

The 4-H program provides a model for successful community engagement. Youth and adult partners plan and host community forums to identify community needs and take action to address them.

Youth Community Engagement: A Recipe for Success

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Abstract

This article describes how community engagement contributes to youth development. Drawing on the literature on youth engagement, youth development, and youth-adult partnerships, the authors examine a successful community youth engagement program that engages youth and their adult partners in a participatory evaluation project that results in community action. The research emphasizes the important role of youth-adult partnerships in community youth engagement projects and outlines strategies for success.

Introduction

Imagine this scene, played out frequently by community groups with the best intentions for youth: A boardroom table is surrounded mainly by adults with one or two youth at the table. The youth at the meeting have been honored with the responsibility of being representatives on the board. Because they value youth perspectives, the adults feel good about including them. The conversation, while important to the work of the group, is clearly not resonating with the youth, who do their best to appear engaged and interested. As the discourse continues the youth rarely speak up, and when they do, they are cut off or not fully understood by the adults running the meeting. At the end of the meeting the youth feel set free, having fulfilled yet another

“leadership” expectation, even if they are unclear about the role they actually played. The adults feel satisfied, knowing they have included the voice of youth, thus demonstrating their commitment to youth development in their community.

While this vignette intentionally paints a stereotypical picture of youth involvement, it also highlights the common struggles of engaging youth in meaningful roles that lead to community engagement and social change.

Youth community engagement in recent years has developed significant momentum. Developmentalists, researchers, and community leaders agree that involving youth in addressing issues that affect them has tremendous potential for social change. As with many emerging fields, much more is needed, particularly in developing effective methods for youth engagement. Nonetheless, considerable advances in the field have been made. Drawing on the literature of youth engagement, youth-adult partnerships, participatory evaluation with youth, and positive youth development, this article highlights an innovative youth development program that culminates in community decision making and social action. Observers of this program will not find youth sitting passively around a boardroom table, but rather working side by side with adults and community members to identify community concerns and take action to address issues that matter to them.

Youth Engagement

Youth have been participating in social change in the United States for many years. The Vietnam War and civil rights movement are two relatively recent examples. Youth volunteerism is on the rise, with over 55% of youth participating in volunteer activities (National and Community Service, 2004). There is also growing evidence that engaging youth is a critical component of effective youth programming (Gambone and Connell, 2004). As youth organizations respond to the importance of youth engagement, most have focused on youth's role in governance or other decision making bodies. Hence, the boardroom meeting described above can be prevalent among agencies desiring to move in the right direction with youth. But according to the Search Institute (2005), there are many ways to engage youth. Here is its list of eight domains of youth engagement:

1. Youth service: volunteerism, community service, and service learning.
2. Youth leadership: often developmental in nature, helping youth acquire skills to understand and address issues affecting them.
3. Youth decision making: youth in governance or other roles that lead to decision making in a community.
4. Youth philanthropy: giving of one's time and resources for the benefit of others.
5. Youth political engagement: youth in civic and political affairs.
6. Youth organizing: community organizing and advocacy.
7. Youth media: developed and disseminated by youth.
8. Youth evaluation and research: youth in systematic inquiry into issues that affect them and their communities.

Zeldin, Petrokubi, and MacNeil (2008) outline similar strategies for youth engagement, including: (1) governance and policy making; (2) training and outreach; (3) organizing and activism; (4) communication and media; (5) service and philanthropy; and (6) research and evaluation. The identification of multiple ways to engage youth has led to innovative programs seeking to identify successful practices for youth

engagement. An area receiving particular attention recently, engaging youth as full partners in research and evaluation on programs that affect them, is youth participatory evaluation

Youth Participatory Evaluation

Important youth contributions to participatory evaluation include theoretical development (Checkoway and Gutierrez, 2007; Fetterman, 2003; Sabo, 2003), and practical strategies (Camino, Zeldin, Mook, and O'Conner, 2004; Checkoway and Richards-Schuster, 2006; Delgado, 2006; London, Zimmerman, and Erbstein, 2003; The Innovation Center, 2005; Sabo Flores, 2008). They are natural outgrowths of the general participatory evaluation movement within the larger field of program evaluation. Participatory evaluation itself is rooted in the field of action research emphasizing purposeful use of research results for community improvement. Building on the idea of stakeholders having an important role in evaluating the programs that affect them, participatory evaluation has established a foothold in a variety of social evaluation projects, particularly in community development, education, and community health. Participatory evaluation emphasizes strengthening communities through the empowerment of local citizens and stakeholders as they discover and use evaluation knowledge for their own betterment (Cousins and Whitmore, 1998).

