

TRAILHEAD INSTITUTE

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# Colorado's State of Adolescent Sexual Health Report

**PREPARED BY**

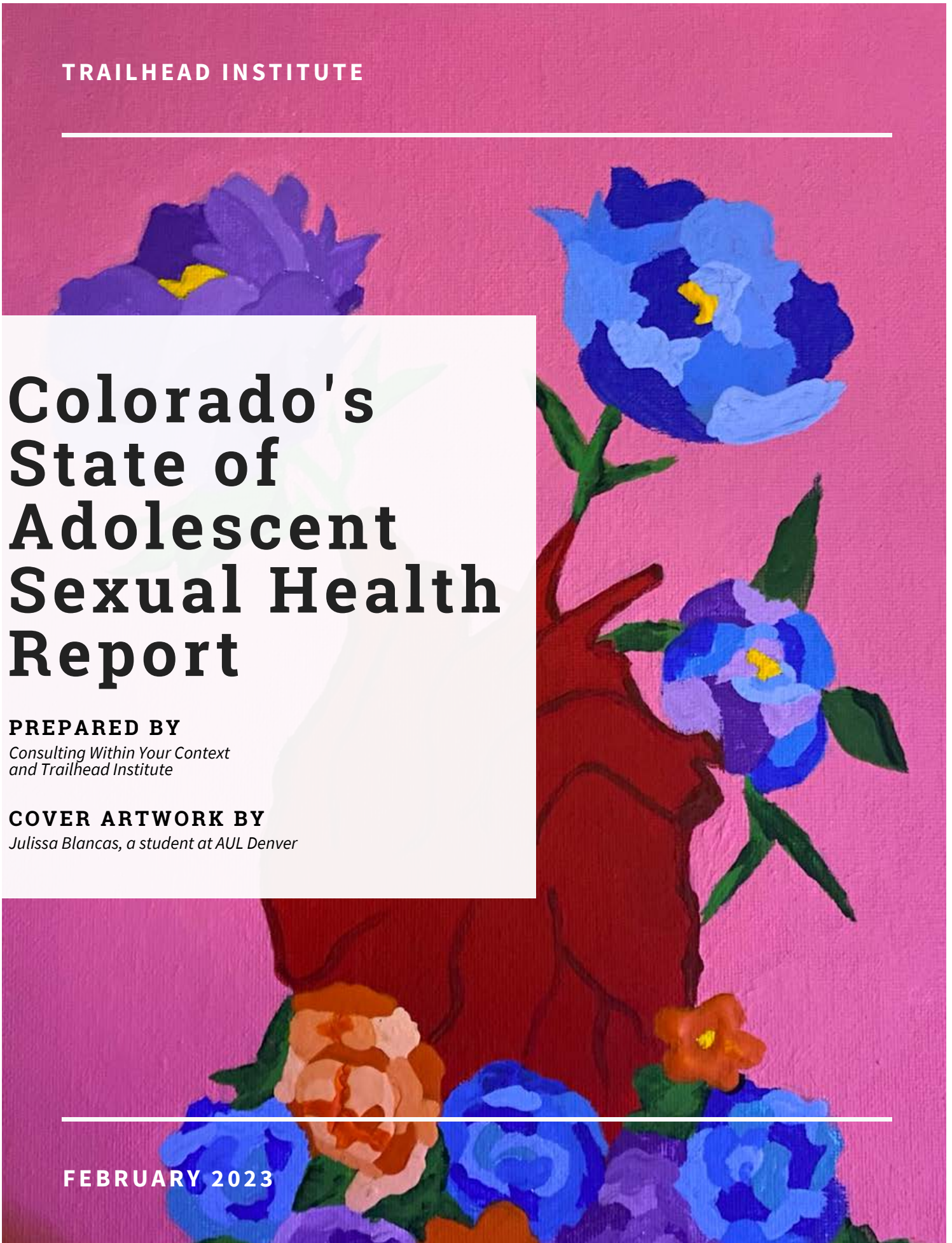
*Consulting Within Your Context  
and Trailhead Institute*

**COVER ARTWORK BY**

*Julissa Blancas, a student at AUL Denver*

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# An Invitation to Reimagine the State of Adolescent Sexual Health in Colorado

For over a decade, the State of Adolescent Sexual Health (SASH) report has provided a summary of up-to-date statistics on the sexual health of young people and a brief snapshot of how Colorado's progress compares to national trends over time. While this quantitative data can inform policies and programs that support the health and well-being of Colorado youth, it is also limited in its expression and depth, and fails to capture a nuanced, intersectional understanding of what young people experience and need from their sexual health education.

