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Best Practices for Youth Engagement in Municipal Government

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The role of citizen participation is widely understood to be crucial for effective democratic governance. Youth are citizens too but their participation in government, while often thought to be a good idea, is not widely practiced and understood. Several arguments have been advanced to underscore the importance of youth involvement. First, youth may benefit from participation in government process. Often identified under the concepts of civic engagement and positive youth development, benefits that accrue to the young person include feelings of empowerment, competence, and connection. They gain information about their options and rights, develop decision-making skills, develop an understanding of decision processes, and gain a sense of control in these processes. Thus, participation may also enhance young peoples' interests and propensity to engage in community service, political action, or other forms of public engagement. For some, it may facilitate career interest and development in public service. Second, the community may gain from youths' participation. Youth can provide relevant information that leads to better-informed decision-making, particularly, in regard to policies that affect young people. Third, as a matter of social justice, youth have a right to engage in decisions that impact their lives. Even in the absence of other measurable beneficial outcomes, the process of including youth is central to a well-functioning democratic institution.

There is widespread consensus that avenues should be created for young people to have input into community decisions. Yet there remains limited information about the strategies for doing so. In this article we focus specifically on youth councils at the municipal level and report on best practices gleaned from a study of multiple youth councils in one metropolitan area.

Background

As discussed above there are many good reasons for engaging youth in government. There are challenges to this practice, as well, many of which are attitudinal. As Kathryn Frank has suggested, problematic views held by adults may serve as barriers.¹ These include: developmental views (youth lack the knowledge, skills, attitudes, behaviors, and social connections of adults), perceptions of youths' vulnerability (youth are both in need of adult protection and can be co-opted by adults and thus cannot participate independently), and legal views (because of their age they are not full citizens and at best can be trained in civic engagement but do not yet have full authority to contribute to decisions). These various messages about youth that are widespread in society create an environment in which some adults are unable to see the capacities of young people.

Shepard Zeldin and coauthors have identified "countervailing trends" within some policy structures that view youth as assets with capabilities to make clear and sustained contributions.² They cited examples from the National Governor's Association, the State of Vermont Agency of Human Services, and the role of private foundations in encouraging the development of strategies for youth engagement. Those adults that interpret the abilities of youth as potential resources reflect a positive youth development approach.

Engaging youth in government can take many forms. Our focus is particularly in regard to community governance through active citizenship and civic engagement. Barry Checkoway and Adriana Aldana recently provided some conceptual organization to youth civic engagement and identified four forms: citizen participation, grassroots organizing, intergroup dialogue, and sociopolitical development.³ Our inquiry falls most clearly within "citizen participation" in which the basic strategy is

to “participate through formal political and governmental institutions.”⁴ Youth councils are identified by Checkoway and Aldana as one of the engagement activities within “citizen participation”. These councils are an important example of “engagement in community governance” (i.e., forums within local public systems “where youth are meaningfully involved in significant decisions regarding the goals, design, and implementation of the community’s work”), according to Zeldin and coauthors.⁵

Disseminating best practices is a necessary step to provide useful knowledge to the numerous municipalities—small, medium, and large—that want to engage youth in this way.

Despite its perceived importance to youth, community, and society, the practice of youth engagement in community decision-making has been slow to institutionalize. Disseminating best practices is a necessary step to provide useful knowledge to the numerous municipalities—small, medium, and large—that want to engage youth in this way. Cognizant of the numerous challenges facing young people in contemporary society, greater attention to establishing and sustaining youth councils may provide a key mechanism for fully engaging youth and tapping their expertise to enhance a city’s commitment to youth.

Methods

The study employed ethnographic methods including phone interviews with adult stakeholders, in-person interviews with youth council members, observations of youth council meetings, and a review of documents (e.g., mission statements, website information, and meeting minutes). The Boston University Institutional Review Board approved the study protocol.

Sample Recruitment

The adult sample consisted of 24 stakeholders from towns/cities in the Boston metropolitan region. We began by developing a list of towns and cities in the Boston area ($n=85$) and searching their websites

for information pertaining to youth councils, youth commissions, or other youth bodies attached to city governments. We contacted those with information via email, letter, and/or phone providing study information and requesting a phone interview with the adult contact to the youth council. We also contacted the mayor or town manager of each town/city requesting information as to whether they have an operating youth council. Additionally, we asked interview respondents if they knew other youth councils in the Boston region and followed up on these leads. From these efforts, we identified a total of 36 operating youth councils. We interviewed respondents from 24 youth councils, representing a 66 percent response rate.

