



FOR YOUTH DEVELOPMENT®
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Character Development Learning Institute (CDLI)

2018 CASE STUDY

YMCA OF THE USA



Table of Contents

Introduction 3
Background and History 3
How the CDLI Was Developed 4
Character Development Learning Institute..... 6
Where We Are Now 10
Conclusion..... 11



The following case study is part of a series commissioned by the Susan Crown Exchange (SCE) that explores how youth-serving organizations are integrating social and emotional learning into strategy and programming. SCE is invested in shaping an ecosystem of anytime, anywhere learning to prepare youth to adapt and thrive in a rapidly changing and highly-connected world. Through grantmaking programs in digital learning and social and emotional learning, SCE helps identify, codify, and promote high-quality opportunities for young people to learn and grow in out-of-school time. For more information, visit www.scefdn.org.

The Character Development Learning Institute (CDLI) is made possible through funding from the S. D. Bechtel, Jr. Foundation, and the Susan Crown Exchange.

Introduction

Character is a key element of the Y's approach to working with youth, and since its beginnings the Y has helped youth develop into ethical, caring, and successful adults. Today, the emerging field of youth character development is documenting, with greater rigor, the social and academic benefits of building youth character. However, it has yet to develop a full body of learning that demonstrates how adult practitioners can effectively apply evidence-based, character development practices in out-of-school-time (OST) settings. YMCA of the USA (Y-USA) seeks to fill this gap through the Character Development Learning Institute (CDLI).

The CDLI aims to advance youth character development through a collaborative, program-agnostic, and deliberate process of verifying, adapting, scaling, and sharing best practices. It plans to discover, test, and disseminate best practices to positively impact millions of youth. Throughout the process, the CDLI integrates evaluation into each step to verify the impact of interventions, the Y's ability to expand the use of those interventions in diverse settings, and the effectiveness of the Y's structure in carrying out the effort.

This case study describes the background and history of YMCA and the CDLI, the discovery process for developing and advancing youth character development, as well as the comprehensive framework and built-in functional evaluation of the CDLI. We hope this document will help other youth-serving organizations, as they explore how to integrate social-emotional learning (SEL) and character development within their organization.

Background and History

For nearly 170 years, YMCA of the USA (Y-USA) has been listening and responding to the needs of its communities. Founded in the United States in 1851, Ys serve all people — regardless of age, income, or background. The Y's mission is to put Christian principles into practice through programs that build healthy spirit, mind, and body for all.

Y-USA is the national resource office for 2,700 Ys across the country. A highly-regarded anchor **institution serving 10,000 communities across the nation**, the Y serves 22 million adults and youth annually. As a leading national non-profit, Y-USA strengthens communities and acts as a catalyst for meaningful, enduring change in: youth development - nurturing the potential of every child and teen; healthy living - improving the nation's health and well-being; and social responsibility - giving back and supporting our neighbors.

In the early 1990s, Ys across the country began placing intentional emphasis on four core values: **caring, honesty, respect, and responsibility**. This focus on the moral aspects of character began to guide how Ys hire, train, evaluate staff and volunteers, as well as design and implement programs. The focus on the four core values came at a time when Ys recognized the need to do more for the youth they served and respond to families who wanted their children grounded in good values that would carry them forward in life. Today, people come to the Y expecting character to be embedded, modeled, and nurtured. Most Ys have integrated the four core values into their organizations, but the degree of application varies greatly from Y to Y.

In the mid-2000s, the importance of developing character among youth reemerged as a national priority. Highly publicized incidents of youth conflict created urgency among local and national YMCA leaders to find and scale effective solutions. This urgency included a renewed commitment to character development as a foundational element of youth development initiatives.

Y-USA recognizes that character development can only be successful when the adults in youths' lives play an active role in supporting and fostering skills that help youth to realize their full potential. The Y's core values of caring, honesty, respect, and responsibility provide a natural medium to elevate adult practices that support and enhance these values.

Evidence demonstrates that youth character is most deeply influenced by interaction with adults, and OST practitioners are best able to effect positive youth outcomes when they are supported in implementing what is known to work. Hence, Y-USA embarked on a journey to conceptualize and develop the Character Development Learning Institute (CDLI). This institute aims to support the staff and volunteers of the Y because it leads to stronger development of character in youth.

How the CDLI Was Developed

First, need was established.

