

AT THE TABLE: *Making the Case for*

Youth in DECISION- MAKING

Research Highlights
From a Study on the Impacts of
Youth on Adults and Organizations

Innovation Center
for Community and Youth
Development and
National 4-H Council

University of Wisconsin-Madison

in partnership with
the National Association of
Extension 4-H Agents Youth in
Governance Taskforce



RESEARCH METHODS

Nineteen youth and 29 adults from 15 organizations, selected to achieve geographic diversity across the country, participated in the study through personal interviews. Additionally, the researchers facilitated two focus groups in San Francisco, CA, and Washington, DC, gaining data from youth, staff, and board members from 16 additional organizations.

Through a number of avenues, researchers identified a group of organizations that had a strong reputation for youth involvement in decision-making. They sought to include organizations whose boards of directors included youth, as well as organizations that engaged young people at other levels of the organization. They looked for organizations that serve a range of youth populations as well as organizations with a strong community, policy, or advocacy emphasis. No one was paid for his or her participation.

The extended case method was used as an analysis strategy, bolstering empirical data with the researchers' previous knowledge as well as knowledge gleaned from existing literature. The strategy of informant checks was used to analyze and verify data.

The study was conducted by researchers from the University of Wisconsin-Madison and was commissioned by the Innovation Center for Community and Youth Development and National 4-H Council, in partnership with the Youth in Governance Taskforce of the National Association of Extension 4-H Agents. The study and this publication were made possible through the generous support of Surdna Foundation, Inc. Shepherd Zeldin's time was supported by University of Wisconsin Extension.

Youth in Decision-Making Roles: A Powerful Strategy for Positive Change

Without question, involving young people in decision-making promotes positive adolescent development. But are there other benefits? A growing national movement to infuse young people into decision-making roles in communities and organizations contends that there are. Not only young people benefit, advocates say, but so do adults and so do the institutions in which young people are involved. Solid research now shows these assertions to be on target.

A new study, designed and reported by Shepherd Zeldin, Ph.D., and his colleagues at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, explores the experiences of youth and adults from 15 organizations with varying degrees of youth involvement. Drawing on the 60-page report on the study, “Youth in Decision-Making,” (available from the Innovation Center for Community and Youth Development) here is a look at the principle findings.

Research Results

The study shows that young people can, and very often do, have powerful and positive effects on adults and organizations. Involving young people in the governance of youth organizations is a practice that makes sense.

A look at outcomes: adults improve and organizations improve

A D U L T S I M P R O V E

The study found numerous ways in which adults benefited from meaningful youth involvement, as follows:

- Adults experienced the competence of youth first-hand, and began to perceive young people as legitimate, crucial contributors to organizational decision-making processes. Some adults unknowingly bought into the stereotype of the disaffected, antisocial youth, but their direct experience with competent youth contradicted their stereotypes and forced reconsideration.
- Working with youth served to enhance the commitment and energy of adults to the organization.
- Adults felt more effective and more confident in working with and relating to youth.

- Adults came to understand the needs and concerns of youth, and became more attuned to programming issues, making them more likely to reach outside of the organization and share their new knowledge and insights. They gained a stronger sense of community connectedness.

This feeling of community emanated directly from the following processes:

- (1) the adults began to see young people less as stereotypes and more as contributors,
- (2) the adults were personally engaged by the commitment of the young people, and
- (3) the adults gained mastery through working collaboratively with youth. Consequently, the adults began to feel connected and gained a shared identity with the youth as well as an attachment to the organization.

ORGANIZATIONS IMPROVE

The research found that among all the organizations studied, the organizations involving youth at all levels of decision-making were most likely to achieve positive outcomes. The study found the following additional benefits to organizations:

- The principles and practices of youth involvement became embedded within the organizational culture. Youth infusion within the organization is enhanced as a result of having youth involved in governance roles.

- Most organizations found that young people help clarify and bring focus to the organization’s mission, and in some cases, made this a formal role of youth.

- The adults and the organizations as a whole became more connected and responsive to youth in the community. Boards with youth members tend to be more connected to organizational operations and better able to match programming efforts to youth needs. Directly involving youth in organizational decision-making strengthens the organization by making the work more relevant to the lives of youth. As Turner Youth Development Initiative Director Marlene Schuman observed, “If you involve kids, they’ll tell you what does and does not work right away.”

- “Working directly with youth made me want to shout from the rooftops to get funds and build support for the organization,” said Susan Crown, Sexual Minority Youth Assistance League Board Chair. Having youth as decision-makers helped convince foundations and other funding agencies that the organization was serious about promoting youth development. Funders have begun asking youth organizations if they have youth on their boards.

Organizations also use young people to pitch funding requests because youth are powerful spokespeople when requesting money from funders.

- Including youth in decision-making led organizations to reach out to the community in more diverse ways (e.g. community advocacy, policy-making, and service).

Contributions of Youth and Adults to Decision-Making

Effective decision-making in organizations, the research discovered, requires the complementary skills, experience, and contributions of both youth *and* adults.