As the field of participatory evaluation evolved, continued refinement of its purpose occurred. Particularly striking was the differentiation between efforts that promoted the use of evaluation findings, also known as practical participatory evaluation, and efforts that emphasized social justice and empowerment of the evaluation participants, known as transformative participatory evaluation (Brisolara, 1998; Cousins and Whitmore, 1998). An interesting dynamic of youth participatory evaluation is its dual emphasis on practical and transformative evaluation. As Sabo (2003) points out, the distinction between the two loses some relevance when applied to youth because of the developmental nature of working with youth, because as a whole, the voice of youth is underrepresented in programs that affect them. Youth participation in the evaluation of programs has potential to increase the practical utility of findings as well as to transform participating youth, thus contributing to their

own positive development. Indeed, one reason this dual approach has gained traction is because of the changes in developmental theory that have occurred in the last 20 years (Sabo, 2003).

Positive Youth Development

Before the 1990s, most programs for youth focused on interventions to help youth at risk for a variety of problems. While research and programming for at-risk youth continue, programs for other youth are not. However, the movement toward positive programming for all youth was greatly aided by Pittman's (1991) statement that "problem free is not fully prepared." Since the early 1990s, the field of positive youth development, and the influence of such programs on child and adolescent development, continues to undergo theoretical development (Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak, and Hawkins, 2002; Eccles and Gootman, 2002; Lerner, 2004; Pittman, 1991; Roth and Brooks-Gunn, 2003). Furthermore, clarification and general agreement about the outcomes of positive youth development programs are being ardently sought after in research. These developments are welcome news for researchers, practitioners, and funders, who have long struggled to articulate the theory, intent, and impact of positive youth development programming.

The goal of positive youth development programs is to encourage and facilitate the growth of "functionally valued" behaviors resulting in thriving and well-being throughout adolescence, with the ultimate goal of helping youth develop into productive and contributing adults (Damon, 2004; Lerner, 2004; Roth and Brooks-Gunn, 2003). Functionally valued behaviors include competence, character, connection, confidence, and caring, commonly called the "5 C's." (Eccles and Gootman, 2002; Lerner, Fisher, and Weinberg, 2000; Pittman, Irby, and Ferber, 2001; Roth and Brooks-Gunn, 2003). The ultimate outcome of the 5 C's is a positive contribution to one's community, increasing through adolescence and becoming a valued aspect of one's adult life (Lerner, 2004). Others have also noted the role a growing sense of contribution plays in healthy adolescent development. Blum (2003) notes that activities in service to others (contribution) play an important function in the development of a young person's sense of competence and self-worth. Likewise, Damon (1995; 2004) says that

a young person's expectation to "give something back" plays a key role in that person's civic and moral development. Benson (1997) includes responsibility and service as well as high expectations from adults among the important developmental assets for youth, and Gambone and Connell (2004) outline youths' positive contribution to community as one of the long-term outcomes as they move into adulthood.

One of the hallmarks of positive youth development programs is the atmosphere in which the program takes place (Roth and Brooks-Gunn, 2003). Kress (2004) identified four essential elements of positive youth programming. These elements outline the types of opportunities that youth must be given through positive youth development programs: (1) to feel a sense of belonging; (2) to develop mastery; (3) to develop independence; and (4) to practice generosity. Inclusion of these elements in youth development programs sets the stage for youth to develop into community leaders.