Character development is foundational to how youth develop and navigate in the larger world. It speaks to the core of successful social and emotional development, and research has consistently demonstrated that when there is a concerted effort made to support this domain of development, it can result in positive youth outcomes. While we know that youth character development comprises a mix of cognitive and social-emotional learning, there is little data about how to support these characteristics in youth. Concurrently, academic research has led to multiple theories, practices, and frameworks around character development. Terminology, such as social-emotional learning (SEL), moral intelligence, skills-building, character-building, grit, soft-skills, resilience, and cognitive competence are often used interchangeably — leading to confusion on when and how to use these tools.

For the OST field to mature, critical work must be done to translate research about social-emotional learning, and character development into practice. Hence, **Y-USA gathered information and held interviews with researchers and practitioners in the field to determine existing gaps and opportunities.**

Next, a discovery process was completed.

Y-USA engaged in a discovery process to learn more about the current state of character development and to identify promising practices currently employed in youth programs in Ys across the country. In an August 2015 report commissioned as part of that effort, Hanover Research shared several findings that supported the need for a project like the CDLI and informed its design.¹

- Adult practice, both in practitioners' own display of character and their ability to teach character, is critical to the success of youth character development programs.
- Almost as important, is the influence of environment, both in its relational and material aspects.
- Effective initiatives use evaluation to clearly identify desired outcomes and measure impact on these outcomes; they provide opportunities to differentiate for diverse youth abilities, skills, and interests.
- Most development and dissemination of best practices have focused on the school classroom setting, indicating a gap in knowledge specific to OST practice — a gap that the CDLI is explicitly designed to address.

¹ *Supporting Character Development in Youth and Children*, Prepared for YMCA of the USA by Hanover Research (August 2015)

Then, concept testing was performed.

Y-USA went through a concept validation process that focused on developing clear criteria upon which to base its decision whether to engage in business planning. It included surveying the youth development field to identify the potential for CDLI to fill a gap and identified basic parameters of the concept design to be further refined through business planning.

Three primary decision-making criteria were identified:

- **Need** – a) the identification of a gap in the field bridging research and practice, and b) the level of interest or demand among youth/ character development practitioners for information coming out of such a project.
- **Partners** – identifying potential researchers and practitioners with whom Y-USA might partner to pursue the project vision.
- **Structure** – designing an organizational structure that would further Y-USA's goals for the project (this factor will influence the decision but is less central than the first two items).

After numerous interviews with leading researchers and national youth development representatives, the following key takeaways confirmed there was a sufficient need for a Character Development Learning Institute (CDLI).

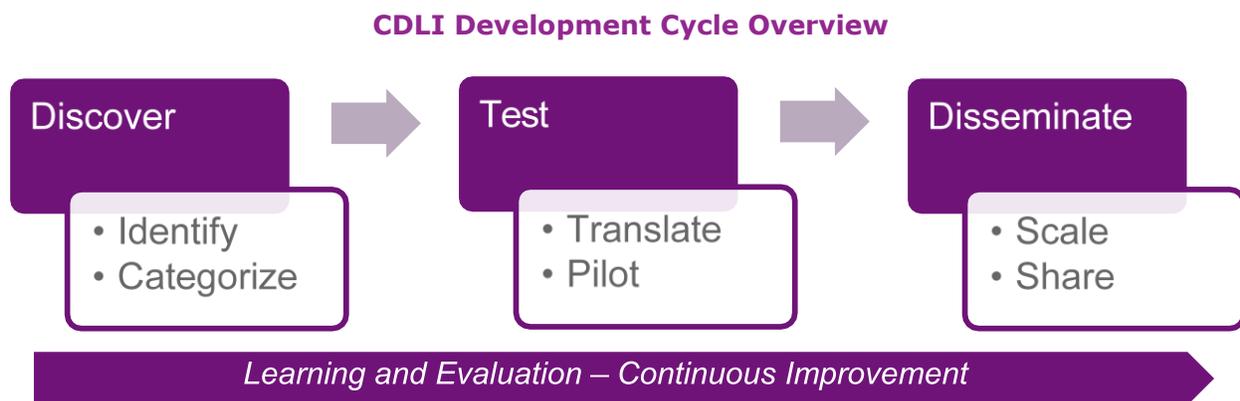
- Although there are numerous character initiatives underway, they are all independent of one another. What is missing is a **systematic effort to test and validate** a broad range of promising practices and share them with the field.
- Most research to date has focused on studies of youth character development as applied through a specific program or curriculum. What is less understood is what practices are effective in a more universal, **program-agnostic** context that the adults in the environment support and promote.
- One of the greatest areas of potential for a project like the CDLI is the development of **practical tools, effective training, and other resources** for practitioners, organizational leaders, and decision makers to effectively adapt, apply, and sustain existing character development concepts and approaches.
- There is an unfilled gap in, and a significant practitioner desire for, research around diversity (i.e., what works for different youth populations, not only in terms of cultural and ethnic diversity, but different ages, socioeconomic status, and other demographic variables) and how to adapt and apply best practices in different settings.

