

3.8 YWCA Boston

Boston, MA

YOUTH LEADERSHIP INITIATIVE (INIT)

“Confidence is exhibited by students’ growing willingness to express opinions not shared by their peers.”

—DONNA CLARK



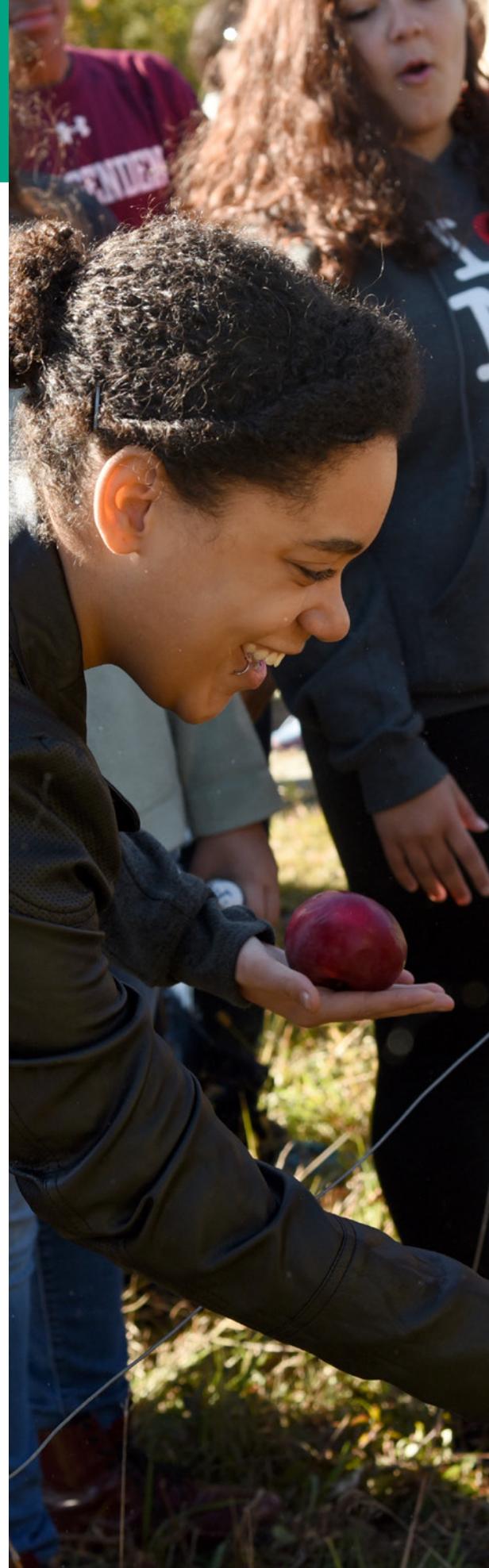
The mission of YWCA Boston (YW Boston) is to eliminate racism, empower women, and promote peace, justice, freedom, and dignity for all. In a city with a growing divide among economic classes and races, YW Boston chooses to focus on the reduction of systemic racial and gender

disparities and the improvement of social cohesion in neighborhoods where health, educational, and safety inequities are most significant. YW Boston seeks to accomplish this work by partnering with beneficiaries, direct service providers, leaders, and organizations in the target neighborhoods. Throughout the history of YW Boston, there have been a variety of programs to serve youth, including a girls’ health initiative and dialogue groups between youth and law enforcement officers.

In 2011, with the support of the Boston Foundation and the Bridgespan Group, YW Boston sought to apply the national mission in the local context. YW Boston took over delivery of the social justice and leadership development programs from the Boston Center for Community and Justice. One of these programs, the Youth Leadership Initiative, or InIt, was selected as the target offering for the SEL Challenge. InIt develops young leaders with nascent leadership skills and supports them as they implement projects that further race and gender equity and social cohesion in their schools and communities. InIt’s goals are to build students’ confidence, their abilities to work across differences, and ultimately design, implement, and engage other teens in community action projects that address social inequities in their school, community group, or neighborhood.