Evolving from what has been, the 2023 SASH report exclusively focuses on the systems that govern and influence the experiences that young people have with sexual health, recognizing that sexual health outcomes and personal development improve when the systems responsible for delivering care, access, and education reflect the humanity and diversity of young people.

This reimagining of the SASH centers the voices of those most impacted by oppressive systems and leans into the leadership of young people in order to lay the groundwork for evolving the delivery of sexual health education in Colorado. Developed using an anti-oppressive process that engaged community members with lived experience, this report identifies the roles that partners across education, community-based organizations, governmental, and philanthropic sectors play in the youth sexual health field and presents an accountable path forward for transforming young people's experiences with sexual health through clear, anti-oppressive action.

At the heart of this call for transformation is an echoing need to center the voices of young people, recognizing that today's youth are navigating a world where abortion is not accessible to all; states are passing harmful anti-trans and anti-gay legislation; and shamed-based, federally funded, abstinence-only sex education is still being taught in schools.



For the first time in the SASH's development, this report uses art and storytelling to understand young people's experiences discovering intimacy, relationships, identity, and autonomy in a society that for too long has limited young people's earliest explorations of self through adultism and other forms of oppression. In the words of Talia Cardin, an artist, activist and young person who supported the development of this report, "Art is fundamentally opposed to the current systems of sex education that are centered in conformity and shame. Art is a form of storytelling that celebrates self-expression; it is a vehicle to span barriers and connect across countries and cultures. Art is a tool of change."

What lies before us now is a spacious opportunity to grow. As a field. As systems. As partners. And most importantly, as accomplices to young people.

This transformative work begins by establishing a set of core boundaries as the basis for youth sexual health education. From this foundation, the 2023 SASH report introduces liberating practices that recurred throughout the development of this report as vital approaches for Trailhead and partners across the sexual health field to collectively and accountably embody in order to take and sustain action that is rooted in equity and justice. Moving from these core boundaries and liberating practices and into action, the 2023 SASH report progresses to sector-specific, anti-oppressive recommendations that outline clear action for partners across systems. This intentional progression towards action requires that partners build from a shared foundation of what sexual health education must reflect, which becomes possible through engaging in liberating practices that center young people, community, and power sharing.

Developed in partnership with Tomei Kuehl of Consulting Within Your Context, a Youth Sexual Health Program Board comprised of young people and adults whose intersectional identities have historically been excluded in conversations about youth sexual health, and Talia Cardin, who served as the youth facilitator to the Board, the 2023 SASH is no longer a snapshot, but a starting place.

This report is a tool for partners across academic, governmental, social, and philanthropic sectors to join Trailhead in the hard and necessary work to achieve systemic transformation. It is an invitation to reflect, hold conversation, deepen relationships, find alignment across initiatives and imagine new possibilities, together.

We invite you to reimagine the state of adolescent sexual health in Colorado by visiting [www.sashcolorado.com](http://www.sashcolorado.com) to explore the 2023 SASH report, developed for the first time in a website format to hold space for greater depth and expansion of learnings and possibilities as we continue to evolve sexual health education across the state.



***Curves and Queerness***

by an anonymous artist from Inside Out Youth Services

"This piece represents the deep queerness and abstract nature that pleasure has for me."

## Leading This Work

Reimagining the SASH would have never come to fruition without the generosity of numerous partners. Trailhead is grateful for the opportunity to work alongside the following partners:

The members of the **Youth Sexual Health Program Board**, who provided direct and clear recommendations on how this work moves forward. This group of passionate individuals including América Ramírez, Apryl Alexander, Arianna Dominguez, Carlee Taga, Darolyn Stewart, Em Mais, Goddess Tyescha Clark, Isa Hussein, Jace Bolano, Jourdan Kee, Julissa Blancas, Marcus Hart, Naliyah Pons, Shanae Adams, Starr Graham, Theo Rodgers, graciously provided insights and actions that centered the experiences of system-impacted community members and young people. It was a privilege to listen, learn and grow with them.

Tomei Kuehl and Talia Cardin from Consulting Within Your Context, who were crucial in ensuring Trailhead centered the process of reimagining the SASH in anti-oppressive practices and approaches. They encouraged and challenged Trailhead to rethink what we've always done, and helped Trailhead think innovatively and creatively of what this work can become.

