**The Community Foundation of Tompkins County**
**Critical Issues Roundtable**
*Inclusive Communities: Breaking the Barriers*
**Women's Community Building**
**April 1, 2005**

**Executive Summary**

On Friday, April 1, 2005, the Community Foundation of Tompkins County hosted a Critical Issues Roundtable shaped by young people and the organizations that work with them outside of school: *Inclusive Communities: Breaking the Barriers*. More than 130 youth and adults participated in the dialogue. Nearly one-third of participants were youth, with most from the Ithaca City School District and the City of Ithaca. Youth participants were mostly in high school, and youth of color represented roughly half of youth participants. Adult participants were predominately a cross-section of professionals who work with youth, volunteers with youth programs, parents and other community leaders. Organizational representation was strong with the mayor, local legislators, principals of schools and agency leaders attending. Participants of all ages and backgrounds reported the evening was a significant event in our community, a powerful, moving experience. Joining us as co-hosts for this roundtable were: Ithaca Youth Bureau, GIAC, CDRC, Multicultural Resource Center, and the Tauck Foundation.

**Background on Framing the Issues:** *Inclusive Communities: Breaking the Barriers*
This critical issues roundtable grew out of the perceived need of the co-hosts to address the concerns of youth about their experience of diversity and inclusion when they are not in school. The planning team prepared this as a follow-up to the spring 2004 roundtable that examined ways the community could more effectively work with the Ithaca City School District. Planning meetings began in the summer of 2004.

In the beginning, the adult leaders around the table had two goals. First, we wanted to collaborate with youth throughout Tompkins County in planning and leading the discussion about diversity and inclusion. We wanted youth input and direction at the center of the process. Second, we wanted to establish a county-wide Youth Advisory Group at the Community Foundation through which youth can represent their communities and help to identify funding priorities for youth activities in our county.

We developed a discussion "tool kit" and distributed them to youth program leaders throughout the County. On short notice, we succeeded in engaging 65 young people in several groups to explore the issues surrounding inclusion and exclusion. We reviewed the result of these conversations with 30 youth participants and their sponsors in November and a smaller group in December, drawing out themes and common concerns. A subset of this group helped set the agenda for the roundtable, as well as opened the April 1, 2005.

We initially scheduled the Roundtable for late January, but engaging the youth as collaborators required that we adults listen more closely to youth and each other, hold all our ideas at bay for a while, adapt our process, modify our initial goals, and slow the process down. We initially thought we might meet as a large group of youth and adults, but we could not find mutually workable times to meet, and there was concern that youth would not feel free to speak openly. As a result we developed a youth planning group and an adult planning group that met separately and worked in tandem. Two adults facilitated the youth meeting and provided the link between the two groups. In the future, we might strengthen the process if youth were part of the link, as well. As our planning process stretched from 4 to 6 months to 8 to 10

months, we realized too late that some youth and adult participants became engaged, but we lacked a formal way to make sure, early on, that everyone was continuously in the information loop, and to pull individuals and groups back into the process.

The emphasis of our effort changed with the youth direction, and this shaped the April 1 program in a decisive way.  Our program began with reflections from youth on their own experiences of when they did not feel they belonged, or were excluded, and what could have been done that would have changed their experience.  This reframing of the topic, to belong/not belonging allowed us to pursue discussions of both personal experiences and personal responses, as well as more organized institutional barriers to belonging and formal policy and program responses to address those issues.  We were seeking both clear descriptions of the experience of "not belonging," as well as opportunities for individual and institutional actions to address that experience.


**What We Found**
75% of those who attended the roundtable completed the response forms.  130+ attended, while 98 participants completed feedback forms (31 youth; 67 adults).  The planning team was quite concerned that the success of the roundtable would hinge upon the openness with which both youth and adults could speak.  Indeed, in planning this roundtable, more than any of the other roundtables, we were met with more questions about whether or not open conversations could be held when many issues of race, culture and economic class have divided the community.  In response to the question:  "During the discussions, were you able to speak honestly about the issues?"  Youth responses were:  27-yes; 2-no; 1-both; 1-no answer.  Adult responses were:  64-yes; 2-no; 1-both; 1-no answer.  The written comments further support *a high level of confidence in the quality of the conversation*, at least among those who completed the forms.