Finally, a business plan was developed and the CDLI infrastructure was established in 2016.

Character Development Learning Institute

CDLI aims to advance positive youth development in OST programs serving youth ages 5-18. This process of advancing adult practices in OST settings includes assessing, verifying, adapting, scaling, and sharing best practices within the Y network. It also aims to embed learning from practitioner and research partners to build a base of knowledge and practices across the broader OST field. Evaluation is integrated into each step of the process to assess the impact of interventions, to verify the Y's capacity to replicate the interventions in diverse settings, and to gauge the effectiveness of the Y's structure in carrying out the effort.

In this context, "practice" refers to a specific intervention and activity, or grouping of inter-related interventions and activities, that OST practitioners may adopt to influence youth character development. Practices also refer to the attitudes, skills and behaviors that inform the strategies and tactics for supporting youth development. This can include methods of training the staff and volunteers, caregiver and partner engagement, and policy planning and implementation.



Using the CDLI process model (see above), an identified practice is selected to be validated, categorized as appropriate interventions for organizations or programs at different levels of development, translated to understand if/how it is practical and replicable, piloted to learn how to bring it to a broader audience, then scaled/shared. Each practice is advanced through the Y's process model that has three major phases of activity, each with two distinct sub-phases, which together comprise a progressive path to impact. At each phase, the CDLI examines programs and practices, their potential for replication, and the possibility of bringing them to a broader audience.

Discovery Phase

In 2016, the CDLI conducted a broad-scale **discovery phase** to identify, assess, and document the best practices that underlie quality character development across four critical domains. These domains include adult practice, environments, evaluation, and delivery.

See detailed description of the four domains on the following page.

Domains

Adult Practice (hiring, professional development, pedagogical approach);

Environments (organizational and physical conditions necessary to deliver quality practices);

Evaluation (use of data to measure impact, inform decision making, and support continuous improvement);

Delivery (existing youth programs where we can infuse character development practices).

Y-USA believed that best practices across these four domains would result in a powerful formula to positively impact character development among youth — both within and outside of the Y Movement.

Through this process, several evidence-informed and research-based, promising adult practices were identified through a review of the literature as well as a consideration of their scalability and relevance to the Y's youth-serving programs.

Five adult practice areas were proposed for translation in the test phase:

Adult Practice Areas

Empathy – Adults work with youth to relate to others with acceptance, understanding, and a sensitivity to diverse perspectives and experiences.

Emotion management – Adults support youth in becoming aware of and constructively handling both positive and challenging emotions.

Relationship building – Adults foster experiences where youth plan, collaborate, and coordinate actions with others.

Responsibility – Adults develop youth to be reliable and to fulfill obligations and challenging roles.

Personal development – Adults encourage youth to act, persist, and initiate goals and outcomes even through the ups and downs of difficult situations and challenges.

These practice areas were selected because:

1. **They have a strong research foundation.** Several frameworks adopted in the OST field were applicable and easily adaptable to the common but varied settings served by the youth development practitioner in the YMCA movement. In particular, the following sources offered many examples, best practices, and lessons learned in both character development and social-emotional learning. Research examples include:

- [Preparing Youth to Thrive: Promising Practices for Social and Emotional Learning](#) by Smith, McGovern, Larson, Hillaker, & Peck. This resource (particularly the case studies) allowed us to understand how different programs, working with older youth supported and implemented social-emotional learning in diverse settings. Forum for Youth Investment, 2016.
 - [2015 CASEL Guide: Effective social and emotional learning programs – middle and high school edition](#), by Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2015.
 - [2013 CASEL guide: Effective social and emotional learning programs – preschool and elementary school edition](#), by Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2013.
2. **They provided opportunities to scale.** It was a priority that the CDLI promoted promising practices that would be accessible, scalable in a local Y, while closing the gap between research and practice.
 3. **They were measurable.** The five practice areas aligned with the Weikart Center’s [Youth Program Quality Assessment](#)® (PQA), an evidence-based tool already used by Y-USA in evaluating evidence-based youth development interventions. Later in the process, Y-USA provided a “crosswalk” between the areas of practice and the above research as a means of assisting local Ys in translating these practice areas to other frameworks, programs, and initiatives. The crosswalk identifies the CDLI’s adult practice areas (e.g., empathy, emotion management, relationship building, responsibility, and personal responsibility), and cross-references those practices with other well-known character development frameworks such as the Weikart Social-Emotional Program Quality Assessment (SEL PQA), CASEL’s integrated framework, and the Devereux Student Strengths Assessment (DESSA). This crosswalk allows local Ys to understand how our adult practices mesh with other evidence-based frameworks. A copy of the CDLI crosswalk is available, upon request.
 4. **They were accepted and affirmed by experts in the field.** For example, the CDLI Advisory Council, external researchers, and other experts in youth development, confirmed the five adult practice areas were a stable, research-informed foundation upon which to build and test.