Talia Cardin and Isa Hussein who co-created and facilitated two **Pleasure Artshops** with AUL Denver and Inside Out Youth Services. Their embodiment of art as a tool of change centered young people's voices in this project through creativity, pleasure, and joy.

The eighteen young artists who participated in the Pleasure Artshops and gifted this work and process with beautiful pieces of art that were a visual and written expression of their lived experiences and hopes for the future of sex education.



*Untitled*, by Itzel Rodriguez-Molina, a student at AUL Denver

The **ReproCollab**, for their generosity of funding and trust from which reimagination is possible. Their approach to flexible funding meets the needs of programs, communities and grantees and allowed Trailhead to use this grant to ensure that the SASH centered and compensated community members and young people equitably, making their participation in this process possible and transformative.

Finally, we are grateful for all of the Youth Sexual Health Program partners who connected us with their community and amazing individuals doing anti-oppressive work. Your commitment to collaboration in the spirit of creating a better future allowed Trailhead to meet and partner with the Youth Sexual Health Program Board members. Thank you for your continued partnership and commitment to furthering the field of youth sexual health and supporting young people.

## Starting From an Anti-Oppressive Foundation: Core Boundaries for Sexual Health Education



*Untitled*, by Aves (He/It) from Inside Out Youth Services

The core boundaries, liberating practices and anti-oppressive recommendations that have emerged from Trailhead’s work with Consulting Within Your Context, Talia Cardin and the Youth Sexual Health Program Board lay the groundwork for establishing a new approach to implementing youth sexual health education in Colorado. For systemic change to be effective, it is imperative to first identify and understand the **core boundaries** held by the Board as the foundation from which all engagement, action, and envisioning within the youth sexual health field must embody to be not only anti-oppressive, but liberating.

The delineation of these founding principles as boundaries is inspired by writer and activist adrienne maree brown’s description of the term in which she writes, “Your no makes the way for your yes. Boundaries create the container within which your yes is authentic. Being able to say no makes yes a choice.”

The core boundaries honored throughout all aspects of the Boards work in the development of the 2023 SASH report create a foundation for youth sexual health education that is inclusive, pleasure-based, anti-oppressive, and accessible for all.

These core boundaries both contextualize the recommendations developed by the Board and are embedded within the liberating practices as collaborative approaches that all partners should engage in for determining future action. These core boundaries centered by the Board should be embraced by all partners working to further the youth sexual health field in a liberatory manner.

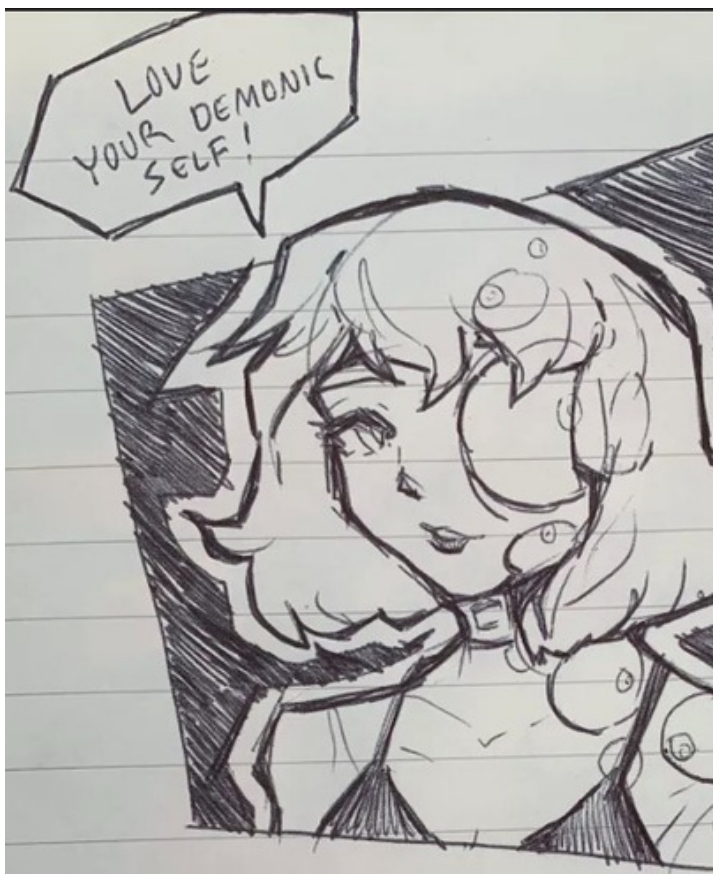
These core boundaries include:

