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## The Community Development Society Students and Young Professionals Initiative

John C. Hill

*University of Kentucky*, johnchill@uky.edu

Gary A. Goreham

*North Dakota State University*, gray.goreham@ndsu.edu

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### Cover Page Footnote

A Report from the CDS Fellows Initiative. Contributing authors: Daniel Kahl, PhD, and Kristina Hains, PhD, University of Kentucky

# The Community Development Society Students and Young Professionals Initiative

John C. Hill  
University of Kentucky

Gary A. Goreham  
North Dakota State University

## **Introduction**

The absence of youth involvement (programs, organizations, leadership initiatives) in community development fails to reflect young people's needs and aspirations (London, Zimmerman, & Erbstein, 2003). In addition, without genuine collaboration between adults and youth, toxic media stereotypes of young people overshadow and alienate community relationships (Gilliam & Bales, 2000). However, when the processes of youth, organizational, and community development collaborate, these efforts can enhance all community initiatives (London, Zimmerman, & Erbstein, 2003). Thus, there is a growing recognition of the role of youth in community development.

Young people's roles range from serving on youth committees in local development organizations to training for careers in the community development profession (e.g., Brennan, Barnett, & Lesmeister, 2007; Christens & Dolan, 2011). At a national and international level, policies and programs are being established to mainstream and integrate youth issues in development efforts, as noted by the U.S. Agency for International Development's (USAID) *Youth in Development: Realizing the Demographic Opportunity* (2012). Thus, encouraging young professionals and graduate students to become members in professional associations or organizations is crucial for networking, professional development, and collaborative efforts towards community development.

Connecting youth, organization, and community development can produce self-sustaining processes which address significant social issues and rejuvenate communities (London, Zimmerman, & Erbstein, 2003). Furthermore, these partnerships can create an avenue of responsibility and support which attract youth into higher levels of organization and community leadership (London, Zimmerman, & Erbstein, 2003). Therefore, in order to enhance youth participation and responsibility within a professional organization, authentic collaboration with senior members is required. In addition, creating a space to hear young people's needs and aspirations is vital to creating long lasting relationships which enhance community development initiatives.

In an attempt to bridge potential pitfalls associated with student involvement in a professional association, an ad hoc meeting of graduate students and young professionals was convened at the annual conference of the Community Development Society (CDS) in July 2017. The participants discussed

best practices for enhancing the culture of the association based on their lived experiences. The discussion eventually blossomed into an initiative funded by the University of Kentucky Community Innovation Lab (UKCIL). The support provided by the UKCIL created an opportunity to explore best practices for CDS to make students and young professionals feel included and welcomed.

Over the past year, the CDS Students and Young Professionals Fellows Initiative has established a network of university graduate and undergraduate students, high school students, and young faculty and practitioners interested in the profession and practice of community development (CD). They worked on collaborative programs (e.g., Zoom meetings, webinars, and strategies to draw participants to the CDS meetings) and on programs in their own locales (e.g., CDS clubs, service learning projects, and guest speakers).

### **Program Design and Planning**

An investigation of the influences that contribute to graduate student participation in professional associations and organizations include four themes: the quality of graduate involvement, continuum of involvement, influences upon involvement, and outcomes of involvement (Gardner & Barnes, 2007). These themes result in benefits of socialization, professional development, and networking for graduate student involvement. However, not all graduate students experience positive outcomes with membership in a professional association or organization. Therefore, Gardner and Barnes (2007) suggest enhancing the culture of a professional association or organization by implementing a variety of practices. Organizations should establish a student orientation at conferences and facilitate peer mentoring programs. Additionally, they should communicate the importance of student involvement to the association in order to make students feel welcomed and important.