Youth bring energy, fresh perspectives, knowledge of young people, and a sense of community to decision-making processes.

Young people's stage of development suits the needs of organizations. During adolescence, young people are driven to explore issues of social justice. They are creating and experimenting with their own principles and political ideas, leading many to become involved in cause-based action. Young people have a way, rarely subtle and often inventive, of bringing attention to their needs and concerns, and they often say things that challenge people and institutions.

Adolescence is also a time for deepening relationships and intimacy with peers.

Young people bring a first-hand knowledge of youth that simply is not accessible to adults. They bring connections to other young people and can leverage the participation and skill of their peers. Almost every adult interviewed stressed that young people often bring a sense of community and energy to decision-making processes.

Adults bring organizational and administrative experience, allowing youth to concentrate on more mission-driven and action-oriented aspects of decision-making.

The young people and adults in this study most often used words such as guidance and support when describing the contributions of adults. By virtue of years of work experience, adults bring a range of administrative and programming skills to the table. Adults also bring lessons learned from other organizations. Young people especially value this knowledge, and often seek out the advice, instruction, and direction that adults can offer. What's more, adults' organizational expertise often allows youth to concentrate their expertise, interest, and time on the more mission-driven and action-oriented aspects of the organization.

Many adults have institutional power not

accessible to young people. With this power comes access and connections to a fuller range of human, community, and financial resources. Whereas youth had important connections with other youth in the community, adults were more connected—because of age and institutional power—to other community resources, such as money, status, and legitimacy.

Working together creates synergy between youth and adults.

The mutual contributions of youth and adults can result in a synergy, a new power and energy that propels decision-making groups to greater innovation and productivity. The researchers reported that in this atmosphere youth and adults become more committed to attending meetings and create a climate that is grounded in honest appraisal, reflection, and ongoing learning.

Necessary conditions for youth decision-making

These positive outcomes don't simply occur spontaneously; they require much hard work. The research found that for youth involvement to be effective, the organization must create the following “necessary conditions:”

- The top decision-making body is committed to youth governance. If a governance body is focused on vision and learning, there is room for young people to make substantial contributions. If it is more traditionally focused on rule-making and management, then it is less likely that young people will have a significant influence.
- Organizations provide support for youth to advance through a variety of decision-making opportunities.
- Organizations involve older youth in governance positions early on in the organizational change process—they eventually integrate younger adolescents into governance

- Adult leaders strongly advocate for including young people in decision-making roles. Giving youth a significant role in organizational governance violates our social norms. Therefore, it is unlikely to be adopted unless these social norms change. Given the adult grip on power in society, strong advocacy and leadership from individual adults or groups within an organization is required to convince others to bring young people into decision-making roles.
- Youth provide pressure and support for increasing youth participation in governance. The movement takes on greater power as young people begin to organize and demand increasing participation in governance. Attitude change does not occur when adults perceive their work with youth to be symbolic or tokenistic in nature. Instead, adult attitude change occurs when the interactions: 1) are goal-oriented and purposeful, 2) are lengthy, and 3) have meaningful consequences.

Challenges in Bringing Youth to the Table

Although getting youth to the table where decisions are made has huge payoffs for everyone, meaningful youth involvement in decision-making is seldom an easy goal to achieve. The research identified several challenges to effective participation, as follows:

- *Lack of knowledge*—Many youth have not been involved in decision-making previously. There is basic knowledge that must be gained to be an effective participant.
- *Unwillingness to get involved*—Because they have not been invited to the table before, many youth are skeptical that their voice and vote will count.
- *Lack of a support network*—Simply bringing youth to the table is not enough. Early on, concerted efforts should be made to ensure they succeed.
- *Unclear roles*—Structure and clarity about functions and responsibilities are essential.
- *Unique needs*—Organizations must also pay attention to the unique scheduling, transportation, and financial constraints that are often associated with being young.



At the Table™

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Increasing numbers of young people are joining the ranks of leaders and decision makers in all levels of society. Grounded in the conviction that institutions and communities benefit from the voices of young people, a growing national movement of youth and adults is working to secure a place for youth at the table on even more boards of directors and other governing bodies. At the Table™, an initiative of the Innovation Center for Community and Youth Development, was created to facilitate a coordinated, sustainable national youth in governance movement. Working together with partners across the country, At the Table™ is helping to educate and inform about the value of youth participation and to prepare youth and adults to work together to create positive change. This report was produced as part of the At the Table™ initiative. Visit the At the Table website at www.atthetable.org for resources, strategies, and success stories to support the work of engaging young people in the decision-making process in communities and organizations across the world.

The Innovation Center for Community and Youth Development works to unleash the potential of youth, adults, organizations, and communities to engage together in creating a just and equitable society. We connect thinkers and leaders of all ages to develop fresh ideas, forge new partnerships, and design strategies that engage young people and their communities. We turn theoretical knowledge into practical know-how that advances the field of youth development and promotes social change. The Innovation Center for Community and Youth Development is a nonprofit 501(c)(3) organization.

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