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Engaging Youth as Active Citizens: Lessons from Youth Workforce Development Programs

Abstract
This article identifies youth engagement strategies in programs funded by the federal Workforce Investment Act in California. The strategies demonstrate that youth can be meaningfully engaged at all stages of the policy process, including design, implementation, and evaluation. Our data come from a comparative case study evaluation that examined youth programs in 10 of California's 50 local workforce areas. Youth engagement requires effort, but improves the quality of services, promising greater long-term payoffs that warrant increased public investment. Armed with youth development theory and research, Cooperative Extension personnel can be valuable contributors to local Youth Councils and Workforce Investment Boards.

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Effective youth development practices engage youth in active roles, viewing them as community resources rather than as passive recipients of services. This tenet underlies a wide range of programmatic approaches, including 4-H leadership development, youth in governance (Fiscus, 2003; Goggin, Powers, & Spano, 2002; MacNeil, 2005; Zeldin, McDaniel, Topitzes, & Calvert, 2000), youth-led research and evaluation (London, Zimmerman, & Erbstein, 2003; (Youth in Focus, 2002), and organizing public work projects by students (Boyte, 2004). Comparatively little attention has been paid to how youth engagement might be practiced within traditional government social programs. Can youth engagement strategies work in settings where bureaucratic procedures tend to cast service delivery contractors and the youth they serve into fairly rigid roles marked by one-way provider-client relationships?

In this article we describe youth engagement strategies identified during a University of California, Davis and UC Cooperative Extension evaluation of government-funded youth workforce development programs. Funded under the federal Workforce Investment Act of 1998 (WIA) and implemented in California by state and local Youth Councils and Workforce Investment Boards since 2000, these programs are intended to help young people facing serious obstacles to gain meaningful employment. WIA legislation features a new, more comprehensive approach to youth development, opening the door to more robust youth engagement strategies. For example, one of the 10 required elements expected of all WIA-funded programs is providing youth with "leadership development opportunities." A planning guide used to educate local WIA stakeholders in California defined the youth development approach as follows (Youth Council Institute Guidebook, 2003, p. 79):

> Youth development . . . envisions youth as partners in progress, rather than simply recipients of services. Projects and programs using a youth development approach enable youth to build skills, exercise leadership, meet high expectations, form relationships with concerned adults and improve their communities.

We examine three specific youth engagement strategies, which correspond to the planning, execution, and evaluation phases of the policy and program planning process:

- Giving youth seats on local Youth Councils, the policy and planning body for WIA youth programs,
- Designing work experience programs that engage cohorts of youth in public work projects, and
- Engaging youth in evaluating youth workforce programs.

While all three strategies have strengths and limitations, they demonstrate that it is possible to build a youth engagement emphasis into mainstream government social programs. The findings also suggest the possibility of expanding partnerships between the Cooperative Extension and workforce development systems.

Studying Youth Workforce Programs in California

Between March 2005 and September 2006, a team comprised of youth and community development experts from the University of California, Davis and UC Cooperative Extension partnered with the California Workforce Investment Board and the Employment Development Department to study WIA-funded youth workforce development programs in California. The purpose of our research was to investigate how WIA provisions for youth programs are being implemented in local workforce areas, to gain an understanding of what is working and what is not, and to make this information available to decision-makers, primarily at the state level.

Consistent with other studies of public policy implementation, we used a "field network approach" (Lurie, 2001; Nathan, 2000) in which the local workforce area was the primary unit of analysis. Guided by common protocols, the research team prepared case studies of local WIA Youth Councils and youth programs in 10 of California's 50 local workforce areas. The 10 areas were selected to maximize variation in location, economic conditions, size, and administrative structure (Table 1). Collectively, these 10 areas serve about one-third of the state's population and receive almost 30% of all the state's WIA allocations.

Table 1.
Local Workforce Investment Areas in Study Sample

Local Workforce Investment Area	Setting	Population	Unemployment Rate
Los Angeles City	Urban	3,694,820	8.0%
Merced County	Rural-Agricultural	210,554	14.8%
NoRTEC Consortium	9 Rural counties	571,397	8.1%
Orange County	Urban	2,180,298	3.3%
San Joaquin County	Rural with Urban center	563,598	10.1%
City of Santa Ana	Urban	337,977	6.8%
Solano County	Urban	394,542	6.0%
Sonoma County	Urban-Rural mix	458,614	4.9%
Tulare County	Rural-agricultural	368,021	15.5%
Verdugo Consortium	3 Urban cities	315,607	5.8%
Source: Population estimates from California Employment Development Department based on 2000 Census information. Unemployment estimates from California Employment Development Department, 2003 yearly averages.			