In addition to the program context, the presence of an ongoing relationship with a non-parental adult is critical to the success of positive youth development programs. Adults provide youth with encouragement and support, and in the best cases, gradually allow youth to take more and more active leadership in the programs that serve them. As the field of positive youth development continued to change, so did the philosophy underscoring the programming methods. Not so long ago it was common to hear adults speak of conducting programs *to youth*. Later, the language changed to refer to programming *for youth*, and more recently programming *with youth* can be heard among adult youth workers. Indeed, understanding the role a youth-adult partnership plays in youth development is receiving much current attention in the literature. Although youth-adult partnerships are an important aspect of youth development programs, these partnerships do not happen easily or without significant buy-in, training, and support.

Youth-Adult Partnerships: the Critical Link

Youth programming conducted in partnership with the audience it serves sparked new program development around youth-adult partnerships. The youth-adult partnership movement itself reflects the deeper philosophical shift taking place. As Zeldin, Petrokubi, and MacNeil (2008)

point out, developing a youth-adult partnership curriculum was not enough. The more pertinent issue was the need to understand and embrace a whole new set of principles and values underlying youth programming.

Research into the effective adoption of youth-adult partnership principles is limited and reveals mixed results. In a study of five demonstration sites for involving youth in governance programs, Jones, Byer, and Zeldin (2008) discovered that buy-in from local staff is critical to successful implementation of such programs. Buy-in alone, however, is not enough. Even staff members who believed in youth-adult partnerships often lacked support, resources, or training to make youth-adult partnerships an integrated part of ongoing programming.

In addition, momentum appeared to be an important element of success. Programs lost momentum when there were delays or cancellation of events, as youth and adults often became involved in other projects. A related challenge is that youth often juggle multiple responsibilities: school, sports, clubs, and other leadership roles. As such, youth need to feel that their efforts are valued and make a difference or they are likely to fall away from youth-adult partnerships. Projects able to spark youth interest and with a clear structure, direction, and timeline appear to be important elements of successful programs (Jones, Byer, and Zeldin, 2008).

In a study investigating the adoption of youth-adult partnership practices into existing 4-H Youth Development programs, Zeldin, Petrokubi, and MacNeil (2008) discovered three goals and leverages for success. First, the goal of “planting seeds,” or setting the stage for a new programming expectation, is recommended. Key ways to achieve this goal include garnering the support of people who already support the idea (“champions”), building social networks, and connecting youth-adult partnerships with existing priorities and responsibilities of stakeholders. The second goal focuses on “walking the talk,” thus modeling the principles and expectations of youth-adult partnership programming whenever possible.

Achievement of the second goal happens by providing continual access to research, ideas, and best practices; through hands-on coaching and training of stakeholders; and through group reflection and planning related to higher qual-

ity implementation of youth-adult partnerships principles. The final goal is to reach the point of “how we do business,” where youth-adult partnerships are fully integrated into ongoing program efforts with sufficient infrastructure to support the role expectations and responsibilities for all stakeholders. When this happens a collective narrative emerges of youth contributions to the organization. Moreover, Zeldin, Petrokubi, and MacNeil (2008) also found significant barriers to the adoption of youth-adult partnerships, including pushback from stakeholders in “traditional” programs, the need for program staff to sell the idea of youth-adult partnerships to stakeholders, and time constraints.

Expansion in positive youth development and participatory evaluation and lessons learned about youth-adult partnerships and youth engagement provide a provocative backdrop on which to develop community youth engagement programs. Emerging from the new understanding are the keys to youth engagement program success.

It is clear that the essential link between youth and community engagement is effective youth-adult partnerships. The review of the youth-adult partnership literature, however, reveals that adoption of these practices can be difficult. Important considerations for success also include: (1) dissemination of youth-adult partnerships through a program plan that uses an outline for implementation, but allows for individual variations depending on location; (2) infusing youth-adult partnership principles through ongoing programming; (3) developing programs that are finite in nature with clear start and end points; (4) building programs around curriculum and projects that are already familiar to the participants; and (5) recognizing that without strategic and patient efforts, stereotypes and roadblocks to successful youth-adult partnerships and youth community engagement will persist (Wheeler, 2007). A 4-H program for community engagement entitled the Participatory Evaluation with Youth Community Action program was designed to engage youth in social science research. This program provides an exemplary model of effectively preparing youth for successful community engagement.

