Youth Engagement: More than a method.

A way of life for healthy youth and community development.

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Introduction

Youth engagement, broadly defined, describes experiences in which youth are “actively involved in cognitive and social endeavors that promote growth” (Weiss, Little & Bouffard, 2005, p. 24), underscoring how central it is to the process of youth development. And yet such a broad definition conceals the diverse forms youth engagement takes and the multiplicity of benefits it has to offer youth and the communities. Youth engagement happens in many different places (e.g. schools, community-based programs, places of worship, homes, neighborhoods); through many different activities (e.g. academics, sports, arts, community service, advisory boards, political advocacy, community activism); in more and less formal ways (e.g. classroom pedagogy, afterschool programs, pickup basketball and informal conversations among youth and adults). Youth benefit in a variety of ways (e.g. academic achievement; problem solving, communication, social, political and a host of other skills; self-efficacy; physical and emotional well-being). And yet communities are the ultimate beneficiaries of youth engagement in all its varied forms, as youth and adults connect and grow together, building individual and collective capacities that communities, our nation and a global society need to thrive in the 21st century.

As critical as these experiences are to Minnesota youth and communities, evidence suggests we are not maximizing opportunities to engage all youth. The challenge to engage youth in academic pursuits is clear and oft-discussed, with only 75% of Minnesota high school students graduating in four years (Minnesota Department of Education, 2010). And yet we are also missing out on powerful opportunities to engage youth in developmental opportunities beyond the school day. During the school year, only about half of Minnesota’s seventh through twelfth graders spend most of their out-of-school time in organized activities (Lochner, Allen & Blyth, 2009); about a quarter do so in the summer months. Participation rates are particularly low for youth from lower-income families and communities and tend to drop as children enter adolescence (Lochner et al., 2009; Saito, 2009). In a nationally representative study of 15-year-olds, Search Institute found that more than one-third (38 percent) did not score high on any of their three youth engagement indexes.

The pages that follow offer a framework delineating four types of youth engagement, the benefits each has to offer, and what it takes to bring them to life. Before exploring the diversity among youth engagement opportunities, however, it is important to first highlight a central ingredient all quality youth engagement experiences share – authentic youth/adult relationships. This core aspect of youth engagement is more important than ever before if youth are to succeed in the rapidly changing, increasingly multicultural and interdependent world of the 21st century.
Connection is at the Core of Engagement

We often talk and think about youth engagement as a one-way action in which adults engage youth. But authentic youth engagement happens when youth and adults engage with each other. They work, play, talk, laugh, cry, create, think, celebrate, struggle and learn together. Along the way, they develop positive attitudes, knowledge, skills and habits. This is human capital, valuable currency to help both youth and adults achieve their own goals as individuals and contribute to a thriving society.

As they engage with each other, youth and adults also develop “bonds of affection and mutual concern . . . through being in the same contexts, working on common projects and finding common purpose” (Flanagan, Stoppa, Syvertsen & Stout, 2010, p. 315). In addition to having a direct impact on individual health and well-being, these relationships are conduits through which young people access, beyond a particular engagement setting, resources they need to meet a wide range of physical, psychological, emotional, intellectual and spiritual needs (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Eckersley, Wierenga & Wyn, 2006; Resnick et al., 1997; Scales, Benson, Leffert & Blyth, 2000; Scales & Leffert, 1998; J. Walker, 2006). At the same time, ongoing, trusting, supportive relationships, developed within and across diverse groups, make up the social capital communities and societies, especially democratic societies, need to achieve collective goals.

Youth need these relationships more than ever before, as they navigate increasing demands amidst the great economic, social and political uncertainty of our time. And yet modern western culture works against forming these relationships. Dominant messages, including those embedded in education policy, define success in terms of material success, with individualism and competition as keys to obtaining it. The onus is on individuals to make their way, despite the role that social disadvantage and privilege play in one’s options (Eckersley et al., 2006). This makes it difficult to trust others, to believe that others will eschew individual interests to help us or work together to achieve some greater good (Lerner, 1996).

