

Implementing a Youth Engagement Organizational Assessment: *NICWA as a Case Study*

Fact Sheet

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Youth-serving organizations have many opportunities to integrate youth voice into their work. While challenging, such integration can result in creating youth empowerment. As a national agency whose mission is to support the well-being of Indian children and families, the National Indian Child Welfare Association (NICWA) developed a youth engagement organizational assessment (YEOA) in 2014. This tool allows tribal organizations to measure how “youth guided” they are. This fact sheet provides a brief case study of NICWA’s experience that can prove useful as systems of care seek to assess and evaluate their work with youth.

Ladder of American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) Youth Involvement

8. Youth/Adult Equity. Young people have the ideas, set up the project, and invite adults to join them in making decisions throughout the project. They are equal partners. *Example: Tribal youth council meets with the adult tribal council on a regular basis and decisions are made together.*

7. Completely Youth Driven. Young people have the initial idea and decide how the project is to be carried out. Adults are available and trust in the leadership of young people. *Example: AI/AN youth define project, goals, and strategy. They may consult adults for guidance when needed.*

6. Youth/Adult Equality. Adults have the initial idea and young people are involved in making decisions, planning, and implementing the project. *Example: Adults come up with an idea for a project and invite AI/AN youth to assist with planning and implementation.*

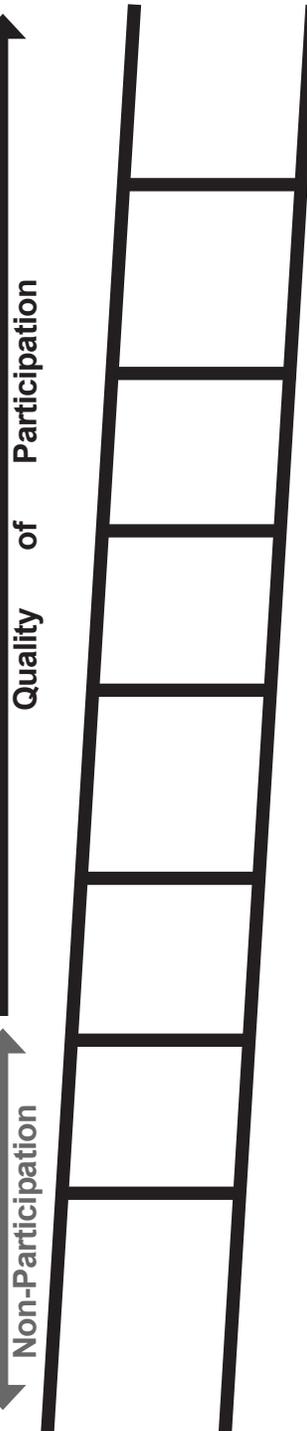
5. Youth Consulted. Adults design and facilitate the project, and young people’s opinions are given weight in decision making. Young people receive feedback about their opinions. *Example: Adults come up with an idea for the project, ask AI/AN youth for their opinions.*

4. Youth Assigned, But Informed. Adults decide on the project and young people volunteer for it. Young people understand the project and adults respect their views. *Example: Adults initiate a project and make decisions. They instruct AI/AN youth about their roles in the project.*

3. Tokenism. Young people are given a limited voice in the project and little choice about what they can say and how they can communicate. *Example: Youth attend meetings but their views are not sought out or taken seriously by adults.*

2. Decoration. Young people take part in an event in a very limited capacity and have no role in decision making. *Example: A group of young people are given a script by adults about “youth problems” to present to adults attending a youth conference.*

1. Manipulation. Adults have complete and unchallenged authority and abuse their power. They use young people’s ideas and voices for their own gain. *Example: Around the time of tribal council elections, a candidate uses a young person’s story without their permission in order to get more votes.*



Adapted from Hart’s Ladder of Youth Involvement

Why should an organization conduct a youth engagement organizational assessment?

A youth-guided organization creates space for young people’s self-determination in the systems that are designed to help them. In direct services, providers using a youth-guided framework take time to learn clients’ needs and desires. The service delivery is individualized to suit the needs of each youth based on valuing the youth’s own preferences. This is an empowering alternative to the prescriptive approach taken by many children’s mental health service providers.

One resource often used by NICWA in technical assistance provision is the Ladder of American Indian/Alaska Native Youth Involvement—a Native-specific adaptation of Hart’s Ladder of Youth Involvement. Every program or entity is at a different “step” on the ladder. Strategizing around how to move up to the next rung is a part of planning for youth involvement.

How did NICWA develop the specific elements of this assessment?

Over the course of developing this assessment tool, NICWA took cues from other youth-focused and Native-specific evaluations and assessments. The importance of collecting qualitative and quantitative responses was carefully considered.

One tool that partially inspired the YEOA was NICWA’s 50 Questions assessment, which uses the relational worldview model to assist a community in self-determining its own needs. The relational worldview model was developed by

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NICWA in the 1980s and continues to be refined in practice by NICWA staff. It is a reflection of the Native thought process and concept of balance as the basis for health, whether that is an individual, family, or an organization. At the organizational level, the youth assessment included questions regarding the organization's environment, infrastructure, mission, and resources (which correspond to physical, mental, social and spiritual health at the individual level).

Input was sought from interns, staff, and board members, allowing NICWA to gain insight from individuals at all levels of the organization. NICWA's desire to maintain a strength-based lens led to implementing a SOAR analysis (Strengths, Opportunities, Aspirations, Results)—a modified/strength-based version of a SWOT analysis (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats). The intent in choosing to use SOAR was not to ignore weaknesses or threats that may be present with regards to youth engagement, but to reframe them as opportunities for growth and change in order to move forward.