## 1. Intersectionality is necessary to understand the way different identities are impacted by systems of oppression.

**Intersectionality** honors the nuance and fluidity to how one identifies and informs how people experience and navigate systems of oppression. In an interview with Time Magazine, civil rights advocate Kimberlé Crenshaw described intersectionality in stating, “Intersectionality is simply about how certain aspects of who you are will increase your access to the good things or your exposure to the bad things in life...It’s basically a lens, a prism, for seeing the way in which various forms of inequality often operate together and exacerbate each other.”

This same nuance and flexibility needs to be reflected in sexual health education.

Intersectionality was centered from the onset of this report’s development with the intentional recruitment of a Youth Sexual Health Program Board made up of young people and adults whose intersectional identities have historically been excluded from sexual health education and initiatives such as the SASH. As a result, the outcome of this report is holistically shaped by the unique living experiences of the Board and presents a pathway for evolving sexual health education that supports all young people by centering those who are most marginalized.



### **Smearing Paint**

by Nora (She/Her) from  
Inside Out Youth Services

"When it came to sex education, my dad had decided to take me out of health class to teach me these things himself, believing the school's education would not be appropriate. My sex education came down to abstinence-only which took years to break out of that concept. Not only that, but being a trans woman taught me that my body was abnormal and even demonic to some, so when it comes to self-portraits I decided to embrace this in a positive way and began drawing myself as a beautiful many eyed demon. I also drew art of a character from my comic named Vivi, she is a trans woman as well and embraces her sexuality and desires, in a way she was my own version of the confidence I wished to work towards."

## 2. Pleasure-based sex education is required.

Sexual health starts from a place of pleasure and joy and is the ability to be one's full self, having resources, access, education, and community to express oneself.

The desire for **pleasure-based sex education** emerged prominently from young people throughout the development of this report in discussion among youth and adult members of the Board and through the creative expression of young artists who participated in two Pleasure Artshops facilitated by Talia Cardin and Isa Hussein. Through the artist workshops, young people were invited to explore their own personal definitions of pleasure, erotic, intimacy, love, and sex through art. These works have been incorporated throughout the 2023 SASH report to illuminate young people's experiences with sexual health.

### ***Untitled***

by Maria Galvan-Mireles from AUL Denver

"I painted a thermal body to show that all types of bodies are perfect/normal. I feel that many girls are scared of intimacy as a result of body shaming. We should love ourselves first."



### 3. Different forms of oppression (isms) must be defined and connected to our existing sex education system.

Sexual health and sex education exist within a modern context rooted in colonialism, capitalism, racism, heteronormativity, ableism, classism, and other forms of oppression. If we are to dream of a new way of showing up in the field of youth sexual health that is centered in anti-oppressive practices, policies and interactions, we must start by learning this history in order to develop action and change that addresses the harms these forms of oppression have on sexual health and education.

Research produced by Consulting Within Your Context provides an introduction to **how these oppressive systems have impacted sexual health** and is a thoughtful start to learning and acknowledging the oppressions that young people with intersecting marginalized identities have had to endure for generations. This research is only the beginning and we will keep exploring the stories that haven't been emphasized or told. Furthermore, the anti-oppressive recommendations developed by the Board begin to rectify our nation's history of oppression and its impact on sexual health.



#### ***Gender Fluidity***

by Ariana Rodriguez from AUL Denver

"The meaning behind my artwork is to make a stand as a gender fluid member of the LGBTQ [community]. I want to represent that we shouldn't just have a female and male bathroom. We should always include another for all genders. We are all humans and alike in many ways and I believe we should have an all gender bathroom and get our freedom without getting judged / discriminated when walking into one."



## 4. Equitable access to sex education for everyone across the whole spectrum of humans is a necessity.

Sexual health education must prioritize **accessibility and inclusion for all** and center those whose identities have been made marginalized by oppressive systems. Access is a critical value that looks different based on the compounding, intersectional identities one holds. In terms of accessibility, the Board prioritized access for students with disabilities, acknowledging that too often students with disabilities are pulled from sexual health classes and never receive any education. There is a spectrum of intellectual and developmental disabilities and schools must be prepared to offer sexual health education in a variety of formats to meet diverse needs.