Throughout its development, the CDLI has been co-constructed for Ys and by Ys. In other words, the relevance, need and expertise of the YMCA movement has been integrated into the selection of the five areas of practice, the development of the tools and professional development experiences, and the elevation of local Ys as thought leaders in the creation, critique, and adjustments of the Institute.

Test Phase

In the **test phase**, the primary question to be answered was: “Can the identified adult practices be implemented within different kinds (size, location, program type) of Ys?” To answer this question, 32 local Y sites were selected in 2017 to **translate** the practices from working definitions to active strategies in their nominated programs and then **pilot** those practices more broadly in the Y Movement, for further development. Each selected Y nominated a youth development program to take part in the CDLI. Nominated programs ranged from OST academic, camp, mentoring, health, and well-being, as well as sports and recreation programs.

To promote implementation of youth character development strategies in the five practice areas, the CDLI provided five major supports to participating Ys: training and professional development, technical assistance, self-directed resources, peer-learning, and data.

- **Training and Professional Development.** Each site participated in extensive training and professional development. They included (but were not limited to): webinars and peer learning sessions provided in small learning communities. In the Pilot Phase, Y-USA transitioned from all-site webinars to small-group webinar professional learning communities, hosted monthly by Technical Advisors. In these calls, Ys had a greater chance to interact and learn from one another.
- **Technical Assistance.** Y-USA Technical Advisors coach, train, encourage, challenge, and troubleshoot with local Ys as they support character development.
- **Y Site Self-Directed Resources.** At the Y, we strive for cause-driven leaders. To develop our stakeholders, we created a CDLI Pilot Guide, a CDLI Placemat (concept map of strategies and tactics), a CDLI Toolkit, and CDLI Crosswalk of SEL terms to encourage learning. We also inventoried existing youth development resources and looked for opportunities to align and embed our five adult practices within them. These resources offered stakeholders — from C-suite to program practitioners — the strategies, tactics, and best/promising practices for each adult practice area. Learning solutions were designed to help stakeholders identify a starting point in his/her respective development, access reflection tools and scenarios that influenced his/her practice and offered a roadmap or guide to a continuum of learning from ok to good, good to great, and great to exemplary. The resource, *Preparing Youth to Thrive*, was a key tool for developing these materials. It provided the scholarly framework evidenced by similar youth-serving organizations who understood social-emotional learning (SEL) in the out-of-school time space from a youth-centric, youth development perspective.
- **Annual Participant Meetings.** To encourage sites to learn from each other, CDLI fostered opportunities for local Ys to directly communicate with one another. A key opportunity was the annual meeting. The three primary objectives for this meeting were for Ys to exchange promising strategies and tactics in the five practice areas, to network with other Ys, and to develop Ys knowledge in youth character development.
- **Data.** We provided data to Ys so that they could measure progress towards goals and then use that data to support continuous improvement. CDLI data collection measured at four key levels of local Y sites: organization, program, adult practitioner, and youth. Each level had its own set of measurement tools to help local Ys assess where they were starting (baseline) and the progress being made by participating in the CDLI. These tools allowed us to assess progress toward the CDLI goal and long-term objectives that drive the initiative's focus.
 - **Organization (Capacity Assessment):** In December 2017, CDLI evaluation staff finalized and sent out the CDLI Capacity Assessment to Pilot Ys. This tool assessed the pilot Y's organizational infrastructure to deliver evidence-based programs and practices and allowed us to measure progress in organizational infrastructure that enabled high quality youth programming.
 - **Program:** To document and assess evidence of adult practice delivery and program quality, external assessors used the Weikart Center's "Social and Emotional Learning Program Quality Assessment" (SEL-PQA). The SEL PQA

measures the quality of youth programs, the implementation of SEL standards, and identifies staff training needs.

- **Practitioner:** To gauge the progress being made in developing character in youth, CDLI selected Algorhythm to create a one-time, post-survey for pilot Y practitioners to complete. The post-survey is expected to be administered at the end of each program.
- **Youth:** To assess youth outcomes, CDLI contracted with Algorhythm and The PEAR Institute to implement youth surveys, at the beginning and end of the different programs.