The program trains youth and their adult partners to plan and host community forums in order to identify a community need that can be addressed by an action project. The program fol-

Table 1. Participatory Evaluation with Youth: Curriculum for Building Skills for Youth Community Action

Topic	Purpose	Social Science Skills Developed
Youth-Adult Partnerships	To prepare youth and adults to work effectively as a team	Collaboration Data collection, organization, analysis, and interpretation
Framing community issues	To determine a topic for a community forum	Develop research questions Data collection and analysis
Community Forums	To prepare teams to plan and host a community forum	Data collection
Data Analysis	To develop skill in organizing, summarizing, and analyzing information	Data organization, analysis, and interpretation
Reporting and Action	To prepare youth to report results and plan an action project	Data interpretation Reporting Action planning

lows the social inquiry model; thus participants also gain skills in research and evaluation. The program training schedule and activities follow Arnold and Wells' (2007) participatory evaluation with youth curriculum. Training activities are highly interactive and hands-on and match the cycle of social inquiry. An outline of the training is provided in Table 1.

Putting it all Together: Participatory Evaluation as a Method for Youth Engagement

The 4-H program originates in the youth branch of the Cooperative States Research, Education, and Extension agency of the United States Department of Agriculture. For over 100 years the 4-H program has provided youth with opportunities for hands-on learning with an emphasis on leadership, citizenship, and community service. Years ago, 4-H focused on innovations for farming and for boys and home stewardship for girls. While the agriculture and home economics roots are still present, 4-H members of both genders now participate in projects related to technology, natural resources, science, health, and engineering. In addition to emphasizing youth-adult partnerships, 4-H has long recognized the importance of engaging youth in communities.

4-H is emerging as a leading program for positive youth development (Lerner, 2008), and has made significant strides in articulating its program theory to facilitate the measurement and impact of its programs. Rennekamp and Arnold (2006) developed a model describing the 4-H program

theory that emphasizes how youth are engaged in learning content while at the same time developing skills such as responsibility and leadership. Learning takes place within an intentional program atmosphere that emphasizes the four essential elements outlined by Kress (2004). The model predicts that such learning leads to positive youth development and ultimately to long-term well-being in adulthood (see Figure 1).

Importance of Training

As noted earlier, having youth work in partnership with adults is a key strategy for building youth empowerment and engagement, but in order for these partnerships to be positive and productive, youth and adult teams must receive training in how to work together meaningfully. Training begins with activities designed to help youth and adults work together as teams. For example, one activity asks youth and adults to brainstorm the benefits and challenges of working together. Each group (youth or adults) then take turns sharing their thoughts by posting the benefits and challenges on the wall. Adults are usually very frank in their assessments, saying youth are "overcommitted" and "impractical." Likewise, youth will often say the adults are "too rigid" and "old-fashioned." But the adults are also likely to comment on the youth's creativity and enthusiasm, while the youth will recognize adults for their wisdom and experience. Activities build on each other to help teams explore the nuances of working together, assessing differences and simi-