The youth sample consisted of 27 members of one municipal youth council in Boston. Youth members are appointed by the mayor and are charged with representing youth across the city. They perform multiple activities including attending large council meetings, sub-committee meetings, holding office hours, and conducting outreach within their communities. The manager of the youth council assisted in recruitment of the youth sample by providing the authors with the schedule of office hours where youth would be present.

All three authors attended the initial youth council meeting at the start of the year (September) to describe the study, answer questions, and distribute consent forms. Then, the authors alternated attending office hours approximately three days a week from October 2015–December 2015 and interviewed youth who were present. A total of 27 youth were interviewed.

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Data Collection

Twenty-four adult stakeholders involved in the operations of each youth council participated in the phone interviews. The interviews were conducted

by one of the three authors and lasted between 30 minutes and one hour. The authors used a semi-structured interview guide focused on the youth councils' origin, development, and structure; the recruitment, selection, and roles of youth; and the impact of the youth council on policy, programming, and practice. The authors wrote detailed notes during the interview and typed them up for analysis.

Twenty-seven youth council members participated in the in-person interviews. The interviews were conducted in-person by one of the three authors in a private room at the City Hall. The interviews lasted approximately 30 minutes. Prior to the start of the interview, the authors reviewed the consent form and answered questions about the study. The authors used a semi-structured interview guide focused on the recruitment and selection process, experiences participating in council activities, impact of participation on youth, and perceptions of city government. All interviews were audio recorded and electronically transcribed for analysis.

The authors observed seven youth council meetings between October 2015 and May 2016. All observations took place in a large room at Boston's City Hall. The meetings generally lasted two hours, from 5 to 7 p.m. The authors used a pre-designed coding form to document information including the number of participants, the agenda items, the level of youth engagement, barriers to participation, and strategies used by the leader to engage youth. In addition, the authors took detailed handwritten notes of the physical space and interactions among members. One final data collection activity was the ongoing review of publicly available youth council documents, including mission statements, agendas, and meeting minutes.

All data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The authors began by reviewing select interview transcripts in depth and coming up with initial codes, which were reviewed and discussed by all authors during multiple research meetings. Then the authors applied the codes to additional data (interviews and observations) and expanded upon the codes. Finally, the authors came up with seven overarching best practices described below.

The authors took steps to reduce researcher bias and ensure quality data. First, the authors analyzed and triangulated multiple data sources including interviews, observations, and documents. Second, the authors met regularly for peer debriefing sessions throughout data collection and analysis to compare and contrast their findings. Third, the authors wrote memos about the data to define, develop, and revise the codes, and contrast them with the existing literature.

Findings

In this section we report the best practices we identified through our data collection and analysis. For each practice identified we provide a description of the information that led us to identify these as key practices with reference to specific cities/towns and interview subjects. To protect confidentiality we identify the cities/towns with a letter (e.g., "A") and youth interview subjects with a number.

1. Develop the youth council relevant to the local context

As one respondent noted, there is no "one right way to do a youth council" (X). Each youth council should be relevant to the local context, the current mission, and the developmental phase appropriate to the body. The respondent further noted that she had "a binder full of information to start a council but you have to realize the population and group you work with and need to tweak the way you work."

Our research identified complex historical development to most of the youth councils. They originated in various ways. Often there was a community crisis; teen drug use or suicide were most frequently mentioned. Some were started within the government by the mayor or council members; others were started by "concerned citizens." It is important to note that none were reported to having been started by youth themselves.

The exact reason and timing for the start of the council is often murky. Several youth councils are long-standing—as long as 50 years. Others are fairly recent. The existing councils have not always had a continuing existence. Respondents in some

towns identified that the youth councils started, “fizzled out” at some point, and more recently were reconvened. We also found that when we contacted identified youth councils we were informed that five were no longer in operation. Clearly, youth councils run a risk of fading away and concerted attention (to structure, funding, and staffing) is needed to avoid this risk.

Several examples were provided regarding the ongoing development of the council. In regard to both the initial start of the council and its on-going development, issues of community crisis, leadership, and funding were noted factors. Like most community-based entities, on-going commitment by a person or persons is needed to steer the course of the group. Funding can be part of the ability to provide leadership. Some respondents discussed the movement from a volunteer position to a paid position; this provided more stability.