Youth and adults learned from, or merely confirmed for, each other that their *experiences of not belonging and feeling left out are universal*.  The experience is multi-faceted and complex, and specific occasions vary for reasons specific to the time and place, persons and institutions, events and feelings involved.  Youth and adults frequently commented that they discovered more common ground of experience than they would have imagined.  Many also discovered that there are a great many ways, large and small, personal or institutional, to effectively respond to these issues.

In addition to the individual feedback, the discussion tables were asked to report out the predominant responses of participants at each table.  It should be noted that almost every table had an adult majority.

*Common themes for what causes a person to feel left out:*  being new or the only one; name calling; differences of race, color, gender, age, size, religion, social groups, economic status, language or dress; gender discrimination; racism and racial discrimination; class/economic prejudice; ideological differences; being different from the group; feeling judged and stereotyped; feeling invisible/ignored; not being accepted because of physical characteristics, personal value systems, or socio-economic status; injustice and the paradox of when something unfair is called fair; false assumptions that produce false empathy; dislocation causing feelings of exclusion; feeling disconnected to surroundings and/or self; alienation; different lifestyle choices; not being respected; not knowing the rules.

*Common strategies to increase belonging:*  inviting, reaching out or making overtures; affirming differences; adult intervention/modeling; getting involved in activities; being open and kind to people, assist, answer questions; linking resources; more dialogue; increased intensity of interaction; more time!!; sensitive and perceptive individuals reaching out; promoting honest and open dialogue about differences; mixing adults and youth more often; early in life learn and teach skill for how to meet/greet people and to express empathy; take risks to introduce oneself; put oneself in others' shoes; stand up for others; welcome persons in all situations and all people; support and recognition from adults and friends; not being isolated by people for your values; having people not make personal issues of differences; be proactive; find your own path – self, faith, and voice; acknowledge and set examples; build relationships with peers and mentors; challenge, explore and acknowledge assumptions; take risks; hold a "Mix It Up

Day" to build bridges of inclusion; adults should follow their own rules; give time; groups of people learning to respect all other people equally; "What we know is not all there is"; reject the domination of the "mainstream"; increase personal awareness of differences; teach value of differences to children; build self esteem; teach effective communication, especially how to identify helpful allies and how to use humor to deal with emotionally intense issues; offer recognition to others; ask questions.

Another question on the individual response form asked each individual what he or she would be personally willing to work on. Both *youth and adult comments reflect an eagerness to begin to take more personal initiative where they might have waited for others to take the lead* in addressing issues of inclusion. *The dominant theme was to communicate more*, to speak and listen with greater intention and care in all aspects of daily life. The optimism and good will of the evening found expression in this observation more than any other. The most common responses from youth were to move beyond their comfort zone: to speak up about their interests and concerns with other youth and adults and to take specific actions to model greater openness to others and inclusion. Adult responses were essentially the mirror image of the youth: to listen more actively to youth, to welcome them in the activities of adult life, from work to play to service, and to work harder at what they are already doing to respond to youth concerns. The responses regarding "strategies" from the tables and the individual responses for what people are willing to do line up quite well.

When asked about their willingness to work with others, both youth and adults emphasized openness to efforts that make youth more effective participants in their communities. These efforts were described as emerging organically from the daily lives of the youth and adults, or if the suggested efforts were more formal programs, they were described as requiring a simple, easily defined, and implemented process. What is striking from the results is the virtual absence of "big" single solutions. The ideas most often expressed involved making opportunities more readily, informally available and user-friendly to youth.

The youth offered to help out other youth and adults, with some emphasizing encouraging youth to informally organize everyday events and groups to develop skills in participation and leadership. Activities included fun, such as sports, music or art, or relaxing with others through talking and learning together. Adult responses ranged from creating space within adult daily life for more youth involvement and space within youth communities for youth to informally organize, as well. But many more adults suggested formally defined and supported programs of participation in leadership development, board decision processes, and programs sponsored by youth organizations.

All youth respondents were willing, even eager, to learn new skills and take action informally to address the issues of belonging. A few youth are actively seeking more formal roles in leadership and participation, as reflected in a handful of their personal comments. When asked about whether or not they are interested in serving on a community board or speaking with other youth about issues of inclusion and the ideas of the roundtable, slightly more than half of the youth respondents (17) expressed interest in taking these more formal roles. Both the universal willingness to act informally and the half who are interested in a more formal role appear to be exceptionally high responses. If we are to listen to the voice of the youth as we plan responses to their concerns, the responses would need to engage and institutionalize informal actions as much as or more than the formal organizational and programmatic responses to youth interests.

