Community-Based Youth Leadership:

A Pathway to Civic Engagement

Wendy Wheeler, President

Innovation Center for Community and Youth Development

and

Carla Roach, Research Consultant

Innovation Center for Community and Youth Development

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Democracy requires people to learn, listen, dream and work together as they unleash their collective potential and create a just and equitable society. Too often, young people are excluded from democratic deliberation or relegated to age-segregated opportunities with little impact on democratic structures, such as service learning and youth advisory commissions. This tendency to minimize the contributions of youth is ironic since young people's enthusiasm, idealism, and capacity for innovation have helped to catalyze democracy over time and around the world (HoSang, 2003; Yates & Youniss, 1999). Neither young people nor older adults can create positive community change on their own. True democracy is inclusive. It calls for the crossing of traditional age, cultural, political, and institutional borders. It demands openness to new opportunities and fresh understandings while building on deeply rooted traditions, experience, and history. This paper describes four insights gleaned from organizations where youth are learning and leading as partners in democracy. The organizational profiles, drawn from various initiatives and partnerships coordinated by the Innovation Center, including the Ford Foundation-funded *Youth Leadership for Development Initiative*, collectively point to four promising practices for organizations and communities to engage young people as leaders in creating strong and healthy communities. These practices resonate with existing scholarship on youth development, youth-adult partnership, civic activism, and community building. Taken together, they highlight the critical role that community-based agencies can play as supporters and facilitators of youth civic engagement.

Recognize that young people are assets to and experts about their own communities

The literature on youth development provides strong conceptual underpinnings for community-based youth leadership. When the youth development stance surfaced in the early 1990s, it challenged the prevailing approach to youth issues in the United States. At the time, policymakers, practitioners, and scholars were largely preoccupied with fixing adolescents' *problems* (Gambone & Arbreton, 1997; Pittman & Irby, 1996). The youth development perspective called for a broader focus on pathways, programs, and contexts to support successful transitions from adolescence to adulthood (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1992; Edginton & deOlivera, Spring 1995; Pittman, O'Brien, & Kimball, 1993). It also introduced the notion that, as they develop, young people have the potential and the right to play meaningful roles as full-fledged stakeholders of their communities (Hughes & Curnan,

2000). Early studies emphasized the role of young people as community change agents and highlighted how and why traditional community development organizations might involve young people (Armistead & Wexler, 1997; Cahill, 1997). In effect, the youth development ideology evolved as an asset-based stance; it dealt squarely with how and why communities should strengthen and channel youth's capacities. Regrettably, efforts to promote this perspective have been undermined by a pervasive societal view of young people as a *problem* and not a potential resource. Adults frequently forget to ask for involvement from young people when they are working on community change. When adults write youth off as apathetic and disengaged, they miss out on some of the richest resources in their communities.   Just as importantly, young people miss out on a chance to make a real difference, build their own skills, and gain the confidence that comes when others value your work.

The Healthy Communities - Healthy Youth Initiative in Waupaca, Wisconsin, tries to avoid these pitfalls by capitalizing on the potential and power of interdependence between young people and communities. "Many times, youth were looked at as the problems, or thought of as 'kids who didn't care,'" says Carolyn Edelbeck, a 17-year-old who participates in the initiative. [1]   "A lot of activities and groups were planned *for* youth, but there wasn't anything that *involved* youth in the planning." Edelbeck's group set a new standard when they developed and ran their own projects. Healthy Communities - Healthy Youth was an innovative approach in which youth and adults worked in partnership, with youth empowered as leaders to make difficult decisions, set policies, and drive the group's work to foster positive community-change within Waupaca. Their accomplishments include: (i) a new skateboard park for the town created with input from both youth and adults; (ii) volunteer opportunities at community organizations for sixth graders; (iii) a youth-led philanthropy committee that made and oversaw grants to local organizations in exchange for service projects that involved youth as partners; and (iv) seats for young people as voting members of the city council. Edelbeck sees the voting membership on city council as a triumph and a turning point for Waupaca youth. "This was a huge step. It shows that youth are valued and their input is important."