Many adults remember a time when youth/adult relationships “just happened.” Putnam, Feldstein & Cohen, (2003) assert that social factors have coalesced to make this less common today. These factors include the “privatization of leisure time that accompanied the explosion of electronic entertainment; the labor market changes that drew ever greater numbers of adults out of home-based, unpaid work and into long hours of paid employment; and the suburban sprawl that bifurcates our communities of residence from our communities of work” (p. 294). As such, these are times in which we must intentionally build these connections if young people and society at large are to reap all the benefits they have to offer.

Many Faces of Youth Engagement

With authentic, trusting relationships at its core, youth engagement takes on many different forms, each associated with specific outcomes for youth, communities and society. Recognizing differences across various types of youth engagement can help us better target these efforts to meet specific organizational and community goals, and to meet the developmental needs of all young people.
Lessons Learned: Youth engagement is more than a set of techniques.

“When we talk about youth engagement, it’s not just a method... This is more than just techniques. It’s a lifestyle, it’s a value commitment, it’s a way of life... that includes young people in our community and in our life’s journey.”

Ed Irwin, Executive Director, Nia-Imani Youth and Family Development Center, Kwanzaa Community Church

Minnesota practitioners agree that we need a wealth of all these engagement opportunities for youth and communities to thrive (MN Youth Engagement Forums, 2007, 2008). They also see institutional and normative barriers to making this vision real. They see a need for a clearinghouse to share training, tools and other opportunities to expand and deepen the practice of youth engagement. At the same time, they recognize that proliferating diverse youth engagement opportunities throughout the state will take more than simply learning, teaching and generating policy support for new “methods” in youth
work. It will require a normative shift in which youth, parents, neighbors, practitioners, policymakers, funders and other stakeholders re-consider the value of and find ways to come together across differences to create the kind of connections individuals and communities need to flourish in the 21st century.

The ideas presented in this paper are based on learning from scientific research and practice-based literature in the field of youth engagement; and the reflections of youth and adult participants and practitioners in Minnesota. The ideas are framed by a model of youth engagement based on the four definitions outlined above, delineating the benefits of each type of engagement and ways to maximize those benefits within programs and in the broader community. These ideas are followed by Minnesota practitioners’ priorities for furthering the practice of youth engagement; and, finally, recommendations for actions the University of Minnesota Extension Center for Youth development and its partners might take to help enhance the practice of youth engagement throughout the state.

**Research Design**

This paper synthesizes learning from a 12-month study designed to conceptualize, convey and stimulate alternative ways of thinking about youth engagement by integrating learning from scientific research, practice-based literature, and the experiences of Minnesota practitioners and youth. The study included:

- a review of relevant literature;
- interviews, focus groups and program observations with youth and adults at four case study sites;
- ten half-day regional forums and two facilitated one-hour discussions with adult practitioners throughout the state;
- a videotaped discussion and interviews with experience “master practitioners,” who mentor others in the effective practice of youth engagement.

The study was guided by the following research questions:

How do the literature and Minnesota practitioners define youth engagement? What do people do, study, promote or support in the name of youth engagement?

What are common goals and benefits of youth engagement efforts?

What does it take to do youth engagement well, to achieve these goals? What gets in the way of achieving goals?

What can the Center for Youth Development and others key stakeholders do to help catalyze and support the proliferation of quality youth engagement practice throughout the state?
To Engage is to:

- **participate** in activities that allow us to **connect** to positive people and places;

- **be engrossed** in a pursuit to an extent that we are intrinsically motivated to learn and grow;

- **enlist** young people’s help in creating effective youth programs and policies;

- **grapple with, take on** issues of shared concern.

**Data Collection Methods**

**Regional Forums**

In November and December of 2007 a total of 147 practitioners attended one of seven regional forums held in the following cities throughout Minnesota: Duluth, Mankato, Marshall, Moorhead, Rochester and St. Cloud. Three forums took place in April and May, 2008 with a total of 29 attendees, in Minneapolis, Moorhead and Rochester, Minnesota. Participants were youth workers who accepted an invitation sent to the University of Minnesota Extension Youth Work Institute mailing list. In addition to the regional forums, we completed one-hour workshops with 78 practitioners attending the Minnesota Department of Education Healthy Learners conference in January 2008, and 28 practitioners attending a Minnesota Alliance with Youth gathering in February 2008.

