - Anonymous feedback survey - Onboarding packet with clearly outlined roles/responsibilities, training materials, company policies and grievance procedures, organizational mission and vision, etc.
Rapport building	- Lack of empathy for youth experiences -Limited opportunities for staff and youth to engage - Virtual work environment	- Empathize with youth experiences, traumas, and backgrounds - Invest in professional and social networking opportunities aligned with youth interests - Hire a cohort of youth consultants to promote building rapport	- Affinity groups and healing circles - Professional workshops and convenings - Social outings (for example, museums, nature walks, musicals)

Equitable Compensation

Equitable compensation refers to paying young people fair, timely, and consistent wages that are informed by research and market compensation guidelines. Empowering Youth Study youth consultant wages ranged from $25 per hour to $115 per hour. Some youth consultants reported they did not receive financial compensation in past positions and were instead offered food or fast-food gift cards as incentives. In addition to unfair compensation, some youth consultants reported receiving inconsistent pay. Youth more frequently reported inconsistent pay if they were working in organizations where youth compensation was based on hours worked. Some Empowering Youth Study youth consultants reported that their hours have fluctuated for reasons outside of their control, such as their supervisor going on vacation. To achieve equitable compensation, organizations must pay youth consultants for their work in a manner that demonstrates the value of their time, contributions, and expertise. To promote fair pay, organizations should establish pay equity policies, practice wage transparency, and conduct ongoing reviews of wages and payment structures. It is also important for organizations to acknowledge that some youth consultants with lived expertise may not have access to a bank account or other documentation that is generally collected during the onboarding process. As such, organizations should aim to be flexible with payment options to accommodate youth needs.

> They tell us that we're the experts, but then when we tell them they need to pay us as experts, there's push back as if there's no funding. You're not going to go to someone with 30+ years of experience and tell them you don't have the funding to pay them. —Youth Consultant

Accomodations and Supports

Accommodations and supports are crucial to establishing an equitable working environment for youth with lived expertise. It is important for organizations to acknowledge that young people with lived experiences of homelessness may face ongoing financial, housing, health, professional, and personal challenges that require accommodations. Challenges to providing adequate accommodations to youth might include organizational lack of awareness of the needs of young people, limited funding, and limited partnerships with direct service providers that offer wraparound services to young people with lived expertise. To enhance the array of accommodations and supports available to youth with lived expertise, organizations can assess youth needs through a questionnaire conducted during the onboarding process, develop a youth-facing resource guide with national and local supports that are available to youth, provide direct and/or indirect access to supportive services, and establish authentic and meaningful partnerships with youth-centered direct service providers to facilitate service referrals. Given the diverse backgrounds of youth with lived expertise (for example, parenting youth, youth enrolled in education programs, youth working full-time jobs), organizations should also be flexible with working arrangements (such as meeting times and locations) to accommodate varied schedules and access to technology, childcare, and transportation. Examples of accommodation and support identified by Empowering Youth Study youth consultants include financial hardship stipends, self-care kits, crisis intervention supports, and wraparound services.

> How are we advocating to end youth homelessness, but I am fighting homelessness on my own? —Youth Consultant

Respect

Respect for youth includes valuing youth skill sets and leadership abilities beyond their lived expertise. Several Empowering Youth Study youth consultants noted a wide range of professional interests and leadership qualities that they bring to the workplace and seek to further develop. Potential barriers to respect include adultism and tokenism.

> **Authentic engagement involves youth in building equitable systems from the bottom up. —Youth Consultant**

> **Adultism** refers to "behaviors and attitudes based on the assumption that adults are better than young people, and entitled to act upon young people without their agreement. This mistreatment is reinforced by social institutions, laws, customs, and attitudes" (Bell, 2003).
>
> **Tokenism** occurs when "adult-led organizations elicit input from youth without empowering them as decision-makers. When youth are given opportunities to engage only in marginal roles, the chance of tokenism multiplies" (Center for Social Innovation, 2020).

To avoid perpetuating harm through adultism and tokenism (and perhaps other forms of discrimination), organization staff should receive mandatory training on authentic youth engagement[1] on an annual basis. To respect youth leadership, organizations should treat youth consultants as equal partners by incorporating youth perspectives into decision-making practices, such as staff hiring processes and the co-development of youth and staff job descriptions. This requires organizations to invest in adequate youth representation to avoid having a few young people with lived expertise speak on behalf of an entire group instead of on behalf of their individual experiences (which is tokenism). It is also important to provide youth consultants with professional development opportunities, such speaking engagements, conference presentations, authorship credits, acknowledgments within presentations and written products, and pairing youth with a staff mentor and supervisor based on professional goals.