The Young Women's Project (YWP) is another organization that recognizes the inherent potential of young people as civic leaders and supports their right to participate in public life. Based in Washington, DC, YWP offers hourly wages to teen leaders—many of whom have spent years in foster care —to show them that their work to improve life for young women in Washington, DC, is valued. As experienced experts on the foster care system and students in

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[1] This quote, and all others that follow, are taken from Innovation Center for Community and Youth Development. Creating Change: How Organizations Connect with Youth, Build Communities, and Strengthen Themselves (2003) Takoma Park, MD: Author. Available from http://www.theinnovationcenter.org/documents/C4-CreatingChange.pdf.

DC public schools, the young women bring a critical insider perspective to the organization and to their work both with other students and with key policy makers within the DC government. They identify key challenges facing their peers, educate policymakers and advocate for solutions. Thanks to their efforts, Washington, DC now has: (i) a sound sexual harassment policy in its public schools; and (ii) systems and standards to ensure quality care in group foster homes. While salaries have attracted more youth to the work and kept them connected, the rewards to young people go far beyond financial. With every project, these young women build vital job skills, increasing their confidence and earning potential. "After our workshop we had some really good feedback," says 17-year-old Tdisho Doe, who addressed reproductive health issues with young women in group foster homes. "The kids at the group homes had some very positive things to say about us. And they invited us back. When people invite you back, you know you have done your job right."

Bring young people and adults together to work as equal partners

Although the concept of youth participation is hardly new, the term youth-adult partnership frequently appears in contemporary community-based work and research. In this context, youth-adult partnerships exhibit three dimensions. They are, first and foremost, relational interactions that are guided by a broad principle of mutuality. Youth-adult partnerships are also associated with distinct competencies –as these partnerships evolve, they are enhanced and sustained by youth and adults who take the time to cultivate communication, teamwork and coaching skills. And, youth-adult partnerships are action-oriented. Ultimately, youth and adult partners use their affiliation in order to realize specific goals that they both share (Camino, 2000).

As youth and adults provide collective leadership on critical community issues, they build the skills and dispositions that foster civic participation and tolerant deliberation in democratic societies. This way of working can potentially alleviate factors that often undermine youth civic engagement efforts –such as the segregation of youth from adults, negative public beliefs about young people, and stereotypes about their capabilities (Camino & Zeldin, 2002). However, the process of forging successful partnerships is often slow and difficult. Just as excluding young people from civic engagement ignores the gifts and resources they bring to the process, it is counterproductive to assume that within youth-adult partnerships, youth should do everything of importance, that adults should completely relinquish power, or that the focus should be exclusively placed on young people (Camino, 2005). Instead, youth-adult alliances seem to flourish in environments where stakeholders take the time to construct balanced and thoughtful

approaches through reflective dialogue and organizational learning (Zeldin, Camino & Mook, 2005).

Adults and youth in Oakland, California have invested heavily in this kind of partnership approach in order to improve garment workers' health and working conditions. Together, they work to change the lives of women in the garment industry, the majority of whom suffer from repetitive motion injury. "Youth had a stake in making sure their moms could come home from work and not feel pain," says Stacy Kono, Project Director of the Youth Build Immigrant Power (YBIP) program at Asian Immigrant Women Advocates (AIWA). For years, AIWA had mobilized immigrant women on behalf of Asian immigrant families and garment workers. They launched YBIP to engage youth and adults as partners in this effort. AIWA had offered free medical check-ups to women garment workers and found that 99% of women had injuries related to their work; all experienced regular pain in their back, neck, or arms. "A lot of youth joined YBIP because their moms are garment workers," says Kono, who hosted drop-in events that attracted mostly young women, ages 14 to 20. In these informal settings, young people discovered their similar family experiences. One young woman says she began to understand "why it was the humming of sewing machines that put me to sleep as a kid, and not the humming of my mother."

That was enough to spark a movement of YBIP members, adults at AIWA, and the garment workers themselves to negotiate healthier conditions in factories. In collaboration, the young people and adults: (i) offered important health and safety training to factory owners; (ii) researched options for funding work station changes and raised $33,000 from the county's community grants fund and the city's economic development fund; and (iii) successfully installed ergonomically correct chairs in the factory workers' stations. Teresa Ruan, who joined YBIP when she was 13, says she continues her involvement with AIWA so that youth "can become leaders like me." Ruan experienced first hand the inspiring impact of youth-adult partnership in her community, and now knows that—in her words: "People together is power."