InIt has collected data about its participants that suggests it is achieving desired results. InIt has been successful in creating socially responsible leaders. Upon graduation:

- 71 percent of InIt participants had the knowledge of how to create a social justice workshop for their peers;
- 71 percent reported speaking up when peers, parents, or friends make prejudiced comments or jokes; and
- 92 percent stated they have an above average ability to participate in dialogue with people who have different perspectives than they do.





ORGANIZATION

Total number of full-time staff	21
Number of volunteers	50-100
Annual operating budget	\$2.2M

FOCUS OFFERING

Total contact hours	152
Duration of the program period	July-June

FOCUS OFFERING YOUTH (FROM YOUTH SURVEYS)

Number of youth	35
Age	14-18
Gender	37% M
Ethnicity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 37% African American • 11% Asian/Pac Is • 29% Hispanic • 3% Native Am • 23% White • 9% Other • 6% Prefer not to disclose
Percent currently attending school on a regular basis	100%

FOCUS OFFERING STAFF (FROM STAFF SURVEY)

Number of staff	3
Level of education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 33% some college • 33% Advanced Degree
Years of experience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 6.5 in youth development • 1.25 in this program
Staff program content expertise self-rating (1=Novice, 2=Experienced, 3=Expert)	2.5
Staff SEL expertise self-rating (1=Novice, 2=Experienced, 3=Expert)	2

YOUTH AND STAFF CHARACTERISTICS

OF THE 41 STUDENTS THAT PARTICIPATED
IN THE CLASS OF 2014-2015:

Youth

InIt is comprised of a diverse group of high school students ages 14 to 19. For many participants, involvement in the program is their first experience within a truly diverse environment.

Students attended a variety of schools, including public, private, and charter schools, both within Boston and in surrounding cities and suburbs, and came from diverse family situations. Julie Thayer, InIt Program Manager at YW Boston, discussed why this diversity is a big part of the program design:

The students complete an application that includes a demographic form and we intentionally explain to them that as a program whose goals are to help people understand the importance of diversity, we require a wide variety of background and life experiences in the room.

InIt recruits through partnerships with schools. YW Boston staff select a group of 2-5 student delegates from each school to form a small team that will advance a community action project in their school. Often, alumni from previous years help conduct outreach to students at their schools after they leave the program. Interested students complete an application, and a committee of staff and alumni youth select the next year's delegates through an interview process. Julie Thayer explained what they might glean from an interview:

We're not looking for sort of a baseline understanding of anything yet because we really believe that anybody can have the capacity to be a leader and to learn new things. We are mostly gauging their commitment. So, just the fact that they show up for an interview shows they're more likely to be engaged for the rest of the year. We're also interested in whether or not they have an interest in talking about subjective issues and if they seem to have the emotional maturity and capacity to deal with difficult topics.

Staff

InIt is staffed by three positions at YW Boston and a team of 12 volunteers (many of whom are InIt alumni). Because of the diverse backgrounds and experiences of the participants, it is imperative for staff and volunteers to demonstrate a collaborative, supportive work style as well as the ability to listen, facilitate groups, and mentor individuals. InIt looks for staff and volunteers with a personal commitment to social equity and who are comfortable sharing personal experiences and perspectives. Staff must have experience leading experiential learning and participate in social equity training. Staff and volunteers participate in 25 hours of training together before they work with the delegates. Training includes team building activities, an overview of program procedures and policies, facilitation training, and an opportunity to engage with the curriculum. Going through the workshop curriculum together allows the staff and volunteers to have and process their own experiences before they're asked to lead a session for youth. Julie said:

The volunteers can get wrapped up in their own process, and so we provide a space for them to process. We give them tips to make sure that how they're facilitating the discussions is keeping in mind the needs of the youth and making sure that they're facilitating the experience for them.