Transparency

Transparency refers to clear and open channels of communication between adult leadership and young adult hires. Lack of transparency can result in strained relationships between staff and youth with lived expertise. Barriers to achieving workplace transparency include unclear channels of communication as well as the withholding—or *gatekeeping*—of information. To achieve workplace transparency, organizations should set clear expectations for roles/responsibilities, openly address workplace conflict, train staff to improve critical skills (for example, active listening, conflict resolution), acknowledge past mistakes, encourage feedback for continuous quality improvement, provide honest justification for organizational decisions, and give regular updates on organizational practices, successes, and opportunities for growth. Examples of transparent workplace practices

> **There is sometimes gatekeeping of knowledge when working with youth with lived expertise that undermines their ability to make informed decisions. We should present them with the full picture and honor their intelligence and critical thinking. —Staff**

include monthly "share outs" on organizational updates and equity practices, office hours with staff liaisons, and an anonymous feedback survey. To promote transparency when the onboarding process begins, organizations might provide a packet with clearly defined roles and responsibilities, training materials, company policies and grievance procedures, and organizational history, mission, and vision among other items.

Rapport Building

Rapport building refers to establishing authentic and meaningful relationships in the workplace. This includes relationships not only between staff and youth consultants, but also amongst cohorts of young people working within youth-centered organizations. Rapport building is essential to developing partnerships rooted in mutual trust and respect. Potential barriers to rapport building include lack of workplace transparency, lack of empathy for youth experiences, and limited opportunities for staff and youth to engage. Rapport building may prove especially challenging within virtual work environments as well as within organizations with limited youth representation. To enhance rapport building, organizations should hire staff who empathize with youth experiences, traumas, and backgrounds. Hiring staff with diverse lived expertise can help with rapport building due to the relational, experiential, and systems-based knowledge that they may share with youth consultants. Examples of rapport-building activities and convenings include social outings aligned with youth interests (such as museums, nature walks, and musicals) and affinity groups and healing circles.

> **Trust is the primary component to engagement. We typically don't have time for relationship building and that's the pinnacle.** —Staff

Conclusion

The Empowering Youth Study identified the core components of, barriers to, and recommended strategies for authentically engaging youth with lived expertise within organizations. Recent developments highlight the growing need for organizations to invest in the authentic engagement of youth with lived expertise to avoid perpetuating systemic forms of oppression. Within youth-centered organizations, authentic youth engagement requires not only addressing youth needs and incorporating youth perspectives, but also actively working to dismantle divisive and oppressive practices within the workplace and systems at large.

Youth consultants and staff within the organizations that we highlight in this brief list five key areas in which organizations can authentically engage youth:

1. Promote equitable compensation practices in ways that demonstrate the value of young people's time, contributions, and expertise.
2. Provide accommodations and supports tailored to diversity in youth experiences and needs.
3. Respect youth skills and leadership by designing meaningful decision-making and professional development opportunities.
4. Be transparent with organizational developments and challenges and involve youth feedback in the continuous improvement of organizational policies and practices.
5. Build rapport by establishing a culture rooted in empathy for the lived expertise of youth of diverse backgrounds and identities and by creating opportunities for youth and staff to interact within and beyond the workplace.

In sum, authentic youth engagement requires continuous and intentional effort. Organizations can assess their current engagement performance by inviting youth feedback on organizational strengths and opportunities for

growth. By enhancing their engagement strategies, organizations can effectively work with youth with lived expertise to promote changes to the systems, policies, and institutions serving directly impacted communities.

Statement of Independence and Integrity

Acknowledgements and Disclaimer

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[1] For staff training resources, please refer to True Colors United courses (for example, 101: LGBTQI Youth Homelessness, 201: Inclusion, 202: Youth Collaboration, 205: Racial Equity) and toolkits (Youth Collaboration, Racial Equity, Inclusion), as well as Point Source Youth training and toolkits on authentic youth engagement. Note: These trainings were identified during the collection of programmatic materials. This is not an exhaustive list of authentic youth engagement training resources.