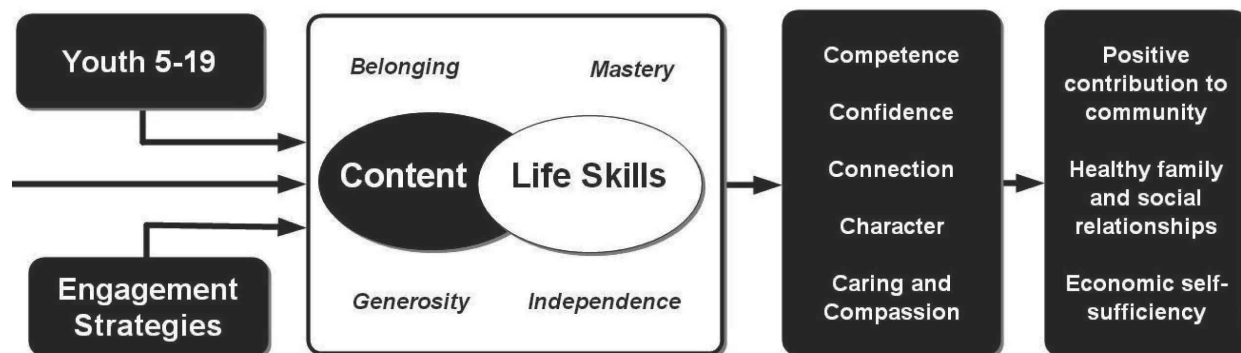


Figure 1. Program Theory Model for 4-H Youth Development (Rennekamp & Arnold, 2006)

larities, and exposing potential problems, such as adultism (adult bias against children). Each activity is debriefed before the next one is introduced. At the end of the session, participants are invited to reflect on their personal experience and learning and to share their thoughts with the rest of the group. The sessions increase understanding between youth and adults and set the stage for clear communication during the rest of the training and for future youth-adult interactions.

Preparing to Plan and Host a Community Forum

The majority of the training prepares teams to plan and host a community forum as a form of community data collection. To set the stage, the trainers host a mock forum, where training staff are the hosts and moderators and training participants are the forum attendees. At the end of the mock forum, training staff highlight the various processes that contribute to the success of the forum, including moderator and recorder skills and techniques for facilitating audience participation. Following the mock forum, activities focus on helping participants identify appropriate forum topics, and teams brainstorm a potential topic for their forum. Later, the youth practice moderating and recording techniques during actual mini-forums held during the training. A debriefing session at the end of the mini-forums allows youth and adults opportunities to discuss possible solutions to problems that may arise during the forum.

Data Analysis, Reporting, and Action Planning

In addition to preparing for a community forum, a series of training activities teach youth how to organize and analyze the information

gathered at a forum through a content analysis exercise. Teams complete a separate analysis of data gathered through a brainstorming exercise and share their results with the larger group through a poster presentation, allowing an opportunity to practice reporting research findings. The training ends with a session on team action planning, providing participants with an understanding of the steps and strategies for effective action planning.

Program Evaluation and Impact

A formal process and outcome evaluation of the program was conducted. Three questions guided the evaluation:

1. What is the quality of the training?
2. Do training participants gains skills and knowledge related to the learning outcomes?
3. Are the teams able to plan and host a community forum and carry out a community action project?

Process Evaluation

Evaluation of the trainings was ongoing. Qualitative data collected throughout the trainings ranged from informal debriefings following an activity to more structured activities such as written reflections. These “checkpoints” allowed trainers to understand how well the training was going and what participants were learning and experiencing. Careful notes were kept about what worked and what did not. The notes were used to create the facilitator’s notes in the curriculum (Arnold and Wells, 2007.) Examples include the importance of creating and discussing ground rules for the training with participants before training begins, making sure adults understand they are active participants in the project (not just chaperones), and debriefing participants.

Beyond the training, each site was monitored for successful program implementation to see how well the project unfolded once the teams returned to their communities. Several consistent issues came up across sites, with one of the biggest being low attendance at the community forums. This information was used to develop recommendations for more successful forum planning.

Outcome Evaluation

The program curriculum has been used to train 16 teams of youth and adults over the past two years. A self-report learning assessment conducted at the end of each training measured participant knowledge and skills in each of the eight topics covered in the training. Using a retrospective pre-test method, participants rated their level of knowledge and skills before and after the training on a five-point scale [none (1), a little (2), some (3), quite a bit (4), and a lot! (5)]. Figure 2 shows pre and post mean participant ratings. A paired t-test analysis revealed significant differences between pre and post means for all items ($p < .01$). In addition, over 97% of respondents indicated that they: (1) enjoyed the training; (2) learned things they could use; (3) felt prepared to lead a community forum; and (4) learned things they had not learned in other places. Respondents also rated the training quality as “good” or “very good” (85%), and 92% rated the effectiveness of the training as “good” or “very good.”

