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Mentor: Bret Gustafson

For the past 25 years, NCCJSTL’s Anytown Youth Leadership Institute has offered a meaningful opportunity through which high school students are able to dialogue across differences and explore their personal identities in relation to contemporary social justice issues. The eight-day residential training program combines facilitated dialogue and experiential learning to encourage self-reflection, ultimately, empowering students to be agents of change in their own communities.

Over the summer, I worked as a program FaciliTrainer at Anytown. I led educational activities for the students and coordinated small and large group discussions. Additionally, I tracked student learning and insight through semi-structured interviews and a mixed method survey administered before and after their camp experience. These methods informed my thesis research, which presents the salient themes and takeaways of camp as articulated by the student participants including simultaneous feelings of concern and excitement for reintegrating their newfound social justice knowledge into their own communities, realizations about the expansive and intersecting nature of social justice issues, and challenging perspectives that arose out of new relationships with students from distinct and diverse backgrounds. Supplementary to analyzing the student insight, this study also analyzes the format of Anytown in order to understand how the camp fosters specific norms and learning objectives. By examining the relationship between camp infrastructure and student experience, I hope to demonstrate the importance of the choices made by camp administrators and illuminate how camp environments actively affect student learning. Ultimately, socialization around one’s identity is informed by a number of direct and indirect factors. Though impermanent and somewhat limited in their scope, Anytown can play a crucial role in exposing students to new thought process and shifting their previous socialization experiences, which undergirds the broader relevance of this study.