The fall regional forums were divided into four key segments. The shorter workshops did not include the second segment. First, we shared four different definitions of youth engagement found in the literature (“youth participate in developmental activities,” “youth are absorbed or engrossed in a developmental pursuit,” “adults enlist youth to improve programs and policies that affect them,” and “youth and adults collectively take on issues of shared concern”). We then distributed cards, color-coded by these four types of youth engagement, on which participants rated each type of youth engagement on two four-point scales. The first scale represented the importance of each type of youth engagement. The second represented the degree to which each definition described the kind of youth engagement they were doing at the time. Participants then plotted each of their four cards on a giant graph on the wall, offering a quick, visual read of current youth engagement practice and priorities based on these definitions.
Second, forum participants broke into groups, each focusing on different definitions of youth engagement. Individuals in each group brainstormed responses to the question “What are elements of quality in this type of youth engagement practice?” Groups then identified themes across individual ideas. Finally, all forum participants identified themes across the groups, categorizing and naming critical elements of quality youth engagement practice. Following this process we shared a synthesis of what the literature identified as critical elements of quality youth engagement practice, noting the overlap with their own ideas. Each forum concluded with a discussion of barriers and what is needed to help proliferate quality youth engagement throughout the state.

We recorded data from each element of the regional forums and compiled it in Excel spreadsheets. We calculated mean scores across sites for the reported importance of each type of youth engagement and the degree to which it described current practice. We conducted a qualitative analysis of themes generated across sites related to critical elements of quality youth engagement practice and what it will take to proliferate quality engagement across the state.

Program Case Studies

Four promising programs were selected as case study sites, based on recommendations from colleagues at the University of Minnesota. In these four sites, we conducted interviews and focus groups with youth and adult staff and participants, discussing each program’s: goals and benefits for participants and the community; activities and practices that help in achieving goals; barriers to achieving goals; and what it would take to overcome barriers. These interviews and focus groups were recorded on a digital voice recorder and later transcribed. We also observed each program in action, taking detailed notes. We used a grounded theory approach, using NVivo qualitative data analysis software to identify themes in data within and across the case studies. The case study sites were:

- The Duluth East Nordic Ski Team, Duluth; Bonnie Fuller-Kask, Head Coach
- The Garage, Burnsville; Eric Billiet, Executive Director
- New Moon Girl Media, Duluth; Lacey Louwagie, Managing Editor, orb28, New Moon Girl Media
- Nobles County Integration Collaborative, Worthington; Sharon Johnson, Executive Director

Youth Engagement Masters Discussion

In April 2008, three “master” practitioners came together for a half-day group discussion, followed by one-on-one interviews about their goals for youth engagement, issues they face, and lessons they have learned about what it takes to achieve their goals. These three master practitioners were people identified by colleagues at the Center for Youth Development as seasoned professionals who mentor others in the practice of youth engagement. The participants were Eric Billiet and Sharon Johnson, listed above, and Ed Irwin, Executive Director, Nia-Imani Youth and Family Development Center, Kwanza Community Church, Minneapolis. Young people from the Nia-Imani Center digitally recorded on DVD the discussion and interviews, which were then transcribed these and included in the qualitative theme analysis.
A New Framework for Defining Youth Engagement

The model below differentiates four uses of the term “youth engagement” we found in the literature and in practice by youth development practitioners throughout the state: Participation, Passion, Voice and Collective Action.

Figure 1 A Typology of Youth Engagement

Words at the bottom of each “ring of engagement” in the model represent important features of each type of engagement. Benefits of participation are strengthened through opportunities for *connection* to positive people and places. Passion includes *commitment* to ongoing growth and development in a particular area of pursuit. Voice requires opportunities not just to speak out, but for youth to be heard and taken seriously, to truly have *input* into decisions that affect them. Our definition of Collective Action includes *shared power* and decision-making authority among youth and adults as they work together to achieve shared goals. While youth engagement is often thought of as a process of adults engaging youth, each of these rings involves youth and adults engaging *with each other*. They are linked at their core by ongoing, authentic youth/adult relationships.

The model, based on a review of the youth engagement literature, evolved through an iterative process that included input and feedback from experienced practitioners and youth, through regional forums described earlier in this paper and individual conversations. These youth and practitioners strongly
articulated the importance of the two-way arrow running through the Rings of Engagement for the integrity of the model. They said they do not experience these four types of engagement as hierarchical, with one form of engagement being more important than another, or as a developmental continuum with some types representing more mature forms of engagement than others. Rather, they see all these forms of engagement as equally important, with each fuelling all the others. They also asserted that all four types can offer opportunities to practice and experience the satisfaction of leadership through a variety of experiences, from leading peers in learning a hip hop dance to organizing youth and adults to advocate for school policy changes.