As noted above, an ad hoc meeting of students and young professionals was convened at the CDS annual conference in Big Sky, Montana in July 2017. Those in attendance discussed concerns they had regarding graduate CD education, employment in the CD profession, and the ability to participate in CDS functions. They expressed a desire to continue the conversation via Zoom. The first Zoom meeting was held in mid-September with faculty and students from the Great Plains Interactive Distance Education Alliance (North Dakota State University, South Dakota State University, Kansas State University, Iowa State University, and the University of Nebraska-Lincoln), University of Kentucky, and Chapman College.

The group, initially calling themselves the CDS Student Engagement Initiative, set several goals for future program. The goals included: (1) to engage/connect CD students with other CD students across the US/world, CD faculty, and CD practitioners; (2) to build a community of CD students using the CDS Principles of Good Practice; and (3) to draw CD students as life-long members into the CDS organization.

The group discussed some activities they would find of interest. These activities included:

- 1.) Networking – holding monthly Zoom meetings among students, faculty, and practitioners;
- 2.) Holding student mixers at the CDS annual meeting where students can meet faculty in a less formal setting;
- 3.) Hosting a gathering for “emerging scholars” at the CDS annual meetings;
- 4.) Providing space for academic programs to meet their own students face-to-face;
- 5.) Providing more opportunities for contact among students/faculty/practitioners between CDS annual meetings;
- 6.) Finding more value-added for CDS for students, such as credentialing, networking, giving presentations/posters, staying current on research and CD programs, mentoring, and getting outside members for thesis committees.

An opportunity was afforded to the group to address these activities when the CDS Board of Advisors announced funding of the CDS Fellows Initiative which emerged from the CDS Student Engagement Initiative. Hill and Goreham submitted an application to the CDS Fellows Initiative in November 2017 entitled, “Improving and Enhancing the Culture of CDS through Student and Young Professional Innovations.”

The application’s goals included: (1) enhancing the culture within the CDS Conference; and (2) improving the culture of welcoming students and young professionals into CDS. The project activities were listed as: (1) holding informational meetings on campuses across the country (initially at the University of Kentucky, North Dakota State University, Chapman University, and the University of Detroit Mercy); and (2) providing organizational membership and conference discounts to those who participate in the Student and Young Professional (SYP) Fellows program (CDS Fellows Initiative).

A survey was conducted of students and practitioners who participated in SYP Fellows meetings at North Dakota State University and the University of Kentucky. An extensive list of recommendations emerged, which are displayed in thematic categories in Table 1.

between adults and youth can enhance the participation and responsibility of youth within a professional organization and community development efforts.

Given the SYP Fellows’ connection to the CDS, an exercise was conducted with the on-campus groups about the CDS Principles of Good Practice. Participants were asked how the Principles were reflected in the emerging organization’s efforts.

First, they said the efforts involved “active and representative participation” of students and professionals. However, they noted the challenge of contacting students in other universities and of formulating lists of young professionals in the region. Second, they believed both the processes and content of the organization helped them “understand community [development] issues” as they deliberated topics such as the UN Sustainable Development Goals, social inclusion, and political polarization. Third, students said they were looking for opportunities to interact with young CD professionals to whom they looked for “leadership capacity.” And fourth, they observed a “range of action strategies to

Table 1. Improving and Enhancing CDS Culture.

Theme	Recommendation
Peer to Peer Interaction	<p>Deliberate on topics of interest (e.g., CD in a polarized society) to students via Zoom sessions</p> <p>Students present their research or practitioner programs to each other via Zoom sessions</p> <p>Have a student-mixer at the CDS annual meeting</p>
Peer/Mentoring Interaction	<p>Connect monthly via Zoom with students/faculty/practitioners from across the US and internationally</p> <p>Discuss the value-added nature of CDS membership (includes access to the <i>Community Development</i>, <i>Community Development Practice</i>, <i>Vanguard</i>, and the CDS webpage) via Zoom</p> <p>Discuss the value-added nature of attending the CDS annual meeting via Zoom</p> <p>Network with faculty from other campuses to learn about their research and potential to serve on thesis committees</p> <p>Network with faculty from other campuses to learn about their research (and potential to serve on thesis committees)</p> <p>Engage with a mentor at the CDS annual meeting</p> <p>Meet with other students/faculty from their campus or program at the CDS annual meeting</p>
Professional Development	<p>Host webinars from experts on topics of interest (e.g., community development and disaster recovery)</p> <p>Form an on-campus CDS chapter or CD club</p>
Media	<p>Host a CDS Student Facebook page</p> <p>Host a Student Engagement section on the CDS website</p>
Organizational Enhancements	<p>Have a preconference workshop on topic of interest to students at the CDS annual meeting</p> <p>Host a track for “emergent scholars” at the CDS annual meeting</p> <p>Provide additional scholarships for students to attend the CDS annual meeting</p> <p>Invite students to participate in the CDS annual meeting as a presenter, volunteer, or committee member</p>