Staff and volunteers participate in extensive social and emotional learning training. For example, in 2014, one InIt program staff member attended a three-day Adolescent and Trauma Resiliency training for youth workers developed and led by the Boston Area Rape Crisis Center and the Boston Public Health Commission. All staff and volunteers participated in a training led by Rape Crisis Center on how to respond to adolescent disclosures of abuse and sexual assault and one by Health Resources in Action on principles of Positive Youth Development.

66 PERCENT OF THE
PARTICIPANTS WERE FEMALE

34 PERCENT WERE MALE

37 PERCENT IDENTIFIED AS
BLACK OR AFRICAN AMERICAN,

17 PERCENT AS WHITE,

10 PERCENT AS ASIAN,

24 PERCENT AS HISPANIC,

2 PERCENT NORTH-AFRICAN /
MIDDLE EASTERN, AND

10 PERCENT AS MULTI-RACIAL

Training on what volunteers and staff need to disclose to authorities as mandatory reporters is an important part of the preparation. The InIt program creates a safe environment where youth may feel comfortable revealing traumatic experiences that they've had, some of which may signal abuse. In these cases, staff and volunteers are required to report the case to the proper authorities. InIt staff are careful to let youth know these requirements and the limits of the confidentiality at the start of the program so that youth don't feel as though trust has been broken.

OFFERING CURRICULUM

Offering Content

InIt is designed to develop young leaders by providing them with a strong understanding of social justice and strong leadership skills, while supporting them as they implement projects that further race and gender equity and social cohesion in their schools and communities. The program cultivates self-awareness, critical self-reflection, and interpersonal skills. The program is designed to purposefully explore diversity in a respectful manner that:

- increases students' understanding of the social topics covered by the curriculum;
- strengthens their personal, interpersonal, and workplace skills; and
- teaches them to understand and value diverse viewpoints.

InIt is guided by the following approaches:

- The Positive Youth Development approach, developed by Professor Richard Lerner at Tufts University. The program draws on Positive Youth Development best practices that help youth explore and develop the five Cs: Competence, Confidence, Connection, Character, and Caring.
- To strengthen the students' understanding of social justice issues, YW Boston use the Cycles of Socialization and Liberation, developed by Bobbie Harro⁹⁷. The Cycle of Socialization helps students understand how issues such as racism, sexism, classism, homophobia/heterosexism, and "ableism" operate systemically to grant unearned privileges to certain groups of people over others. The Cycle of Liberation offers a counter narrative to help them see how education and consciousness raising can offer opportunities to take actions that break the Cycle of Socialization.
- The 4 "I"s developed by John Bell of YouthBuild, USA help the delegates recognize how social inequities are reinforced at internal, interpersonal, institutional, and ideological levels.

Offering Sequence

InIt is made up of three important elements: 1) Immersion Week, 2) Program Days, and 3) Community Action Projects.

Immersion Week is a week-long overnight retreat focusing on deepening delegates' understanding of society and themselves. It is held in July and August on a college campus and is the kickoff event for the 10-month program. During Immersion Week, young people explore key aspects of their personal identities (e.g. race, gender, socioeconomic class, sexual orientation, disability status) and begin to recognize how isms operate on a systemic level to grant unearned privileges to certain groups of people over others. Because this experience can be emotionally intense, staff employ a variety of strategies to ensure delegates feel safe and willing to participate.

On the first day of Immersion Week, staff and delegates play icebreakers and games in both large and small groups. Delegates and staff members share a personal object that symbolizes something about them and use it to introduce themselves to the group. These activities provide an opportunity for the delegates to get to know one another and build trust. The staff works deliberately to create and model a culture of openness, honesty, and communication. Staff establishes and ensures buy-in for ground rules (e.g., respect, using "I" statements instead of "you" statements, agreeing to disagree, active and patient listening).