Build young people's connections to their own identity, culture and community

In communities across the country, organizations are working with young people to help them understand who they are, where they came from and what their heritage offers them. This focus on identity deals squarely with the reality that civic participation is influenced by the cultural context within which it occurs (Ginwright & James, 2003; Roach, Yu & Lewis-Charp, 2001). Armed with an understanding of their own identity, young people can appreciate their own cultures, understand how historic injustices affect them, and use this knowledge to make positive changes (Lewis-Charp, Yu, Soukamneuth & Lacoe, 2003).

Leadership Excellence (LE), a youth development group in Oakland, CA uses identity as a starting point to develop a critical consciousness and cohesion among young African Americans. "I got involved in Leadership Excellence when I was eighteen," says Ronell Clayton. Clayton had been arrested during a painful time in his family's life and was trying to get back on track by improving his grades and decisions. LE offered a way to connect the pain and disruption in his own life with the pain of oppression in the African American experience. Clayton took part in LE's Middle Passage Workshop, which recreates the sights and sounds of capture in Africa and enslavement in the United States. This guided visualization describes the injustice and spiritual erosion African Americans have endured in this country ever since. It demonstrates slavery's devastating impact on Black culture today. Clayton remembers his reaction to the workshop. "People in my family had passed, my good friend had passed away at school. Still I didn't cry," he says. "After Middle Passage, I just cried and cried." There are about 150 youth in LE, ages 5 to 18. They are recruited by word of mouth and sometimes mandated to attend by probation officers or parents. LE offers visualization, role play, and workshops to encourage understanding of current social and economic issues, all of which have origins in the past. Through programs like the Middle Passage workshop, LE supports critical thinking skills and instills in young people the values and attitudes that help them cope with and take action against injustice. Their transformation is evident in the young man who rejects sexist terminology or the young woman who creates a child care program at her school so that young mothers like her can continue to attend.

Like LE, the community-based organization OUTRIGHT also uses identity support programming to help young people develop and apply skills as community leaders. Located in Portland, Maine, OUTRIGHT provides social support, advocacy, and information to gay, lesbian, transgender, bisexual, and questioning (GLBTQ) youth. Their work with this population is critical in light of the significant barriers that hinder citizenship development for sexual minority youth (Russell, 2002). Andrew Jones, for example, was 17 when he took a risk and showed up on drop-in night. "I thought I was the only kid in Portland who felt like this," recalls Jones. "I was really nervous going in." OUTRIGHT creates a safe space for GLBTQ youth and promotes a safer world on their behalf by running a hotline and hosting educational and social events. For example, youth members of OUTRIGHT have: (i) counseled a local school official through the handling of an anti-gay harassment incident and advised specific changes to the climate of the school; (ii) organized a prom for GLBTQ young people in Portland, attended by 190 young people; and (iii) brought three young people—a transgender man, a lesbian, and a straight ally— to the stage of a high school auditorium to tell their stories to 300 teachers and students. One

student openly regretted his use of the word "faggot" and vowed to eliminate it from his vocabulary. Three years since his first drop-in meeting, Jones serves on the youth-adult board of directors and witnesses changes in GLBTQ and straight youth who are affected by OUTRIGHT. "With a better understanding of themselves, their personal identity, and their place in the community, young people realize who they can be or what they can be," he explains. "So, they are motivated to help others do the same."

Engage young people as community leaders on issues that matter to them

Through community leadership, young people can channel their frustration with the status quo and devote their energy to community development and social change Driven by a desire to bring about change, they are ready and willing to take on leadership roles—and to develop the skills to do the job well. Organizations that channel this interest can help young people develop new skills, confidence and goals through the experience (Kahne, Honig & McLaughlin, 2002). Simultaneously, as young people define and defend a common good, they exercise –and strengthen –the basic tenets of democracy (Flanagan and Faison, 2001).