work toward long-term sustainability” in the emerging organization. They noted that these skills could be transferred to CD efforts at the community level.

Once again, these responses align with those discussed in Table 1, all of which address the SYP Fellows’ goals of (1) enhancing the culture within the CDS Conference; and (2) improving the culture of welcoming students and young professionals into CDS. In addition, the importance of peer to peer and mentor interaction is imperative for enhancing participation toward enabling all community members to meaningfully influence the decisions that affect their lives. Their responses also suggest actively working to enhance the leadership capacity of community members, leaders, and groups within the community.

### **Program Implementation**

First, monthly meetings were held for the SYP Fellows on participating campus, primarily at the University of Kentucky and North Dakota State University. One of the activities at the monthly meetings involved hosting a guest speaker to talk about their work in CD. Examples included a city CD coordinator, an Extension CD specialist, a county food shelf official, and a low-income housing coordinator. A second activity was to deliberate “hot topics,” such as “What are the challenges for social inclusion in CD practice, and how can these challenges be overcome?” and “How can we do CD in politically polarized communities?” A third activity was to provide announcements about employment opportunities, graduate school, and upcoming meetings. Emphasis was placed on the value of professional development opportunities through the CDS such as the journals, annual conferences, and networking through the CDS website.

Second, students and young professionals were invited to attend the CDS conference in Detroit, Michigan in July 2018. To offset their expenses, the SYP Fellows program paid for Fellows’ registration. Five individuals took advantage of the offer.

Third, monthly Zoom meetings were open to the SYP Fellows on participating campus. The meetings took place primarily with participants from the University of Kentucky and North Dakota State University. These meetings specifically addressed the improvements, challenges, and goals of: (1) enhancing the culture within the CDS Conference; and (2) improving the culture of welcoming students and young professionals into CDS.

Fourth, a “Birds-of-a-Feather session” was held at the CDS Conference for those involved in the Young Professionals Fellows program. The goals were to: (1) exchange ideas for their respective community development programs and projects; (2) explore strategies to draw younger people into local community development functions; (3) facilitate interaction among students, young practitioners, and faculty; (4) draw students into the community development profession; and (5) encourage involvement in professional organizations, such as the CDS. Twelve younger CD professionals participated in the session. They noted challenges faced by young professionals, such as being recognized and legitimated for their CD expertise, starting a career and family, struggling with entry-level pay, having too many or too few job responsibilities, and learning the technicalities of state and federal programs. Although they found professional

memberships and conferences worthwhile, they had difficulty affording the prices.

### **Lessons Learned**

Several participants in the SYP Fellows program joined CDS and attended the annual conference. It must be noted that the program's policy was to cover the Fellows' conference registration expenses this year. That policy reflected the oft heard concern of the cost to attend the conference. Students commented that the conference "opened their eyes to what community is all about – concepts that were discussed in class, but are now a reality." Others said that "they were able to meet the people who wrote the books and journal articles they read for their classes and they are *real* people!" Several of the students received leads for employment and ideas about where to attend graduate school.

The Birds of a-Feather session held at the CDS annual conference was well-attended with roughly 13 participants in attendance. Given the interest the session generated, similar sessions should be held in subsequent conferences.