In preparing the case studies, the research team conducted 104 interviews with youth, WIA service providers, Youth Council participants, and community members between March 2005 and May 2006. All interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed. Making use of qualitative analysis software (QSR N6), we then performed a content analysis on the transcripts and field notes, looking for common themes, patterns, and issues both within and across the 10 local cases. We also observed at least one WIA Youth Council meeting in nine areas, conducted eight focus groups with youth, explored Web sites, reviewed documents, and developed comparative data profiles of the local areas. A detailed cross-case report summarized overall findings and recommended policy and programmatic strategies (available at <http://www.ccp.ucdavis.edu/pubs/pdf/Youth.pdf>).

As Extension professionals with youth and community development assignments, we were particularly interested in identifying promising engagement strategies employed by WIA youth programs. As our field work progressed, we used triangulation to determine strategies that had been nominated by multiple respondents. We also worked to incorporate youth voice and leadership development by enlisting young people as co-leaders of focus groups with program participants. In this article, we review selected findings that illustrate some of the promise and challenges associated with these youth engagement strategies.

Engagement Strategy No. 1: Seating Youth Representatives on Local WIA Youth Councils

Current WIA legislation requires that local Youth Councils include at least one youth representative. We found that some local areas have been more successful than others in finding adolescents willing to join their Youth Councils and participate in the meetings. Orange County boasted four youth members with full voting rights, drawing them from current youth programs and from regional Youth Advisory Committees. Merced County has always been able to find at least one youth to serve on the Youth Council, in part because they decided to have a youth co-chair. By contrast, Solano County has two youth seats, neither of which was filled at the time of our fieldwork, and the NoRTEC Consortium, due to its unique multi-county structure, has no youth seats at all.

Although placing youth representatives on a Youth Council sounds logical, even obvious, we found that it doesn't always work as adult planners intend. For example, we discovered that the youth that are successfully engaged do not necessarily represent the youth served by WIA programs. Sonoma County has an active young woman who has served on the Youth Council for 2 years and has taken part in several Youth Council projects. Although her interest and forthright manner have been very helpful to the adult members in selecting projects and providing insights into youth issues, she represents Sonoma County's more affluent youth rather than the

WIA-eligible youth who could better acquaint the Youth Council with issues facing that population. This point concerns a member of the Los Angeles City Youth Council as well:

> I think it is really important to have more low-income youth. I think that if they had more youth who were definitely low-income more involved with the Youth Council, it would help in terms of the program design and the program requirements. Because you might have a high functioning youth who might not have all the same challenges and the same barriers as the youth that we are dealing with who are in public housing.

More helpful in reflecting the needs and attitudes of low-income youth is the Tulare County youth member, who has taken part in a WIA-funded program. He is proud to use his credibility with similar youth to recruit them for a variety of youth conferences and other activities and to present their point of view on the Youth Council subcommittees on which he serves. In both Verdugo and Santa Ana, we encountered similar examples of youth who were not only active leaders on Youth Councils as individuals but saw themselves as community liaisons who engaged a broader segment of youth in public dialogue about the shape and character of youth workforce services.

Barriers to Youth Participation

At least three common barriers to youth participation affect all current WIA Youth Councils.

1. They tend to be at school or working during the times that Youth Council meetings are held.
2. Transportation to meeting sites is often a problem, particularly in rural areas.
3. The meetings are rarely designed to be interesting to young people.

In addition, the position by its very nature is a temporary one, since youth members grow up and move on. As a result, filling youth positions requires continual recruitment.

In Merced and Solano Counties, the Youth Council scheduled its meetings for later in the day so that there was no conflict with school, but the Solano County youth who served on the Youth Council still needed a round-trip ride to the meeting. Orange County has shifted its meetings from 1:30 to 4:00 and moves them around the county, but transportation remains an issue since public transportation isn't a viable option for traveling between cities. San Joaquin County has offered transportation to potential youth members but finds that they have other priorities. For example, some have found jobs, an excuse that is difficult to fault.

Some local areas find themselves caught between attracting youth and accommodating the rest of the Youth Council members. Tulare County's Youth Council meetings are deliberately scheduled for the convenience of the adult members of the council, and the lead staff member sees no likelihood that this will change: "The Youth Council just doesn't want to do that and I understand because these are very busy people that we have on our Youth Council. They are all running programs with the whole county."