The youth engagement literature supports the notion that a flourishing community needs all these types of engagement opportunities if we are to meet diverse youth and adults where they are, ensuring they have opportunities that fit their current circumstances, interests and capacities throughout their lives (Blyth, 2006; Eccles et al., 1993; MN Youth Engagement Regional Forums, 2007, 2008; Saito, 2006). Furthermore, the more different types of engagement opportunities youth experience, the better off they will be. A recent study of 15-year-olds by Search Institute (Scales, Roehlkepartain & Benson, 2010) found a cumulative effect when young people experience multiple types of engagement, including having: strong relationships and opportunities for participation; an activity, issue or ideals about which they are passionate; opportunities, a sense of efficacy and plans to voice their ideas, engage in leadership roles and solve community problems. Youth who scored high in all these areas fared better than other youth on every academic, psychological, social-emotional, and behavioral outcome Search studied. While this study highlights the promise of providing a wide array of engagement opportunities, it also highlights the challenge at hand if we are to realize that vision. Only seven percent of youth in the study experienced high levels of all these types of engagement.

In addition to their benefits being additive, the four types of engagement in our model are also inter-dependent. Expanding and deepening opportunities in one ring can help to further development of the others. What follows is a more specific definition for each of these elements of youth engagement, along with an outline of the benefits of engaging youth in each of these ways, and what it takes to do it well. Also included are some of the dynamics through which each type of engagement experience fuels and is fuelled by the others.
Lessons Learned: There are opportunities for young people to learn and practice leadership skills in all the types of engagement.

When asked how they have benefited from their experiences in the Nobles County Integration Collaborative in Worthington, Minnesota, participants said they developed leadership skills through a range of different opportunities, from participating in a hip hop dance team to facilitating discussions among youth and adults to decide what afterschool programs the collaborative will offer:

“For hip hop, we kind of all get to be leaders. . . Sometimes we have to teach steps to people . . . [then] somebody else gets to be up front, and we switch around.”

“This place shows you how to lead the group, not like bossy, but how to get the ball rolling. If you noticed the group is like quiet, not interacting, kind of start with an icebreaker or something. Just ask ‘who has an idea?’ and just hope that someone has an idea that someone else will put onto that and then go on and on.”

Authentic Relationships

At the core of the Rings of Engagement are authentic relationships in which youth and adults actively listen to each other; treat each other with respect, honesty, kindness and empathy; have a shared understanding of their roles and responsibilities within the relationship; respectfully challenge and hold each other accountable; and enjoy their time together (MN Youth Engagement Masters, 2008; Pittman, Martin & Williams, 2007; Scales, et al., 2010; Search Institute, 2005; J. Walker, 2006). Adults sometimes think empowering youth means taking a step back, refraining from sharing their own wisdom and insights as they encourage young people to take the lead. However, the youth engagement literature, practitioners and youth to whom we talked all agreed that instead of stepping back, authentic relationships require adults to step up. They need to offer guidance, share wisdom and skills they have gained through their many years of experience, giving young people a chance to appreciate and learn from them, at the same time they appreciate and learn from the perspectives, wisdom and unique skills young people bring (Larson, 2006; MN Youth Engagement Masters, 2008; MN Youth Engagement Case Studies, 2008; MN Youth Engagement Regional Forums, 2008; O’Donoghue, Kirshner & McLaughlin, 2002; Search Institute, 2005; Serido, Borden & Perkins, 2006; Watts & Flanagan, 2007; Weiss et al., 2005; Wheeler, 2007a).

Benefits of Authentic Relationships

In authentic relationships, youth and adults find common ground. They come to understand, respect and appreciate their differences. Along the way, they build the trust required to take new risks with each other, opening doors to learn and achieve things that neither could have accomplished on their own (Innovation Center, 2008; MN Youth Engagement Case Studies, 2008; Scales, et al., 2010). Along the way, these trusting relationships broaden young people’s access to ideas and resources beyond the
relationship. For example, even when they are aware of an available health service, young people are far more likely to access that service if they learned about it from someone they trust. At a more fundamental level, ideas about who we are and who we can and want to be are informed by and often created in conversations with people we trust. In this way, a broad base of trusting relationships broadens the range of roles we can envision ourselves playing, and the resources we can access to bring our chosen vision to life (Eckersley et al., 2006).