Additionally, the data showed that youth councils continually engage in a process of development. Many respondents expressed ongoing reflection about the strengths and weaknesses of their councils. Also, the councils must be adept at responding to both changes in the community (political leadership, community problems identified by data or crises), potential opportunities (particularly around funding), and the expressed needs of the members (particularly youth). Youth members cycle off these councils; for developmental reasons they do not stay more than a couple of years. Hence, the focus of activity and the overall character of the work of the group should be reflective of the members in order to have a sense of engagement and ownership.

2. Align mission, structure, and activities of the council

While many different forms of municipal youth councils exist, a well-functioning council with potential impact requires alignment of mission, structure, and activities. These, too, can be fluid but as missions change, so should the structure and activities. Our research identified a four-level continuum of adult-centric → youth-centric practice. Several components distinguished placement on the continuum: (1) youth membership, (2) youth

decision-making, (3) youth initiative, and (4) youth leadership. All of the councils had mechanisms to include youth voice, but the degree to which youth shared power with adults appeared to be linked to the structure of the council. Structures that were more youth-centric provided youth with more power than those that were adult-centric. Other factors included access to the mayor or city manager and voting privileges on the council. Youth-centric councils embodied most or all of these characteristics: membership was a majority youth; youth made decisions; youth decided what issues to focus on; and youth held leadership positions. Youth-centric councils also had adult allies that provided education and guidance to youth council members. We identified three councils that fell into this category. The adults that supervised these councils were hired by the municipality to do so; they would provide support, encouragement, and information in order to help the young people succeed. These councils had the necessary structural support and capacity—often existing as stand-alone entities employing a youth development framework.⁶

While youth development specialists (like ourselves) favor youth-centric models, they might not be the appropriate model for a specific locality at a particular time. As noted above, in all cases adults started the idea of a youth council. They are, therefore, very unlikely to begin with a fully developed youth-centric structure. Rather, there was evidence that several councils progressed over time toward a youth-centric model. The respondent from town Y, for example, suggested that the adult leadership of the youth council identified the need to include more students and moved to rebalance the adult/youth ratio.

We identified a wide range of activities in which youth councils are engaged: holding meetings, education and prevention activities, youth summits, recreational activities, community service, community assessments, counseling, and policy-specific actions. Some councils held meetings that were formal, clearly following governmental procedure, with agenda, minutes, and sub-committees. Other councils had meetings with less formality. These were more obviously youth-centered and focused on youth development programming rather than governmental procedures.

Other than holding and participating in meetings, educationally focused prevention activities were the most common activity. Some of the councils received funding from the State Department of Public Health or federal funding through the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). Such funding would, obviously, drive some of the education and prevention activities in which youth councils engaged. Youth development approaches, including those aimed at engaging youth in community initiatives (such as serving on youth councils) may be included in substance abuse prevention activities. Yet, the essence of youth development strategies and the promise they hold require that they are not solely problem-focused. Funding may be important, but a council solely focused on substance abuse prevention (or other problem) may lose its overall orientation toward broader engagement in governance. Many of the councils had this nonproblem focus to their activities. Thus external funding is neither good nor bad but should be pursued purposefully and requires alignment with council mission, structure, and activities.

3. Get support from adult allies

We identified two types of necessary adult support in the successful functioning of youth councils. The first is that of political leaders within the municipality, typically the mayor or city manager. Good leadership among political officials did not require specific youth-related expertise, but these leaders needed to be connected to all constituencies and needed to perceive youth as a vital constituency and resource. Surprisingly few of the respondents in our study reported a direct connection between the youth council and the chief executive. On the few occasions when direct connection occurred, it appeared to be a powerful force. This was the case of town R. A central figure in viewing youth as an important constituency, the mayor occasionally attended council meetings and/or interacted with the youth council at other city events, all of which were considered by the youth in our sample to be special.

The second form of adult support is having at least one adult staff member who is involved in the operation of the council. The staff member(s) should have specific youth-related expertise, or seek to increase

their competency over time. For example, some of our interviewees bolstered their skills through webinars, conferences and networking with other youth council leaders in the region. There was variation in the sample as to whether this person was focused on the youth council full-time, part-time, as part of another role, or in a volunteer capacity; however, a supportive political environment and access to resources was critical.

In town T, the political milieu was that of stated support for youth programs and youth well-being but without the resources and policy to allow for action. A single full-time staff member and the tireless efforts of committed volunteers led the work of the youth council. Though these adults were committed to youth in the city, their influence on youth programming was limited due to a lack of authority and funding. In contrast, the full-time staff person in charge of the council in town H was located within a larger youth-related department, which gave the youth council the ability to use departmental resources, as well as their own budget, when necessary.