Perhaps the greatest barrier to youth participation tends to be the way Youth Council meetings are conducted, as we heard from youth and adults alike. One staff member explained,

> We have had four youth over a couple years that were on the Youth Council. They just kind of faded away as youth will do when they're not entirely engaged. They just went on about the business of doing the things that youth do, like staying in school, finishing school, going to college, playing sports, and things like that. This big system approach that we talk about a lot, and the way that we look at those things, that's not engaging for kids, for most of them. They like, 'Here's a project! We're going to build this thing and do this work and we want you to design it, help us implement, and help us do all of this!' Now, ***that*** they can get behind. But it has to be real, it has to be concrete, and there has to be something they can learn from it.

Successful Strategies for Engaging Youth on Youth Councils

A few general strategies for engaging youth in Youth Councils emerged from our discussions.

1. Give young members an engaging hands-on job to do, something with short-term goals and the potential to make a difference in the youth community.
2. Treat them as expert consultants, as ambassadors from a foreign land, and listen to what they have to

say about local youth and about issues before the Youth Council.

3. Pair them with an adult mentor, someone they can admire and emulate, and around whom they can be themselves.

4. Review the Youth Council agenda with youth members before the meeting, so they know what is coming, can make suggestions of their own, and can more fully engage.

5. Give them alternatives to attending the full Youth Council meetings, such as serving on an active subcommittee with finite, tangible goals.

Engagement Strategy No. 2: Work Experience Projects as Pride-Generating Public Work

A key component of most job training programs is some form of work experience. However, previous evaluations found that many work experience programs provided minimal opportunity to learn skills, gain confidence, and receive adequate adult supervision. By contrast, our study identified a number of work experience projects that are worthy of broad emulation. We found two important keys to the success of these programs: first, the youth work together as teams, enabling them to identify with a supervised group of peers, and second, the programs focus on meaningful public work. Because the work creates visible public benefits, the youth engaged can take pride in contributing to their community. The following two examples, one rural and one urban, illustrate the promise of this approach to youth engagement.

Workforce One

Workforce One is a project of the Tehama County One-Stop (part of the NoRTEC Consortium), situated in a rural area in Northern California. The program creates a work crew with one supervisor assigned to five youth. The supervisors function as boss, trainer, mentor, coach, parent, counselor, and drill sergeant as the crews perform a variety of general labor, maintenance, and grounds keeping jobs.

Crew members not only acquire job skills (basic construction, repairs, painting, plumbing, electrical, horticulture, use of tools, safety, etc.), but are also taught the behaviors, attitudes, and responses that employers expect. They receive minimum wage and are expected to meet work standards for productivity, quality, attendance, and following instructions. Work-related mistakes and soft skill problems are approached as a learning opportunity, but youth who do not respond to instruction and warnings must then face the real world consequences and are suspended or fired.

Originally, Workforce One performed only community service work, such as refinishing and painting the city pool; rebuilding the dugouts, fences, and restrooms at the Little League ballpark; and planting trees as part of a downtown beautification effort. An unexpected outcome was the sense of accomplishment and civic pride that the youth experienced as they saw the fruits of their labor and as they received accolades from city councils, county department heads, and community leaders.

As the reputation of Workforce One grew, requests for their assistance started coming from private sector business and home owners struggling to find trustworthy day laborers for minor clean-up and repair projects. Filling this niche, Workforce One regularly does minor sprinkler and fence repair, pruning and planting, painting, and simple building repairs. Although crews continue providing community service work at no charge, word of mouth advertising for fee-based services brings in a steady stream of paying customers, enabling youth crew members to learn and earn at the same time. After 1 year, Workforce One is generating enough revenue to cover the wages and payroll costs for a crew of five full-time workers.

Glendale Youth Alliance

The urban example comes from the Glendale Youth Alliance (GYA), the primary youth services contractor for the Verdugo Consortium in Los Angeles County. GYA is a nonprofit organization that puts at-risk youth to work in supervised crews clearing brush from hillsides. The work addresses community concerns about gangs while contributing to the prevention of wildland fires. Youth participants get intense life and job skills training first--3 weeks of training, 4 days a week, 4 hours a day. They also learn CPR and first aid, receive on-site tool training, and go on field trips such as to the Museum of Tolerance to learn about conflict resolution. A staff member at GYA describes the program as a "boot camp," but also as the sort of fun group experience that teens crave:

> There is a hard start time and a hard end time . . . If you miss the bus your mom has to come and get you. If you miss it three times, you're out. We don't ever have to fire anybody; that's never been an issue. They get it, because it's so structured . . . There is something that happens here that I can't explain. I think they develop a work ethic that they carry for the rest of their life. Everybody that I know that's ever gone through summer brush never forgets that experience, because it's also very fun, though it's very rigid. When we take them up to the hills, they see the views and the trees. They're working in teams, outside, and they have a blast. And they're working in the same group of 10. Every week we have Team of the Week and Worker of the Week.