When conducting a SOAR analysis, these questions served as the foundation of the discussion:

- What are our greatest strengths?
- What are our best opportunities?
- What is our preferred future?
- What are the measurable results that will tell us we've achieved that vision of the future?

How did NICWA pilot the tool and what were the outcomes?

Tribal organizations considering implementing the YEOA can learn from NICWA's experience in piloting the assessment. Involvement at all levels of the organization allowed for open and honest conversations. This involved meeting one-on-one and in small groups with staff from different departments, as well as interns and board members.

Implementing the assessment allowed NICWA to examine its own opportunities for growth and change. It is important to recognize that every community, organization, or agency has room to grow. Effective youth engagement exists on a spectrum and is informed by other factors such as internal capacity, funding and infrastructure.

NICWA staff, interns, and board members completed a survey about the degree of youth involvement at various levels of the organization. Surveys were collected and responses were calculated by SurveyMonkey, a free online resource. Focus groups using the SOAR analysis were conducted within various departments, notes were taken, and the combined notes from each focus group were used to create a word cloud.

Major themes identified during NICWA's internal pilot of the YEOA included a need for increased and sustainable funding for youth programs, opportunities to increase the level of youth involvement, and a desire to make the organizational environment more engaging and youth-friendly.

	Internal	External
Present	Strengths: What is the organization doing well to facilitate effective youth engagement?	Opportunities: Where do opportunities to engage youth exist? How can we best take advantage of them?
Future	Aspirations: What is our vision of effective youth involvement at all levels of the organization? What can/should we aspire to?	Results: How will we know when we have achieved this vision? What are our deliverables regarding youth involvement?

General Tips for Tribal Organizations Considering a Youth Engagement Assessment

- Take time before beginning the assessment to have conversations with key stakeholders about why effective youth engagement is an important part of the organization's work.
- For direct service organizations, talk with youth served or, if applicable, the local youth council to provide input and participate in the assessment. Let youth know their feedback is important. Consider providing incentives for youth who participate in focus groups and complete surveys.
- During the SOAR analysis, it is important to focus on organizational strengths—without ignoring challenges or weaknesses. Framing challenges as opportunities for growth is a strengths-based way to assess potential difficulties in this process.

Youth Engagement Organizational Assessment

One major lesson learned was that youth engagement work takes time and patience. Moreover, systems change work, especially work which involves a wide array of stakeholders, can take more time than anticipated. Encouraging buy-in and involvement among all staff in an organization prior to conducting the assessment itself is a way to ensure that the process goes as smoothly as it can.

How can tribal communities use this assessment tool?

This assessment may be implemented as a collaborative project between a youth coordinator, youth engagement specialist or other staff working with youth, and a project director. All staff, including youth peer supporters or peer mentors, should have the opportunity to participate and give input; the board of directors, tribal council, or other governing body may also participate.

If the organization is affiliated with a youth council or other entity comprised of youth leaders (e.g., youth advisory board), those youth should have the opportunity to give feedback and participate in the evaluation process. Community participants may include members of the community, families of youth served, youth receiving services, and youth eligible to receive services who are not currently being served. The end result of this assessment will be a number of concrete recommendations to incorporate into the organization's program work, strategic plan, and future projects involving youth.

Communities, tribes, urban Indian organizations, and other agencies can use this assessment to identify the strengths and challenges that are present within youth engagement work. Once data is collected, it can be used to identify future goals as well as a plan of action to achieve those goals.

NICWA Youth Engagement Specialist Linda Gokee-Rindal (Red Cliff Band of Lake Superior Chippewa) led efforts to complete the organizational assessment, and is committed to serving as a resource to tribal communities wishing to learn more about the youth engagement organizational assessment process. To speak with her, contact NICWA's offices at (503) 222-4044.

Resources

You can find additional information on the resources mentioned within this fact sheet below.

Hart's Ladder of Youth Engagement. <http://www.freechild.org/ladder.htm>

National Indian Child Welfare Association 50 Questions Assessment. www.nicwa.org/mental_health/SystemsOfCare/

National Indian Child Welfare Association Relational Worldview Model. www.nicwa.org/Relational_Worldview/

SurveyMonkey. www.surveymonkey.com

National Indian Child Welfare Assessment Youth Engagement Organizational Assessment. Available upon request.

Recommendations for NICWA

As a result of completing the youth engagement organizational assessment, NICWA received the following recommendations.

- 1. Create a youth-friendly environment.**
 - In-person and online
 - Relaxed, welcoming office space
 - Display Native youth-oriented materials and resources
- 2. Define "youth" and standards of practice/guiding principles for youth engagement.**
- 3. Provide more opportunities for youth participation.**
 - Events (trainings, conference)
 - Internships for Native youth
- 4. Build internal and external capacity for youth engagement in Indian Country.**
- 5. Establish a youth leadership circle or other decision-making group of Native youth to advise NICWA.**
 - Network of youth advocates with lived experience
 - Youth circle to guide policy decisions
- 6. Increase collaboration with partners (local and national) to build NICWA's infrastructure and audience for our youth engagement work.**
- 7. Actively pursue dedicated and sustainable funding for NICWA's youth programming. Earmark project budgets for youth participation in all programs that incorporate youth voice.**