YW Boston's Offering Sequence



Throughout the week, large group workshops introduce new topics and offer opportunities for the youth to learn new vocabulary, reflect on their relative privilege regarding particular identities, and learn about the experiences of people with different backgrounds and perspectives from their own. Small group discussion sessions provide space for delegates to delve deeper into issues that arise during workshops. The small groups are intentionally comprised of students of different backgrounds and who attend different schools to create bonds between youth who might not socialize with one another in other contexts. Some youth participants shared particularly powerful moments:

"We talked about what defines a person who's in a box of man or woman and what happens when a person breaks that box. After our discussion it got very, very, very emotional and the guys definitely learned a lesson about what it means to experience sexism in this society."

—YW Boston Youth

The day we talked about sex, gender, and sexuality, we engaged in an activity where we separated the guys and the girls and we filled out all these sheets about how, from our own perspective, how disadvantaged we were. We talked about what defines a person who's in a box of man or woman and what happens when a person breaks that box. After our discussion it got very, very, very emotional and the guys definitely learned a lesson about what it means to experience sexism in this society. Sometimes women are actually fearful for their lives from just because someone is walking behind them.

We had the race conversation and I was really ignorant about racism. I knew the segregation stuff and the basic things you learn from history, but I didn't know that not everybody or anyone can be racist. I learned that in order to be racist you actually have to have something over someone else, like privilege. And other things like, I used to say Hispanic or Spanish when I was talking about Latino people, and I learned that that wasn't really right. And it's just the simple things like that. Racism is a system that brings us down. Especially the stuff that happened to Mike Brown and Trayvon Martin and Eric Garner.

A powerful moment for me was when we wrote down stereotypes that immediately came to our mind about a certain group or race of people. We wrote things down about white people, black people, Hispanic people... we wrote about Asian people, and all of us did it and we put it all on the board and read everything out loud and then we discussed. We kind of realized that all this stuff we'd written down was absolutely horrific. That although this is something that was almost instinctive in our minds, it's wrong to say a lot of those things. That just goes to show how much society has imprinted and brainwashed everyone who's in it. That's not something that's under your control. It's something you experience and it's automatically instilled into your brain whether you like it or not.

Immersion Week provides a deep foundation for the work the delegates will do throughout the rest of the year. Julie Thayer elaborated:

The intensity of the week—the fact that they're all living together for that week and going through these workshops one after another—accelerates their social and emotional learning process. People come out of their shells more quickly than if we would meet once a week or once a month, and those bonds develop and the trust forms and the empathy builds in a more accelerated way. It's kind of like we create a different reality through the week. I think it would take months and months and months to get to the level where the students are with themselves and with each other if we met less frequently. So that intensive experience is really necessary for this specific type of program, and then we can have much more meaningful and higher level conversations the rest of the year because of that foundation.

Saturday Program Days take place once a month from 9:00 A.M. to 5:00 P.M. and offer workshops and community service projects to enhance delegates' skills and deepen their understanding of how social justice issues affect their communities. Workshops focus on topics such as community learning, leadership development, community service, and personal and workplace skills development. Program days include field trips to a community farm to discuss food security, a law school to discuss criminal justice, and to a hospital to discuss healthcare inequality. During the visits, youth are encouraged to reflect on the systemic issues that impact the community at large and particularly marginalized populations. Oftentimes, Saturday Program Days are hosted or attended by community partners. In this way, youth are exposed to a variety of organizations across the city and to career opportunities within these organizations.

PROGRAM DAYS 2014-2015

Saturday, September 6, 2014: Economic Justice

What Initiatives have organizations taken to address poverty? How can government policies address root causes of poverty? How have policies led people of color to live in poorer neighborhoods than white people? How can poverty affect a person's access to opportunities?

Community Partners: St. Ambrose Family Shelter, Greater Boston Food Bank, Chinese Progressive Association, Pine Street Inn

Skill-building: Community Asset Mapping

Saturday, October 18, 2014: Food Justice

What are the characteristics of the modern food industrial system? What would a healthier, more sustainable food system look like? Which communities have access to healthy, affordable foods and why?