Two longer-term outcomes for the project, hosting a community forum and conducting an action project, were monitored for success. Of the five teams trained in 2007, four have hosted a forum and completed an action project. The fifth team drop from the project immediately following the training. Ten teams were trained in 2008. The trainings took place in January and February, and to date four of the teams have held community forums, and two teams have completed an action project. Action projects completed so far include refurbishing bleachers at a local high school, planning and hosting a series of community youth and family activity nights, and planting flowers to enhance a community in preparation for hosting the U. S. Olympic track and field trials.

Narrative evidence from youth participants further highlights the impact of the program. The positive effect the community action project had

on the community was eye-opening for one participant who stated:

“One of my favorite things about the forum was seeing all of our hard work put to use in the final project, which was sprucing up the events center in time for the Olympic Trials. Our project reached many more people than I had originally thought it would, and I was gratified when over 50 people volunteered their time to pull weeds and get dirty with us.”

Another stated: “One of the things I learned most from this process is that if even just a few people take the time to organize something like a forum, it is really a great way to bring the community together and do something important.”

Another highlighted the reach of engagement that took place, saying: “You really do impact a lot more people than you think you do. By listening to everyone’s idea it can generate into something bigger than yourselves.”

Finally, the personal development of youth engaged in the project was articulated by a participant who said: “By participating in the program I know how to express my opinion in a diplomatic and straightforward manner. It meant a great deal to be a part of a statewide community action event. I felt that all of the youth went away feeling far more confident and with greatly improved communication skills.”

The Scholarship of Integration and Application: A Model Program for Effective Youth Community Engagement

In his provocative work challenging the status quo of academic scholarship, which traditionally focuses on the generation of new knowledge, Boyer (1990) argued for an enlarged definition of scholarly work. In particular, he highlighted efforts by faculty members involved in the scholarship of outreach and engagement to include the scholarship of integration, application, and teaching. One of the hallmarks of programs delivered through Land Grant University Extension programs is the promise of research-based programs both in terms of program content and delivery methods. Incumbent upon all extension educators is the requirement of knowing the research base of a program, and implementing the program in a way that builds on the best known practices of the day. Beyond knowing and applying knowledge, extension faculty members also contribute to the growth of the field through sys-