A cohort of SYP Fellows was developed on some of the campuses. These individuals continue to hold monthly meetings. These networks have the potential to become a university student club or a CDS Chapter. University student clubs on some campuses typically do not permit non-student membership, thus other organizational structures may need to be considered. One organizational form could be a CDS Chapter, in accordance with Section D of the CDS Policies and Operational Guidelines.

The SYP Fellows group at North Dakota State University participated in service projects including riverbank cleanup and food shelf stocking. Their culminating project was to engage with faculty from the Great Plains-IDEA graduate program to host the 2020 CDS meetings in Fargo, North Dakota. They participated in writing an application that was submitted to the CDS Board and are serving as the Local Host Committee for the meetings.

### **Program Obstacles**

The program's organizers faced the challenge of broadly announcing the SYP Fellows program to potentially interested individuals. Invitations were emailed to officials in colleges and universities with CD programs to participate in the SYP Fellows. However, it was difficult to find a listing of young CD professionals potentially interested in the Fellows program. For those who already were CDS members, the *Vanguard* or an organizational listserv could be used.

Finding days and times that fit participants' schedules for online Zoom meetings and webinars presented a challenge. Students' class schedules and CD professionals' work schedules may often conflict with SYP Fellows' online Zoom programming.

Additionally, there are differences between students' and young professionals' abilities to attend the CDS annual conference. Conference costs can be prohibitive. Unless students receive departmental support to cover conference costs, they are unable to attend. Similarly, some young professionals' agencies provide professional development funds, but rarely enough to cover their



expenses. Since funding from the CDS Board for the Fellows Initiative was a one-year trial, there is no guarantee of funding for SYP Fellows' conference registration in the future.

### **Learnings for the Future**

This initiative was originally thought to be in the prototype phase. This means members were cognizant of maintaining realistic aspirations for this initial stage of implementing best practices, which included outreach; campaigning on behalf of the CDS association at monthly informal meetings, monthly discussion topics, and conference roundtable discussion focused on graduate students and young professionals in the context of community development; and offering monetary discounts on membership fees and conference attendance. This phase confirmed the importance of scheduling conversations with potential members and provided a platform to address concerns, questions, and comments. Furthermore, these discussions revealed four major barriers in participating in a professional association, described in the next paragraph.

The lack of monetary funds to join or attend the conference for “just networking purposes” was a major indicator in their preconceived notions on how a professional association or organization may operate. Second, several individuals were unable to identify themselves as community developers: they were hesitant as to whether or not they were “doing” community development. Third, individuals who identified as practitioners did not anticipate a sense of belonging among individuals within CDS they assumed were mostly academics. Finally, they wanted to know a cost-benefit for membership and attending the conference. Specifically, they inquired about the opportunities that exist for them outside of browsing a website and attending a conference to hear individuals speak.

Overall, this prototype phase not only tested perceived best practices, but gathered important information on potential membership barriers. It confirmed the significance of dialogue, transparency, and authenticity when building rapport with others. In addition, this phase laid a foundation for the next phase, which should include the sustainability of continued outreach and regular online or face-to-face meetings. Furthermore, the next phase should include implementing more student and young professional opportunities within the conference. For example, the organization could implement a welcoming session for new members, provide mentorship opportunities, establish sessions for brainstorming research interests and ideas, and provide opportunities to do community development work as a session at the conference.

### **Conclusions**

Building bridges and communicating through dialogue has proven its worth in our initiative. In an era infatuated with digital communications, dialogue has proven to provide clarity, transparency, and opportunity when disseminating information about CDS membership. Our prototype phase applied practices that not only increased student and young professional involvement, but also enhanced the experiences as a member within a professional association. This initiative

required passion, collaboration, and outreach in order to begin a dialogue with individuals considering a CDS membership. Lastly, the potential connectedness required to maintain sustainability of the initiative must be formed in the desire to welcome, assist, and appreciate student and young professional membership and involvement.

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