

Clement Coulston: The opportunity Project UNIFY gave him to be a youth leader and how he takes those skills and uses them in other organizations.

Before my involvement in Project UNIFY, I saw leadership in terms of “check boxes” in which one had to fit into each prerequisite to be even considered “a leader.” I thought to be a leader, I had to be the most popular, the academically gifted, and the praised Athlete. But, is this equitable? Are these the ‘standards?’ Is this neglecting young people, just because of either a challenge or a difference?

As I progressed through school, I did not see myself as a leader. I heard the term used in history classes when learning about the Founding Fathers and the Civil Rights Activists. While we studied these life-altering leaders, I saw leadership was something that I was not “fit for.” I had new ideas, I loved working with my friends, and I was a hard-worker. However, the way that leadership was valued and perceived in school, my aspirations or even thoughts of being a leader were whisked away. I was just another student, who would follow the “ones” who were leaders.

When I started in Project UNIFY, I felt like I was in a different world; it is a culture that does not capitalize what one cannot do, but celebrates what one can do! Youth of all abilities, strengths and challenges are encouraged and provided the opportunity to lead. The typical delivering of a speech or writing of a letter are not the only competencies that entail leadership. One person may excel at leading a discussion, while another may be a detailed note-taker. One person may have the ability to summarize and paraphrase propositions that may be challenging for all to comprehend.

This notion of shared leadership was amazing to me, and also opened my eyes to how we can encourage and engage people with different abilities, to gain those valuable leadership skills.

Through Project UNIFY, I have learned about **value-based leadership**: leading with the heart, empowering the soul and valuing the people you work with! We have transformed value-based leadership and invested in the revolutionary concept of *Inclusive Youth Leadership*.

You may be asking, “*What is Inclusive Youth Leadership?*”

- Ability to identify, utilize, and maximize the talents in each one of us;
- Embrace a supportive environment, in which one feels comfortable and valued for his or her contributions;
- Youth with and without disabilities leading and working together, rather than perceived as “token items;”
- Youth are recognized as *agents of change* rather than *helpers of change*. If given the chance, the opportunity, and the **belief in our ability**, we will truly amaze you!

If asked to “summarize” what Project UNIFY really is, I will find much challenge to this request. Through my experience in Project UNIFY, I have become cognizant of how we all support the three pillars (school-wide awareness, inclusive youth leadership, inclusive sports activities) of Project UNIFY, but each of us has a unique personal experience that catalyzes our passion to further change

in our communities. Changing the negative stereotypes of low expectations and amazing others with the attitude of “we can and we will!” Reversing the exclusive attitudes precipitated from possible uncomfortableness in interacting with a person with a disability to building communities modeling “all of us have value” inclusionary behaviors.

“Together We Can!” - Theme for the 2013 Special Olympics World Winter Games in PyeongChang, Republic of Korea

From my leadership experiences and opportunities with Project UNIFY, I have been able to carry the ideals to other organizations.

One of the areas that make Project UNIFY distinct from other organizations is the focus on equity. We continue to hear this term in the news, but some consider inequities in terms of food, healthcare, housing, or even racial demographics.

I remember learning about equity during a conference call with a group of colleagues. We were discussing our vision for the future, and the steps in which we both individually and collectively must undertake to get there. During this call, an aura of ‘getting through what needs to be done’ by whoever can share his or her opinion first. While these ideas earned respect, this indirect notion of ‘speaks first does first’ framed a climate of inequity. Those other teammates who needed the time to process and organize his or her thoughts were left to the listening role. This situation opened my eyes to an important quality that PU has taught me, which is **equity**.

Equitable Conversations, is where *every voice person* is encouraged to share his/her thoughts with the group, regardless of ability, educational degree, listing of experience. Through using visuals, creating organizational webs, providing summaries, and composing agendas can help all with understanding, so they all can contribute!

If one voice is not heard, our collective work can be decreased, as everyone can make a positive contribution. We must open our EYES up to the ability in all!