Community Partners: theMOVE and Blue Heron Organic Farm

Skill-building: Time Management

Saturday, November 15, 2013: Education Equity

What is the historical context of desegregation in Boston schools? What impacts do race and class have on educational quality? What factors influence why and to what degree students are disciplined? What rights do students have under school discipline laws?

Community Partner: Suzanne Lee (local community organizer and teacher during desegregation in Boston)

Skill-building: Understanding Your Communication and Leadership Style

Saturday, December 13, 2014: Health Equity

What is the difference between a health disparity and a health inequity? What are social determinants of health? How do stress and microaggressions impact health? How do inaccessible environments impact the health of people with disabilities?

Community Partner: Dana-Farber Cancer Institute

Skill-building: Facilitating Effective Meetings and Workshops

Saturday, January 10, 2015: Healthy Relationships and Social Justice Arts Slam

What are the core elements of healthy relationships? What behaviors promote equality and respect in relationships? What are strategies for effectively dealing with conflict in relationships? How can we make the arts more accessible and welcoming for people of color? The Social Justice Arts Slam is an opportunity for youth participants to use the arts as a vehicle for creating social justice.

Community Partners: Boston Ballet

Saturday, February 7, 2015: Immigration

Who comprises the immigration population in Boston, Massachusetts, and the U.S.? What factors facilitate or hinder prospective immigrants from applying for a visa or seeking asylum or refugee status? What privileges does immigration status confer, especially in regarding to education and healthcare?

Community Partners: Suffolk University Law School, Project Citizenship, Student Immigrant Movement, Massachusetts Immigrant and Refugee Advocacy Coalition

Skill-building: Public Speaking

Saturday, March 7, 2015: Criminal (in)Justice

What is the School to Prison Pipeline? What is the Prison Industrial Complex? How do The War on Drugs and mass incarceration disproportionately impact marginalized populations? What barriers do former prisoners face in reintegrating into society? What is restorative justice?

Community Partners: Boston Student Advisory Committee, Black and Pink

Skill-building: Creating and Giving PowerPoint Presentations

Saturday, April 11, 2015: Review and Reflect

What have you learned throughout the past year? How does change happen in society? How have you been and how can you continue to be an agent of change?

Skill-building: Self-Care for Sustainable Social Justice Work



Community Action Projects (CAPs) are developed by the youth over a 10-month period. Delegates work with their school cohorts to develop and implement a community action project to address a school or community issue. This activity is designed to support the youth as they become socially responsible leaders. Youth take the lead in conceptualizing and implementing their CAPs with guidance from an InIt staff member at biweekly meetings. Early meetings are focused on goal setting and laying the groundwork for what they want to accomplish for the year. As the year progresses, the meetings serve more as a time to check in on the plan.

The skills and knowledge students develop through program workshops feature heavily in their CAPs. Youth work with their school administrators and peers to implement their CAPs, and in doing so, learn to work around the institutional barriers within their sphere of influence. Beth Chandler, Vice President of Programs, said:

The youth have this idea. They're really excited about moving it forward, and now they're hitting roadblocks. They finally figured out their own interpersonal stuff and now they're hitting roadblocks from the administration.

InIt staff work with the youth to troubleshoot the projects and help them line up resources to make the CAP a success. Examples of CAPs include creating a Social Justice Week or organizing around getting a gender-neutral restroom in the school. Beth described one project:

One group wanted to do a day of silence at their school, and the school had never done anything like that before. They kept having to go back to the administration to talk about what it was that they wanted to do and then they kept getting delayed, and so every time they'd set a date, there was another delay. But they continued to go back to the administration to find out what the specific concerns were and how they could address them so that the administration would feel comfortable in letting the activity go forward. InIt staff would continue to meet with the youth to help them think about what concerns had been raised, and how they might go about addressing those concerns for the administrators. Even though it was frustrating during the process, once it finally happened it was really well received by students in the school. And so they're really excited about trying to make this type of activity an annual activity. It brought students together from across the school and brought a real sense of school unity.