***The tables offered these recommendations in response to "What next?"***
The second set of questions to each of the tables elicited an equally wide spread of responses. We have clustered the responses into four categories: Creating space for engaging and communicating with youth; Youth and adults taking initiative with and for youth; Spreading the news about youth concerns and activities; Relationships and resources required for success. Within each of the four categories we break down the responses to illustrate both what individuals can choose to do informally with few resources and minimal organization as well as what might require more resources and more formal organizational control.

**I. Creating space for engaging and communicating with youth:**

*What you can offer or ask for informally:*
--focus on natural communities in which youth find themselves
--enable young people to gather, speak, make a difference
--opportunities to connect to each other and to adults in power
--initiate contact among youth and youth and adults with gestures of introduction, respect and
　　　　acknowlegdment
--just say "hello"
--honest discussion, which strikes a balance between political correctness and insults
--acknowledge all the emotions, experiences and class issues that lie behind discrimination
--create safe and respectful spaces for discussion
--watch out for others
--learn how to read and assess others
--role model returning to the Golden Rule
--mix it up, youth and adults
--find personal power, connect to inner self
--acknowledge other people's presence
--improve self-esteem
--adults should do the following – not be so judgmental, validate and acknowledge youth, and
　　　　empower youth without mixed messages

*What needs to be formally organized:*
--form small groups of youth to shadow existing adult groups in the community
--establish a Youth Commission with adult membership and resources
--offer a "Celebration of Youth Day" at the Ithaca Festival
--involve youth as equal members of committees
--go into the schools to the youth
--educate teachers and others to use a language of belonging and proactive community building;
--continued, orchestrated conversations
--change adult attitudes toward youth, including higher expectations
--increase the ways youth may feel and be safe, making safe spaces
-- involve more diverse institutions

**II. Youth and adults taking initiative with and for youth:**

*What you can offer or ask for informally:*
--get together!; commit!; Just Do IT!
--just be people together in informal settings
--be allies, advocates, and witnesses
--engage in intergenerational activities
--more activities, both informal and diverse, at the high school level
--hire young people, let them job shadow, mentoring
--empower youth to be leaders and come up with their own activities
--foster experiences that challenge stereotypes
--look for the positive
--lead by example
--on a quarterly basis whole families should meet to assess the following – youth and parents
　　　　experiences of belonging and not belonging, youth efforts to maintain athletics as a
　　　　positive part of youth lives, kids active participation in decision making;

*What needs to be formally organized:*
--establish a peer mentoring program
--involve young people in community decisions, including projects and hiring, and take the
　　　　students through the entire process alongside adults/community leaders

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--expand and add clubs in the schools and in the community
--offer incentives for people to get together, and get more involved with others in the community
--youth nomination of adults to receive awards
--use the arts to explore people's cultures, backgrounds, ethnicity, and opportunities to learn and
      grow;
--develop a "JUST TO HAVE FUN" club
--full membership in local boards
--display of youth artistic endeavors
--create a youth center on The Commons that is run and organized by youth
--create "Youth Empowerment Symposium" forums, leadership training, and workshops
--expand education programs focused on community building and inclusiveness
--foster connections across groups through community service
--meet with youth, adults and business owners to educate business owners not to discriminate
      against youth
--invite youth participation on civic/community Boards/committees;

## III. Spreading the news about youth concerns and activities:

### *What you can offer or ask for informally:*
--promotion by word of mouth and informal invitation
--young people educate adults about teen life and issues
--show active support of youth and families
--make it clear that role modeling is part of extended family and wider community responsibility

### *What needs to be formally organized:*
--provide a central place to display information about youth
--promotion through media and formal invitations to events and programs
--initiate a marketing campaign to give positive messages about how to make friends, introduce
      oneself, interact with others, create opportunities to get together
--recognize youth "voice" and presence through radio programs, regular columns in local
      newspapers
--youth websites
--Youth Fair to publicize opportunities for youth involvement
--use events or projects such as the Ithaca Festival/Kids panel, media campaign, advertising to
      promote communication:  "Do you know me? Ask!"