The lure of employment is the initial draw for most youth, but in order to work they must be in school and maintain an acceptable grade point average, or be enrolled in a certificate program or vocational school. Each youth has a counselor/mentor who works with him or her on a very personal basis, and successful participants later mentor and supervise younger recruits. For youth who succeed in the summer brush clearing program, GYA has a graduated continuum of programs that offer youth increasing experience and responsibility working in local government offices, nonprofits, hospitals, and businesses.

Engagement Strategy No. 3: Involving Youth in Workforce Program Evaluation

As part of our evaluation, we conducted eight focus groups with a total of 53 youth, most of whom had participated in WIA-funded programs. The purpose was to learn about youth attitudes and connections with the world of work and to inquire in greater detail about their experiences in WIA programs.

To implement this part of our evaluation, we decided to engage youth as co-researchers. The research team recruited and trained youth from five of the local areas in which we were conducting case studies to co-facilitate the focus groups with a member of the research team. Cooperative Extension youth advisors brought 10 youth from as far as Los Angeles to a focus group training held at the UC Davis campus. We designed a fast-paced, interactive, 4 hour-long training that highlighted the advantages and nature of group interviews and the specific steps involved in conducting a focus group. Youth trainees practiced active listening skills--including mirroring and paraphrasing--in a group game and learned techniques for asking neutral, open-ended questions. Youth took turns leading a mock focus group and using their new skills to manage participants who talked too much or too little or violated ground rules. In a debriefing after the training, the youth gave researchers feedback on the draft focus group protocol and the training itself.

In the months after the training, five of the eight focus groups we conducted were co-facilitated by the youth we had trained. In a few cases, youth who had been trained were unable to co-lead focus groups due to scheduling conflicts. In general, it appeared that the addition of youth to the research team helped to build rapport with the focus group participants. Although the youth were still new to facilitation skills, we felt their presence aided the research effort while also developing their skills in qualitative research.

The focus group research became the primary source of youth testimony in the project and provided important insights into the needs and challenges of low-income youth seeking meaningful employment. Among the common reactions we heard were these:

- Youth indicated that they want to be asked by the community about what types of facilities and services they need instead of having others make those decisions for them;
- They are deeply concerned about the availability of illegal substances and about drug use among their peers;
- They fear gang activity in their communities in all parts of California;
- They regard teen pregnancy as unfortunate but as an inevitable consequence of there being "nothing for kids to do"; and
- They express a disturbing pessimism that any of these problems can be resolved.

Even so, youth are eager to accept assistance from the WIA programs in which they are involved, and they enjoyed being offered the opportunity to talk to us. Apparently, the hunger to be meaningfully engaged is widespread among youth.

Implications for Extension Professionals

Armed with general information on the features of healthy youth development and with the findings of applied research such as this evaluation, Cooperative Extension personnel can be valuable contributors to the deliberations of their local WIA Youth Councils. Extension professionals might consider a number of specific steps. First, they could make it a priority to join the local WIA youth council and bring research-based expertise to bear on their deliberations. Second, they might use the effective strategies we have identified to inform other youth in governance efforts in the local community, such as youth commissions or youth appointments to city or county boards and committees. Third, they might remember to take the extra time and energy to include youth in meaningful roles in their own work, including evaluation projects.

The relevance of our findings extends beyond just those directly engaged in youth in governance projects or even beyond the 4-H Youth Development area. A wide range of Extension professionals could help develop youth public work programs. For example, agricultural or natural resource personnel can partner with other programs in supporting youth public work initiatives such as stream restoration projects or wildland fire prevention.

Conclusion

Historically, government social service programs have not been known as incubators of youth engagement. Our evidence suggests that this need not always be the case. Meaningful opportunities for youth engagement exist at all phases of the program life-cycle, from planning and design to execution and evaluation.

These opportunities do not come without costs or tradeoffs. Business-as-usual approaches will not suffice in enabling youth representatives to participate in Youth Council deliberations. Creating successful work experiences typically requires staff-participant ratios that are lower than in programs that serve more youth with less quality. Engaging youth as co-researchers took valuable time away from other research activities.

One overall finding of our evaluation is that WIA's comprehensive approach to youth development has raised the quality of services, but by expanding the variety and depth of youth services without increasing per capita funding, WIA implementation has reduced the number of youth who can benefit from workforce programs. The extra effort it takes to engage youth meaningfully promises better long-term outcomes for the youth served, but means that a great number of youth in need cannot be served at all. The answer, we would argue, is not to shortchange the quality of services, but to increase the public investment in workforce programs. Exemplary programs and approaches, such as those we have described, can help build the case for a more far-sighted policy.

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