The May graduation ceremony is an opportunity for delegates to showcase what they accomplished through their community action projects. Each delegation gives a 4–5 minute presentation on the goals of their project, what they were able to accomplish, and what they plan on doing next.

Committees. Youth have the opportunity to serve on one or more youth advisory committees to help plan events (e.g., social justice arts slam, graduation), assist with recruitment of next year's class, and provide feedback on and input into the InIt curriculum. Serving on these committees provides leadership skill building opportunities and incorporates youth voice into the day-to-day work of the program.

Offering Session Structure

The structure of Program Days varies based on whether or not there are guest speakers or presenters or if there is an off-site service learning opportunity. Nevertheless, each program day has a specific topic of focus and a leadership skill-building workshop. They are all structured to provide some historical context on the issue, introduce exercises to get students thinking about their own privilege and perspectives, generate dialogue on personal experiences, and encourage youth to take some sort of action related to the chosen topic. A combination of lecture-style teaching, group discussion, engaging with media, and interactive exercises is used to convey information efficiently while accommodating multiple learning styles and ensuring all students participate to their full potential.

Biweekly Community Action Project meetings vary in structure based on the school, the specifics of the project, and the personalities of the students. Some of the students are highly motivated and given a lot of autonomy by the school whereas others need more support or are expected to check in with school administration every step of the way. Inlt staff tailor their guidance depending on what type of support each delegation requires. All meetings tend to include a progress update, brainstorming session, and action steps to be completed before the next meeting.

CADEN'S STORY AS TOLD BY JULIE THAYER

Caden participated as an Inlt delegate his senior year of high school, at the urging of a friend who had participated the year before. He came to the program with little knowledge of social justice issues and no previous leadership experience. Inlt welcomes such students, as long as they demonstrate a commitment to the program and a desire to learn. It was clear Caden wanted to learn, but he was so reserved that it was difficult to tell if he would be willing to engage with the challenging content and participate in the difficult conversations required to become a young social justice leader. Throughout immersion week, it became clear that he struggled with verbal communication – often stopping mid-sentence, stuttering or tripping over words, and losing his train of thought. It was also clear that this is something he had been bullied about, making him hesitant to speak up, particularly in large groups. Like a lot of other SEL programs, we use a “challenge by choice” model in many situations. We do have activities where everyone is expected to speak, but it can be as little or as much as the person is comfortable sharing. During these activities, Caden’s contributions were usually brief.

Throughout the program year, several examples come to mind that highlight Caden’s growth. He was always the first delegate to sign up for youth committees and other volunteer opportunities. In these smaller group settings, he began coming out of his shell, willing to take risks and show more of his personality. The other students who attended these events tended to be the more vocal, confident leaders in the group, yet they always created space for Caden and gave him as much time as he needed to convey his ideas. Whereas most students participate as a delegation from their school, Caden was the only student representing his school. For his Community Action Project, he took the lead on creating a workshop on school dropout after hearing that his school had a reputation for being “the last place you go before you dropout.” He conducted his own research, asked Inlt staff for resources, and asked classmates and other Inlt delegates for help creating and facilitating the workshop. In the end, he facilitated an activity and discussion at his school that educated his classmates on factors such as poverty and race that often fuel the high dropout rates, challenging the idea that it stems from students’ unwillingness to learn.

The Inlt graduation requires every student to create a PowerPoint presentation on their project and share it with their fellow delegates, teachers, parents, and YW Boston staff and supporters. For both his workshop and graduation, Caden met with Inlt staff multiple times to practice his presentation and get more comfortable with public speaking. He was open to feedback and practiced over and over again, despite his discomfort. On graduation night, I could sense that his fellow delegates were nervous for him as he walked to the front of the room to present. They knew he struggled with public speaking and didn’t want to see their friend fail. Because he had practiced so much, he delivered his presentation naturally and confidently and came off as more prepared and polished than any other delegate in the class. His fellow delegates cheered loudly when he was finished—louder than for any other delegate—knowing it took so much for him to get there.