



MY-CIL Practice Brief #7

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Ways CILs Can Sustain Engagement of Youth with Disabilities from Minority Backgrounds: Focus Group Findings

About the MY-CIL Project. Minority Youth and Centers for Independent Living (MY-CIL) is a collaborative effort of Hunter College; the Center for Independence of the Disabled, New York; Independent Living Research Utilization; and Mathematica. The Administration for Community Living's National Institute on Disability, Independent Living, and Rehabilitation Research and the Office of Independent Living Programs funded MY-CIL to improve outcomes for out-of-school youth and young adults (ages 14 to 24) with disabilities. Specifically, the project seeks to produce and share knowledge that empowers Centers for Independent Living (CILs) to improve outcomes for youth and young adults with significant disabilities from nationally recognized racial and ethnic minority groups who have completed or otherwise left secondary education.

Clarifying terms

Youth from minority backgrounds. MY-CIL uses the term *youth from minority backgrounds* to refer to transition-age youth and young adults (ages 14 to 24) from nationally recognized racial and ethnic minority groups.

Out-of-school youth (OSY) with disabilities. MY-CIL uses the term OSY to refer to transition-age youth and young adults (ages 14 to 24) who have completed or otherwise left secondary education.

In this brief: We conducted three virtual focus groups with OSY with disabilities who come from minority backgrounds to learn about how CILs can improve their outreach and programs for this population. Conducted over Zoom in June 2022, each focus group included 7 to 10 participants who lived in Illinois, New York City, or South Carolina. This brief highlights techniques CILs can use to sustain engagement of OSY with disabilities who come from minority backgrounds.

Focus group methods and recruitment strategies

We partnered with three CILs—Southern Illinois CIL, Center for Independence of the Disabled, New York; and Able South Carolina—to recruit OSY from minority backgrounds for the focus groups. We recruited 10 participants for the Illinois focus group, 7 participants for the New York City focus group, and 9 participants for the South Carolina focus group. See Table 1 for more information on the participants.

Table 1. Self-reported characteristics of focus group participants

Characteristic	Number of focus group participants
Age	
18 to 21	11
22 to 24	15
Race and ethnicity	
Black or African American	18
Asian	1
American Indian or Alaska Native	3
Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander	3
Hispanic (including persons of Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, and Central or South American origin)	2
Gender	
Female	9
Male	17

Note: Data on race and ethnicity come from participants’ responses to the online screening survey. Data on age and gender come from participants’ responses during screening phone calls. Categories for race and ethnicity are not mutually exclusive.

Findings

In this section we highlight participants’ perspectives on techniques CILs can use to sustain engagement of youth with disabilities from minority backgrounds.

Techniques for sustaining engagement in CIL activities

Participants described barriers and supports for involvement in groups, programs, and activities. They indicated how CILs can create welcoming environments that make it more likely for them to stay engaged.

What barriers do participants face when joining new groups and activities?

Participants spoke candidly about the challenges of joining new groups. One participant reflected, “Trying something new comes with so much anxiety.” Other participants discussed behaviors that make group interactions feel inauthentic or judgmental. One participant described that some groups “lure” people there but have nothing to offer, so it feels like the organization is more motivated by attendance numbers than by offering useful or meaningful content. A few participants also mentioned confidentiality concerns. These participants did not want organizations sharing their contact information without their permission.

Participants emphasized the importance of people accepting them as they are — specifically, that organizations should not expect them to wear certain types of clothing or make financial contributions. “They should just appreciate the fact that you found the confidence to show up,” said one participant.

Several participants shared that experiences of discrimination related to disability and race make returning for a second meeting unlikely. One participant said, “I was invited to a meeting, an in-person meeting from an online community. ... So, when we got the meeting, I experienced some racist behaviors by other disabled people that were White. I kind of felt bad, and at some point, I really wanted to go back home. But since the meeting was for people with disabilities, I

just overlooked my skin color and I had to attend it though I was [in] pain inside.” Other participants described feeling belittled or ignored.

“Another thing is being stereotyped and looked as if you’re not up to task... When you want to provide your contribution to something, they would be like, ‘Oh no, don’t worry... Let others do it.’ [That’s] something that will break me down, like why can’t I be in this space? Why can’t I be included?”

(Focus group participant, age 24)

How can CILs create a welcoming environment that prioritizes value and respect?

Participants emphasized the importance of feeling welcomed, valued, and respected in new groups. They said they notice when people are authentic and ask questions and “actually care” about them. One participant said, “I love to be in a place in which I’m treated like every person—no extra attention, no extra care, but just like, let me feel normal.” Another participant echoed this concept, recommending that organizations “listen to the person behind the disability.”

“So, I feel like any time I sense this particular group of people actually care about who I am and how I am and what I’m going through, if they’re asking me questions ... I just get comfortable with them, and I actually want to share more and talk about myself more.”

(Focus group participant, age 23)

Participants described a welcoming environment as one that is equitable and free of discrimination. Participants suggested that organizations demonstrate discipline for negative behaviors. “My own opinion is that there should be rules and regulations, and in a situation where anybody breaks it, there should be a punishment for it,” said one participant.

Key takeaways

- **Ensure programs and activities are free of judgment and discrimination.** For example, CILs can engage young adults to co-create ground rules for engagement. This would build consensus on positive behaviors that foster a welcoming and inclusive environment and identify negative behaviors that the CIL or program will not tolerate in the group. CILs can also include a statement of confidentiality for participants’ contact information in the ground rules or code of conduct. CILs can display this code of conduct on the CIL’s website and include a link to this landing page in outreach materials. Facilitators can reference these ground rules at the beginning of meetings or activities.
- **Specify expectations of participants in outreach materials.** Such expectations might include costs associated with the program or activity or attire requirements.

Discussion

CIL staff interested in connecting with youth from minority backgrounds might consider strengthening their strategies to sustain participant engagement. When deciding to stay involved in a new group or program, participants’ first impressions were key. Program staff can provide a warm welcome to the group by asking questions to learn more about attendees, thanking them for attending, and accepting them as they are, without judgment. CILs can reflect their

dedication to creating environments that are authentic and free from discrimination by working with people who use their services to establish a code of conduct and actively enforcing it. These measures would help ensure all participants feel safe and welcomed.

Interested in other focus group findings?

To learn more about **conducting effective outreach** with out-of-school youth from minority backgrounds, see [MY-CIL Practice Brief #6: Ways CILs can Conduct Effective Outreach to Youth with Disabilities from Minority Backgrounds](#).

To learn more about **recommendations for CIL programs and activities**, see [MY-CIL Practice Brief #8: Program and Activity Recommendations for CILs Working with Youth with Disabilities from Minority Backgrounds](#).

To learn more about MY-CIL

To learn more about MY-CIL, please visit <https://minorityyouthcil.com/>.

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