Youth Inclusion Facilitator Instruction
Youth Input, Direction, and Leadership

Programs and activities should provide youth with opportunities to affirm their sense of self, identify with others that are similar and different to themselves, and take action. Program staff should not decide how to best reflect the young people's interests; rather, staff need to get youth input. Youth who feel they are contributing to the development of the programs and activities will feel ownership of the programs and a sense of purpose, and programs that reflect the diversity of the youth will be more successful.[40, 18, 15] Organizations that allow youth to participate in program design and development not only build strong, positive adult-youth relationships but also environments where youth feel welcome and safe.[39, 33]

Strategies for getting youth input can be formal (i.e., youth advisory boards, focus groups, etc.) or informal (i.e., in-person). Program staff should consider how groups of youth interact with these strategies, especially youth who may not feel included or safe in the program.[23, 39] The point of getting youth input is to learn about the interests of the youth who participate in the program and then develop activities that align with those interests.[43, 16]

This does not mean consulting youth regarding decisions that have already been made or with only token options.[39] The influence youth have on decisions in the program needs to be real and meaningful in order for it to contribute to a positive, welcoming, and safe environment.[18] In cases when it is not possible to involve youth in decision-making, it is helpful to explain why they were not included and how the decision was reached.[39] Each youth program should include a structure for youth input that fits within the overall arrangement of the program.

Note, youth input should not only focus on programs and activities but also be part of the process of developing systems and rules that govern the youth program space (see section on Rules, Systems, and Language).[39]

To further support youth input, direction, and leadership, youth program staff need to understand the concerns of the youth in the program.[23] To do this, staff should educate themselves and other program staff about the issues faced by youth. In particular, they should increase their understanding of youth who may see themselves as different due to social class, ability, sexuality, gender identity, citizenship, race, ethnicity, or culture. This understanding allows staff to see the humanity of people from different groups[46, 24] and contributes to the youth professional's capacity for creating programs for all youth.

Strategies for Youth Input, Direction, and Leadership

Formal and Informal:	Identify the formal and informal ways youth have input into activities and the program.
Assess:	Identify why youth do not use these formal and informal avenues for input.
Adjust:	Adjust these avenues to improve youth input.

Preference:	Identify how youth let program staff know their preferences for activities and programs.
Observe:	Observe how program staff react to input when they believe it is unreasonable or unattainable.
Impact:	Observe the impact on youth when staff react poorly to input.
Leadership:	Identify how youth exhibit leadership in the program.
Meaningful:	Consider whether that leadership is meaningful.
Inform:	Provide youth program staff with information about the characteristics of the youth who participate in the program.[22]
Connect:	Connect staff with individuals outside the youth program who offer additional information or perspectives about the concerns youth encounter.[24, 25]

Workshops related to Youth Input, Direction, and Leadership

Building Relationships

Youth program staff may not understand how to create a system where youth have input, give direction to the program, and serve in leadership roles. The basics of this system are the same as those for any good relationship and include Respect, Communication, and Support.

Gathering Youth Input

Using formal and informal strategies for getting youth input will make the program stronger and more appealing for youth by generating programs that interest the participants and give youth a sense of ownership and agency.

Community Building

Youth program staff should try to help youth make connections to community and business leaders to help connect youth to role models and organizations within the community. However, to help make connections program staff need to see potential connections and understand the roadblocks youth face when trying to make connections.