Where We Are Now

Pilot Phase

In 2018, we began the **pilot phase** of the CDLI process, which includes 64 Y associations comprised of 32 new Ys and 32 translation Ys. It also includes eight “hub” Ys, which are a sub-set of translation Ys. Hub Ys serve as regional hubs to support other Ys in carrying out their identified character development practices. The “Hub and Hive” structure engages a small number of lead associations as regional Hubs to help guide and support Hives, or groups of other Y associations, as they are added. This Hub and Hive model will ensure appropriate supports for participating associations while simultaneously building local commitment to the effort.

The pilot phase has been informed by many of the initial lessons learned during the Translate phase. Below are a few of the key take-aways to date:

- **Buy-In and Engagement.** While the Y’s ability to scale is an advantage and opportunity, it can also be a challenge due to the size, complexity, and decision-making practices at local Ys. To gain a foothold and sustain character development, we engaged local Y leadership from the outset. The importance of gaining buy-in from local Y leadership who influence programmatic and cultural decisions cannot be understated.
- **Staffing and Workforce.** Local Y CEOs and other Y leaders vary greatly in terms of experience, education, priorities, tenure with the organization, and more. The same is true of frontline staff. From the leadership level down, staff may be new to character development while others may already have ideas or practices around character development. To succeed, the CDLI is working at every level in each Y association, taking top-down and bottom-up approaches to integration.
- **Data and Measurement.** CDLI consistently and rigorously collects and evaluates data from local Ys. Collecting that data, however, can present challenges. Some local Ys struggle with adequate staffing to collect and submit data; some do not see the value; and some are inundated with the data-collection requirements of other programs. The CDLI communicates the value of data and measurement, assisting local Ys through proper training, along with reminders and follow-up. The CDLI also shares data (local and national) with local Ys which directly benefits their work.
- **Family and Youth Must Be Involved:** Local Ys continue to address the challenges of including the voice of families and youth. Often, family members are the adult practitioners that coach and encourage youth to become thriving adults. We know

that families play a significant role in how youth develop character, and we know anecdotally that families look to the Y to help support and foster SEL and character. But, we need to better understand and appreciate what this means for our families, where there is already alignment, and where we can improve.

- **Character Development Must Be Embedded in a Broader Youth Development Strategy:** Currently, there is a gap between how Ys operate their youth development programs and how they view character development. To address this need, we convened a group of 15-20 C-suite staff from local YMCAs to discuss character development as a pillar of youth development across a Y's OST programs.
- **Shared Learning:** Shared learning provides frequent, ongoing, accessible, and flexible support as well as resources to Ys. Peer-to-peer, or local Y-to-local Y, learning is an effective vehicle to help Ys learn about CDLI work and integrate character development within existing youth programs. Local Ys appreciate hearing from each other about how to understand and apply each of the areas of practice. As a result, more opportunities for Ys to inquire, critique, and provide feedback to each other are now in place.

Dissemination Phase

Going forward (2019-2020), after sufficient testing, the CDLI will enter the **dissemination phase**. In this two-year phase (comprised of scaling and sharing), Y-USA will address how to share effective adult practices across the Y Movement, and the broader youth development field. Specifically, Y-USA will recruit additional local Ys to join in CDLI training and implementation. Plus, the training materials and CDLI resources will be accessible to a select group of Ys via its proprietary resource exchange.

As the Institute continues to mature, we aim to learn and build on the research and evidence of applied practices of adult learning. Rigor, relevance, and relatedness are key elements to this approach. Our next steps, as we scale, are to continue to create mechanisms for breakthroughs, clarifications, and recommitments about character development and social-emotional learning.

Conclusion

As one of the largest, most experienced, and recognized OST youth-serving organizations in the nation, Y-USA and the Y network of associations are uniquely positioned to implement this project. The Y's long-time commitment to practical program development has established both a proven methodology for testing and scaling effective practice and an extensive national network of associations well-suited to serve as learning laboratories for applying these practices in the field. This alone has the potential to change the face of youth character development at more than 800 Y associations nationwide, involving more than 800,000 staff and volunteers in serving nine million youth.

We believe the CDLI is positioned to create even broader impact. Y-USA is working with researcher and practitioner partners to enhance its own learning, share CDLI learnings and activities with partner organizations, and close the gap between theory and practice. The CDLI offers local Ys and Y-USA an opportunity to study character development with youth and youth leaders at the nexus of learning. We look forward to sharing our results with the broader youth development field.