## IV. Relationships and resources required for success:

### *What you can offer or ask for informally:*
--small amounts of money to initiate self-sustaining activities
--permission to use informally, at little or no cost, existing public and private spaces
--volunteers to take initiative to develop and lead new practices/rituals of greeting, events and
      projects
--open minded folk to suspend their disbelief and try new things
--flexible timing, Just Do It Now, or whenever a critical mass is moved to act

### *What needs to be formally organized:*
--larger amounts of money to offer formal programs and projects
--funding for dedicated spaces and times
--open minded professional staff and officials to suspend their disbelief and try things
--volunteers to serve organizations and programs
--flexible times that fit in with other scheduled youth activities
--encourage and create a climate of acceptance in the schools

**Next Steps**
Many participants experienced this Critical Issues Roundtable as a significant contribution to the community in the way it enabled youth and adults to speak and to listen well. It was a powerful experience for many, and one table group is convening to continue the conversation. The Planning Committee continues to analyze the participant responses to guide the next steps in addressing the issues raised in the roundtable. For those who attended and volunteered to help, you may be contacted at a later date. In the meantime, the Roundtable identified many actions individuals can undertake with little organized effort or expense.

**Summary and Thanks to All**
The Critical Issues Roundtables represent a series of community-focused conversations hosted by the Community Foundation in its role as a convener for exploring unmet needs and community-wide opportunities. The roundtables are intended to encourage more effective strategic decision-making and planning practices, promote positive results for our communities, and foster enlightened philanthropy. The Foundation invites others to co-host these meetings as a means of encouraging partnerships, fostering collaborative efforts, and identifying the natural leaders who are prepared to pursue the next steps.

Essential to this community discussion of breaking the barriers to inclusive communities was the dedicated Planning Team whose work has covered many months and whose wisdom identified the main discussion points for the roundtable. Members of the Planning Team were: **Stephanie G. Adams***, Assistant Director, Office of Multicultural Affairs, Ithaca College***; Barbara A. Baker***, 4-H Youth Development Program Leader, Tompkins County Cornell Cooperative Extension***; Eric Clay,** *Chair of the Grants Committee, Community Foundation of Tompkins County;* **Audrey Cooper,** *Director, Multicultural Resource Center, Tompkins County Cornell Cooperative Extension;* **David Driskell***, AICP, Lecturer, Department of City and Regional Planning, Cornell University***; Karen Friedeborn***, Youth Development Division Coordinator, Ithaca Youth Bureau;* **Peg Hendricks,** *Executive Director, Community Foundation of Tompkins County;* **Margo Hittleman,** *President, Board of Directors, Greater Ithaca Activities Center; and PhD candidate, Department of Education, Cornell University;* **Leslyn McBean-Clairborne,** *Deputy Director, Greater Ithaca Activities Center (GIAC);* **Jane Levine Powers,** *Senior Research Associate, Family Life Development Center, Cornell University;* **Judith Saul***, Executive Director, Community Dispute Resolution Center (CDRC)***; Nancy Zahler,** *Director, Tompkins County Youth Services Department*

Special Thanks to Our Youth Planning Leaders and Panel Team: **Ale-ere Akunzule**, *First Congregational Church;* **Michael Anderson**, *Ithaca Youth Bureau Advisory Board;* **Larissa Anderson**, *Ithaca Youth Bureau Advisory Board and Youth Panelist*; **Ambria Diaz**, *Ithaca Youth Bureau Advisory Board and Youth Panelist;* **Sebastian Friedeborn**, *Ithaca Youth Bureau Advisory Board*; **Jacob Gelber**, *First Congregational Church*; **Giovanni Griffin**, *Greater Ithaca Activities Center (GIAC)*; **Caprice Malone**, *Greater Ithaca Activities Center (GIAC)*; **Orande McBean**, *Greater Ithaca Activities Center (GIAC)*; **Kennay Nembhard**, *Greater Ithaca Activities Center (GIAC)*; **Chavonte Perkins**, *Greater Ithaca Activities Center (GIAC);* **Chibo Shinagawa**, *Multicultural Resource Center and Youth Panelist*; **LaiKuan Ward**, *Greater Ithaca Activities Center (GIAC)*

We thank our co-hosts of the roundtable: The Ithaca Youth Bureau, GIAC, CDRC, Multicultural Resource Center, and the Tauck Foundation..

On behalf of the Planning Team and the Co-Hosts, we thank all who participated in the roundtable on *Inclusive Communities: Breaking the Barriers.*