This core boundary was prioritized throughout Trailhead's Board recruitment process to ensure that folk with living experience with disabilities and navigating sexual health education were a part of the Board. Furthermore, practices to ensure equitable participation were centered. All Board members were paid for their time and living experience, as well as the young artists who participated in the Pleasure Artshops with AUL Denver and Inside Out Youth Services. Additionally, Consulting Within Your Context and Trailhead utilized "touch points" rather than monthly meetings to engage Board members in ways that met their individual needs, interests, and capacity. Lessons in navigating barriers to compensation and youth engagement, and enhancing participation through touch points are available in more depth in the **Lessons Learned section** of the SASH website.



### **Curves**

by an anonymous artist from  
Inside Out Youth Services

"This piece depicts the experience of having a disability and its relationship with my sexuality. In my life I am missing a lot of personal autonomy despite reaching adulthood. I feel like I am perpetually in a space between tight ribbons and tangled lines. Although not always deliberately, individuals around me don't perceive me beyond having a disability and as a result respond poorly when I behave my age per say. Specifically when it comes to my sexuality I find that it returns the personal autonomy the world took from me. This piece depicts the feeling of individual freedom in granted in my sexuality."

These core boundaries ensure that we keep in alignment with our mission to dismantle oppression within the sexual health field and serve as a guiding tool when forming partnerships, engaging in program development, action planning, curriculum selection and implementation, policy development, resource referral, and other actions. Each of these core boundaries are discussed in greater depth on the **SASH report website**, providing further insight on how these core boundaries were centered by the Board and guided the development of this report and recommendations for future action.

## Liberating Practices

The core boundaries introduced above are embedded within the anti-oppressive recommendations developed by the Board and the liberating practices synthesized by Trailhead. The **liberating practices** introduced below emerged as recurring themes when analyzing the anti-oppressive recommendations developed by the Board. Their delineation as liberating practices serve to distinguish these themes as enduring approaches that all partners within the sexual health field can embody now – while implementing the anti-oppressive recommendations – and in the future, when determining what new action is possible and needed.

These liberating practices begin to imagine new possibilities for the sexual health field that are centered in pleasure, sex positivity, and joy by engaging with young people to understand and address their needs; valuing the spectrum of lived experiences through collaboration; and redistributing power and decision-making.

These liberating practices are not meant to be exhaustive, and may be expanded upon with future consideration.



### ***And Look At You, You Have So Much Meaning***

by Saber Ali from AUL Denver

"You can love whoever you want to. Relationships aren't just about physical attraction, they are also about the connection between two people's souls."

## 1. Centering Youth Voice

We have learned through this process of reimagining the SASH that the field of youth sexual health education cannot move forward in an impactful or sustainable way without **young people at the center**. In a thoughtful reflection on their participation as the youth facilitator to the Board, Talia Cardin shared, “Currently, adults in positions of power are able to decide on our behalf what potentially life altering education and information we will engage with, without consulting us.” They expanded upon the possibilities that come from working alongside youth by adding that, “When you equitably compensate young people for their time, and enable creative pathways of engagement, we show up with force and thoughtful consideration, and create beautiful change.”

By moving forward in partnership with young people and elevating their voices and experiences, especially in spaces where young people have not been traditionally invited, Trailhead and partners across the sexual health field can begin to dismantle the oppression of adultism that limits youth participation and potential.

## 2. Practicing Authentic Community Engagement

This reimagining of the SASH report demonstrates the transformation that becomes possible when those leading the solutions reflect the communities who have historically been excluded from the systems that govern youth sexual health. By centering people with intersectional identities and unique living experience, the SASH report is holistically different from iterations past; embedded in opportunity that is centered in pleasure and joy that uplifts the wellbeing and liberation of all young people – especially those whose identities have been most marginalized.

Several practices supported Trailhead in equitably engaging with the Board and young people throughout this initiative. This included compensating community members; intentionally recruiting people based on their living, rather than professional, experience; and establishing a set of community agreements and expectations of Trailhead to ensure bi-directional partnership, autonomy, and respect. These practices are described in greater depth on the **[Practicing Authentic Community Engagement page](#)** of the SASH report website.

## 3. Sharing Power

We can build a brighter future for young people across Colorado through collective impact across sectors and true youth-adult partnership. This necessitates that Trailhead and partners across systems examine the power and influence they hold in spaces that impact youth and determine how we will leverage this power to better center the needs of young people and marginalized communities.