4. Approach diversity of council membership in thoughtful ways

It is important to consider multiple aspects of diversity and to include youth with various attributes and histories (e.g., youth in foster care, teen parents, immigrant youth) when recruiting and selecting members for a youth council. While it is not possible to incorporate all forms of diversity in council membership, it is important to strive for membership that is representative of the youth in the city/town/neighborhood. It is also necessary to consider many aspects of diversity such as race/ethnicity, economic status, immigrant origin, sexual orientation, gender identity, and ability/disability, when selecting youth council members.

In our data we found a lack of economic and academic diversity. Regarding the former, one adult stakeholder reported, "Town D is a very upper-middle class, non-diverse community, about 95 percent white; yet there are diverse segments of the community: lower class subsets, high population of homeless children, and low-income housing. It comes up in the council that we need to do a better job of outreaching to these segments."

Regarding academic diversity, the youth councils were overwhelming populated by high achievers. As noted by one respondent, “the youth we have in our council are great, however, several of them are in National Honors Society or other high school clubs (O).” This was confirmed by our youth sample; the majority attended one of the top high schools in the city and identified multiple pre-existing opportunities for community engagement.

Membership on youth councils, while inclusive in some respects, might also perpetuate social inequalities. We identified academic excellence, family involvement, and social networks as factors related to youths’ involvement in municipal youth councils.⁷ Adult stakeholders noted the importance of looking beyond the “best students” and engaging a wide variety of youth, including youth in vocational programs or home school, and youth “at risk” for dropping out of high school.

5. Provide youth development opportunities

Youth in our study reported joining the youth council so that they could “make difference in their community.” In order for this to happen there is a need for ongoing training, support, and guidance from adults working with the council. Ideally, the council would hold an orientation before the start of any council activities. The orientation might range in duration and substance depending on the needs of the locale, but in general it should provide youth with an overview to the local government structure and functions, the role of the youth council (e.g., in terms of advising local government on policy, programs, and/or practice), the activities of the council, and the expectations of youth council members. Holding an orientation before the start of the council provides youth with a context for their role and responsibilities, while helping them to understand the position of the council (e.g., within or outside local government) and the potential impact of council activities.

Once youth are on the council, they should be provided opportunities to engage in activities that assist them in developing their leadership knowledge and skills. Our participants discussed a wide range of activities, including attending meetings, participating in education and prevention efforts, conducting community service and outreach efforts, and

engaging in policy-advocacy. Both youth and adults should carefully select these activities to ensure that youth have the opportunity to assume leadership roles, while simultaneously receiving support and guidance from adults. For example, in town O young people raised awareness of the importance of transportation. They worked with adults from the local transportation authority to create a “youth route” for the bus route. The route traveled from the high school to the movie theatre or the mall. Youths participating in this activity had the opportunity to exert their leadership skills while also receiving input from adults.

One of our larger youth councils was engaged in a youth-led participatory budgeting process involving young people between the ages of 12 and 25. The mayor allocated 1 million dollars to be spent on capital projects proposed, developed, and voted on by youth in the city. The youth council was charged with implementing the participatory budgeting process, including collecting ideas from young people, developing proposals for capital projects, and encouraging participants to vote on the proposals. The youth council had regularly scheduled meetings with the entire council where they received training focused on participatory budgeting, methods of communication and outreach, and teamwork. Youth who participated in the process had the opportunity to develop multiple leadership skills including teamwork, public speaking, communications, decision-making, and time-management. Moreover, participants often mentioned the importance of this concrete, important, and highly-recognized activity to focus their attention and to make their participation meaningful rather than symbolic.

Youth who participated in the process had the opportunity to develop multiple leadership skills including teamwork, public speaking, communications, decision-making, and time-management.

6. Recognize and address anti-youth attitudes

The majority of adult stakeholders involved in this study viewed youth as capable, powerful, and a necessary voice within the political process. Yet, it was

seen as inevitable that youths would interact with individuals and groups who are not supportive of them and who may have explicit or implicit biases against young people. In essence, the idea that “adult attitudes are the greatest barrier to effective” youth participation, as Sharon Bessell has suggested in an article in the journal *Childhood*, was echoed in our study.⁸ While our adult interview respondents represented individual professionals who believe in the potential of youth voice and participation, youth councils continually contend with cultural attitudes at-large. Bassell identifies four key areas where these attitudes are embedded: “institutional context and procedural requirements; cultural and social norms; lack of clarity about children’s participation; and concerns about negative consequences.”⁹ Thus, the adult allies of the youth council may be called upon to support the youth council in a variety of ways to confront anti-youth attitudes. One specific action typically requires an adult stakeholder to help prepare and guide the youth council members when they are planning to interact with adult members of the city council or city departments. Adult stakeholders commonly support youth in practicing presentations, for example, as well as anticipating potential responses.