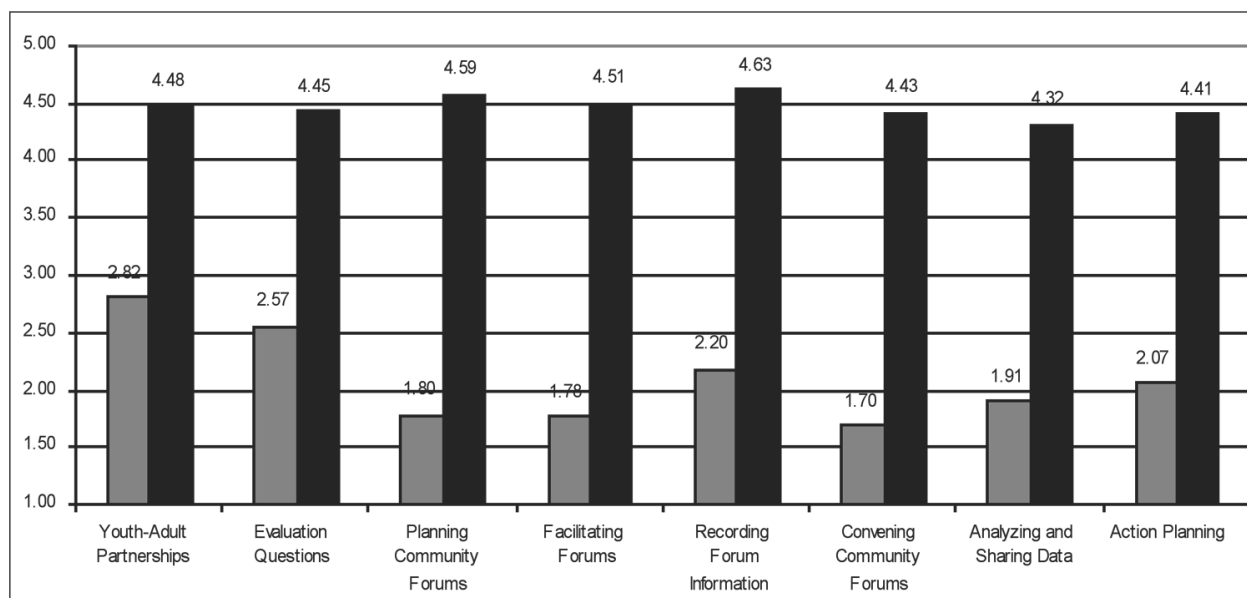


Figure 2. Change in Participant Knowledge of Training Topics Pre to Post (n = 56)

tematic evaluation of the program's implementation and impact, and sharing results with peers, thus contributing to the knowledge base of best program practices.

The Participatory Evaluation with Youth for Community Action program is a model of the type of scholarship advocated by Boyer. The program integrates current knowledge in youth engagement theory and practice by intentionally combining the critical elements of participatory evaluation, positive youth development, and youth-adult partnerships resulting in application that informs future practice. Several key contributions of this application are highlighted below.

Participatory Evaluation and Community Engagement. One of the unique aspects of the Participatory Evaluation with Youth for Community Action program is the opportunity to build skills in evaluation and research in a manner that is embedded in youths' own environments and communities. The skills of social inquiry, and the accompanying ability to gather, analyze, synthesize, and share data, are highly valued skills in the contemporary work environment and transferable to different career settings. Our program provides an opportunity for youth and adults to research, discuss, and evaluate real concerns that matter to them and their community and create an action plan for change.

This results in the empowerment of youth in their natural community settings, allowing for the youth to experience the transformative power of community engagement. Holding a forum in their community and creating a finite timeline

for their project make the program participation practical for youth and adults and alleviate some of the pitfalls some youth engagement programs encounter.

Seeing Community Engagement as a Positive Youth Development Strategy. Positive youth development theory asserts that all youth have the capacity to change and grow as they interact with their communities (Benson, Scales, Hamilton, and Sesma, 2006). In addition, community engagement is endorsed as a vehicle for actualization of the five C's in youth (Balsano, 2005). Even so, such development does not always occur spontaneously, but requires deliberate and intentional strategies of engagement. Developmentally, teens are negotiating their independence. Consequently, programs need to be aware of such growth in autonomy and use this as an asset to strengthen programs with youth. Programs also need to capitalize on teen's existing social structures while at the same time connecting them to society in order to provide youth with a greater sense of belonging within their communities. The Participatory Evaluation with Youth for Community Action program encourages youth engagement and action within the community, leading to positive youth development and the ultimate goal of life-long contribution to others.

Youth-Adult Partnerships and Community Engagement. Youth engagement thrives when there are successful partnerships between youth and adults. Teens need adults who inspire and support them. The participatory evaluation/community action model for youth-adult partnerships

incorporates youth and adults through every stage of the program (e.g., attending the training, planning and hosting a community forum, and implementing a community action project). Successful youth build links across families, schools, peers, and communities that in turn support their pathways.

Youth Engagement: A New Vision

By combining the best elements of quality youth engagement practices, we can envisage a brighter future around the boardroom table. Imagine now a boardroom meeting that has been planned in partnership among youth and adult board members, where deliberate efforts have been made to train the youth and adults on how to work together effectively. Instead of sitting quietly to the side, youth members co-lead the meeting, providing frequent and thoughtful contributions to the conversation. The agenda for the meeting itself has been established through an assessment of community needs and interests, and has at least a partial focus on community engagement. As a result, youth are propelled further down path of positive development, supported by the adults and communities that believe in them, gaining confidence and competence, and developing a lasting commitment to the value of community engagement.

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