This process of youth civic development is deeply embedded in the work of Youth Ministries for Peace and Justice (YMPJ) in the Bronx, NY. When young members of YMPJ learned that an old cement plant in their neighborhood was slated to be torn down to create a parking lot, they refused to let it happen. Hernan Melara was 12 when he first joined YMPJ. "I grew up here. I feel safe here. I'll stay here," says Melara. "I see things in the future, how they can be. I don't want a cement plant. I want a park for my children and their children." He and YMPJ's other 200 members, ages 6 to 21, organized to stop city planners' bid for the parking lot and get the land transferred to the Parks Department. Despite their successes in stopping the parking lot, their work is not finished; the city still wants to run a road through the park. YMPJ members have taken action by performing street theater to inform their neighbors, collecting signatures for petitions, meeting with the Department of Transportation, and garnering press attention. "This is my community," explains Melara. "Nothing gets done here without my permission."

Young people may initially join community change efforts because they want to improve their lives and the lives and their family and friends (McLaughlin, 2000). They stay engaged because they gain opportunities, skills, and the satisfaction of a job well done. These early experiences may even translate into continued engagement as adults (Youniss, McLellan & Yates, 1997). Katie Sanborn, now age 19, spent four years in the youth-led Respect Team at her high school in Oxford Hills, Maine. The experience paved her path into public service. "You

can't be on the Respect Team without seeing the realities of all there is that needs to be done," says Sanborn. Respect Team brings together high school students and adults to encourage tolerance, acceptance, compassion, respect, and responsibility—not just among young people, but everyone. The team offers service-learning and youth-led educational and cultural events. They maintain a core leadership team of youth and adults and engage business and civic leaders in projects and events. This youth-adult partnership has inspired changes to its community and culture. Specifically, Respect Team members: (i) painted murals, wrote newspaper articles, and hosted culturally diverse events, such as an annual community summit of 150 young people and adults; (ii) led round table discussions and participated on community boards to define and promote respect; and (iii) expanded across the state and completed a video and guide to youth-adult partnerships, for distribution in schools throughout Maine.

Susan Jennings, an adult member of the team who works at the University of Maine Cooperative Extension in Oxford County Extension, observed changes in young people who took part. "They explain their work as their passion," she says. "They see themselves as valuable in this community and know they have the power to make change happen. Many are studying service-learning and community development. We have seen many of our young people move from struggling in school to successful people with clear future goals and aspirations." Sanborn kept up her commitment to social justice as an Americorps member, and shows no signs of stopping. "I definitely see myself participating in service for the rest of my life," says Sanborn. "The same cycle keeps popping up on every project—it all goes back to family and education and being responsible."

Practical and Conceptual Implications

These organizational profiles portray four dimensions of community-based youth leadership as a viable pathway into long-term civic engagement. From a practical perspective, the cases affirm that young people are not only among the key stakeholders of a community, they also represent a huge and frequently untapped reservoir of human energy, talent, and vision that can strengthen democracy. Second, the profiles demonstrate the power of youth-adult partnerships as intentional – often transformational – relationships between youth and adults that afford both groups an equal opportunity to build and utilize their skills as they engage together in deliberation and civic leadership. Third, these cases highlight the ways in which identity support programming can serve as an entry point into civic engagement for young people – particularly for youth who are disenfranchised due to unique challenges associated with their racial, ethnic, socioeconomic, sexual orientation, and immigrant backgrounds. Finally,

the profiles emphasize that when civic engagement experiences are grounded in and responsive to local community concerns, they are particularly powerful. In effect, the community helps to contextualize learning and civic engagement.

At a conceptual level, it is apparent –even from the abbreviated organizational sketches provided in this paper –that the richness of civic engagement experiences is best captured by using multiple vantage points. The work of involving young people in civic life is not bounded within a single sector or institutional arena. There are many ways that varied community organizations intentionally support youth civic engagement. Gibson (2001) points out that civic education; service-learning; political action, advocacy, and social/community change; and youth development are among the most popular frames used for youth civic engagement research. Future work would do well to utilize interdisciplinary approaches and cross-cutting perspectives that mirror the complexity of youth civic engagement and capture the diversity of the settings in which it takes place.

Overall, the experiences described in this paper demonstrate that, under the right conditions, young people can function effectively as leaders in their communities. They bring big ideas for change, frank assessments of problems, and a willingness to work hard in order to get results. Together with adult allies, they are driven by a more positive vision for their communities. They seek to create a more equitable and inclusive society. And the very process of getting involved in community leadership efforts makes young people stronger and healthier. As they work in partnership with adults, they become leaders on issues that matter to them, and develop skills and connections that will be useful for the rest of their lives.

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