At Trailhead, we look to Raji Hunjan and Jethro Pettit’s definition of power as a starting place for defining the root of this liberating practice, in which Hunjan and Pettit write that, “Power is dynamic, relational, and multidimensional, changing according to its context, circumstance, and interest. Its expressions and forms can range from domination and resistance to collaboration and transformation.”

As a public health institute and leader of Colorado’s Youth Sexual Health Program, Trailhead holds power and influence in our relationships with funders, state and local governmental agencies, and through our longstanding network of community and institutional partners. We also hold power as leaders of Colorado’s WISE (Working to Institutionalize Sex Education) Initiative that leads the expansion of comprehensive sexual health education across the state. In all spaces that we occupy, we commit to being strong advocates with and for young people through expressions of power that are rooted in collaboration, transformation, and dismantling of oppressive systems. Visit the **[Sharing Power page](#)** of the SASH report website to learn about how Trailhead is engaging in this liberating practice.

## Taking Action Through Anti-Oppressive Recommendations

Over a six month period, the Board developed a robust set of sector-specific recommendations and action steps to improve sexual health in Colorado. These recommendations offer a starting point towards affecting systems-level change within the youth sexual health field. They can be explored in depth at [www.sashcolorado.com](http://www.sashcolorado.com).

As organizations take action upon the anti-oppressive recommendations, partners must embrace the core boundaries and liberating practices in their work plans as strategies for how they will plan and implement immediate and future action. This involves evaluating how youth will be involved across initiatives; assessing who is most impacted by systems of oppression and intentionally engaging these communities to prioritize their needs; and exploring how organizational power and influence will be used to ensure that youth sexual health education is grounded in inclusion, accessibility, pleasure, and joy.

*The Pleasure is All Yours, But My Body is Not*

by an anonymous student at AUL Denver





## How We Arrived Here

In 2021, Trailhead embarked on a process to reimagine the SASH; honoring and releasing what came before and embracing a non-linear, iterative vision of what could be. Through flexible funding and partnership with the Colorado Collaborative for Reproductive Health Equity, Trailhead was given the space without restriction to explore and imagine how the SASH could evolve. We did not know nor try to specify what the outcome or end product would look like; a commitment that was at times both uncomfortable and exhilarating – a sign that we were deep in the process – trusting, learning and unlearning as we moved through it. What we did know was that we wanted young people's voices and experiences to be at the very center of how the field evolves and that we aimed to center anti-oppressive practices as we sought to rethink engagement and participation in the advisory board that has traditionally developed the recommendations for the report.

As Trailhead began to map out plans for engaging a Youth Sexual Health Program Board and SASH development process, we quickly realized our own limitations and biases; recognizing that an investment in external support would be essential to disrupting historical processes of engagement in this work. We partnered with Tomei Kuehl of Consulting Within Your Context to hold us accountable and support us in intentionally centering an anti-oppressive framework into every aspect of the process, beginning with the development and recruitment of the Youth Sexual Program Board. Our **Lessons Learned** section of the SASH report website captures this process and the essential pivots that happened along the way alongside key considerations for all partners who are actively involved in community engagement. We share these lessons openly and with transparency on the SASH website to demonstrate that all are capable of embodying this approach. It is a journey that begins not from expertise, but from a commitment to learning, reimagining, and holding profound care for the health of our communities.

Throughout this journey, as a program and organization, we have experienced deep joy, renewal and growth as we've learned what it really means to hold space for change. As you look at the SASH report and the beautiful expressions from youth through their artwork and statements on the SASH report website, we invite you to join us in acting on what is possible when we let go, to let emerge.

*In partnership and with tremendous gratitude,*

*Trailhead Institute*

# Moving Forward Together

The systemic change called for in this report is possible when we move forward together. We invite you to join us in this work by contacting Trailhead's Youth Sexual Health Program team through the contact details shared below. We hope that through conversation and connection, we can evolve the delivery and impact of youth sexual health education in Colorado by learning and unlearning together; building awareness and collaboration among partners and across initiatives; and collectively embodying anti-oppressive practices that support all young people in leading happy and healthy lives.

## CONTACT US AT

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## **Learn and Take Action**

[www.sashcolorado.com](http://www.sashcolorado.com)

## **Learn About Trailhead's Youth Sexual Health Program**

[www.trailhead.institute](http://www.trailhead.institute)

***Blossoming Womanhood***  
by Desire Morales  
from AUL Denver