Confronting anti-youth attitudes within systems is a larger task. Our youth sample indicated that perceptions of government and its employees were initially prohibitive to active engagement in government. Prior to joining the council, young people typically had little interest or information about city government. In some cases, they held negative connotations of government and adults, feeling that these structures and individuals did not value their opinions. In discussing views of city government, one youth (48) stated that prior to joining the youth council, “I thought that there were just a bunch of grown men who made ideas and collectively agreed on the ideas but didn’t really reach out to anybody else... I thought that it was more exclusive and not involving the community.”

Many of the young participants in our study had positive experiences with adults, and city government, based on their involvement with the youth council. The consensus among them shows that without direct experience with encouraging adults and systems, their attitudes and opinions of government were neutral at best, and created a disinterest

in entering these spaces. Even for the youth on the council, they believed that many of their friends and generally, youth-at-large, did not believe adults (specifically in city government) would listen or care about young people. It appears that these attitudes extended beyond individuals and had to do with the institution and social norms.

Adult stakeholders were aware of some of the barriers within government that are perceived as restrictive to participation. In town K, “difficulties of the bureaucratic procedures have been noticeable.” Several young people shied away from participating on the council because they were intimidated by the formal procedure of being sworn-in. The swearing-in process while strictly procedural, was intimidating enough to deter some youth participation. Understanding how formal structures may be unintentionally anti-youth might also assist in explaining why it is that high-achieving youth seem to participate in these institutions.

In practice, adult allies of young people must be aware of the myriad ways systems of operation in government can feel foreign, and thus anti-youth, to young people. Adult allies can then take steps to make institutional practices more youth-friendly, for example, altering unnecessary formalities or finding a home for the council that provides flexibility. At a minimum, practitioners can prepare youth to expect to face anti-youth attitudes in their work, since these attitudes reflect social norms well beyond any individual.

7. Be purposeful in providing social networking opportunities

Social networks appear to be a key component of youth councils in numerous respects. Young people may be interested in joining a youth council largely or in part because of the social aspects of meeting and interacting with other young people. In some instances, they may be recruited to join the council via their social networks. For example, one youth in our sample reported that she learned about the youth council through one of her friends she follows on Twitter who provided regular updates on the various activities she performed on the council. Consistent with goals related to diversity, outlined above, networking opportunities of youth councils may allow youth participants to broaden their

networks. Making sure networks to enter and participate are open enough to allow a wide range of youth to participate is critical. Additionally, interactions with young people from a wide range of backgrounds allow each of the youthful participants to grow in their social competence.

Networks may also have instrumental value. By creating opportunities for skill development and engagement in political process, youth may also benefit by developing relationships that can further their educational and career goals. We heard some instances in which involvement in a youth council was initially perceived as a “resume builder” although most youth later realized there were many more benefits.

Consistent with goals related to diversity, outlined above, networking opportunities of youth councils may allow youth participants to broaden their networks.

Additionally, in large youth councils with access to city government employees there may be opportunities for genuine career paths. Cultivating networks to achieve goals of education and employment are all to the good. Indeed, these tangible benefits may provide a very real incentive for participation and they mirror the processes of engagement that adults frequently utilize for their own advancement. If youth councils are constructed to achieve such individual benefits to the young, it is particularly important that access to participation does not result from “insider” networks but that recruitment and application processes aim to reach a wide range of youth.

Conclusion

Through the course of conducting this research we had many practitioners ask us for advice about forming and running youth councils. Having a youth council within or attached to city government is widely considered to be a good idea. Yet, many good-intentioned efforts fall short in practice. Furthermore, many well-running, established youth councils continually seek information and new ideas to improve their operation. Our article aims to address this need for information by providing

guidance in some key areas that came to our attention during the course of the research project.

We identify these best practices to be “overarching.” Of the many lessons learned they rose to the fore as most fundamental to undergird the operations of the council and its potential accomplishments. They were culled from numerous data collection efforts. Additional guidance of a more practical nature is also relevant (e.g., setting appropriate time and location, offering food) but we aimed for more conceptual categories to guide practice. Youth councils themselves can then decide how to apply these guidelines in their work.

Notes

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