These relationships also help us recognize that our own efficacy, our ability to be masters of our own fate, is enhanced through interdependence rather than through the independence that is so strongly promoted in Western culture. This sense of collective efficacy makes it easier to believe we can overcome barriers that are beyond our individual control (Eckersley et al., 2006; Flanagan et al., 2010).

At the same time trusting relationships are important to the health and well-being of individuals, they benefit organizations, communities and society as a whole. They breed social trust, which motivates people to act in trustworthy ways and contribute to the greater good (Flanagan et al., 2010; Lerner, 1996; Putnam et al., 2003). And, in working and being together, youth and adults also learn interpersonal, cross-cultural and collaborative skills that are critical for diverse workers, citizens and leaders to work together to create organizations, communities and a global society that can thrive (Appiah, 2006; Cheng, 2007; Friedman, 2006; Gastil & Keith, 2005; Levine, 2007).

Thriving communities, in turn, benefit the individuals within them. According to Putnam et al. (2003), “A child born in a state whose residents volunteer, vote, and spend time with friends is less likely to be born underweight, less likely to drop out of school, and less likely to kill or be killed than the same child – no richer or poorer – born in another state whose residents do not” (p. 269).

**Keys to Building Authentic Relationships**

Putnam et al. (2003) assert that building authentic relationships is easier in one-on-one or small group, face-to-face settings, where individuals feel more accountable to one another. On the other hand, youth benefit from feeling part of something big, important and growing. And there is greater opportunity for building relationships of trust and understanding across social and cultural difference within larger groups. As such, Putnam suggests:

- nesting one-on-one and small group experiences within larger group experiences;
- creating multiple common spaces in which people from the same and different groups have opportunities to connect regularly in different settings;
- providing media-based opportunities for a virtual exchange of ideas.

Putnam et al. and Minnesota practitioners (MN Youth Engagement Case Studies, 2008) suggest that virtual venues work better to support existing relationships that were first built face-to-face, rather than expecting to develop new communities virtually.

Overcoming racial discrimination is critical to engaging in authentic youth/adult relationships. African American, Hispanic and Latino youth in the Search Institute study of 15-year-olds (Scales et al., 2010)
were consistently more likely than white teens to say they experience discrimination. This undermines the ability of these young people to develop the trusting relationships so critical to their success.

Perhaps among the most powerful factors for building authentic relationships is recognizing the many opportunities for doing so in a host of formal and informal settings. Scales et al. (2010) report the following advice from 15-year-olds to adults, for creating authentic relationships with them: spend time talking with us; listen, don’t multi-task or get distracted when you’re with us; respond to our e-mail, voice and text messages; do what you say you are going to do; show appreciation for what we do; relax, don’t feel like you have to be on your guard; laugh with us; attend our concerts, games and other events; show that you have confidence in us; ask us to help you, and to show you what we can do; teach us what you know; push us to do our best.

Lessons Learned: Informal “talk” time helps build authentic relationships.

The Nia-Imani Youth and Family Development Center, in Minneapolis, Minnesota, offers a variety of opportunities to participate, find a passion, have a voice in current policies and practices, and work with adults to create new activities and programs. Current programs include a video production business, a men’s discussion group, a group creating their own music in a recording studio, a “Teen Connection Café,” and a Toastmasters public speaking group. Ed Irwin, Executive Director, says building relationships is at the core of all their work.

“We have programs we can send [young people] to that start at 5 and end at 6:30, but a lot of young people are going to come because they want to sit at your desk and just talk about what’s going on in their lives, families, a problem they have. We have to make sure our staff values that time. That’s quality program time in my eyes. . . active listening, tell me a little more about what’s going on, how would you solve that, brainstorm with them solutions to their own problems.”

Participation

Young people participate in a range of formal, informal, and non-formal activities that offer opportunities to connect with positive people and places, offering challenges and supports for their growth and development. This includes a wide range of activities offered by in-and out-of-school programs (e.g. academic activities, organized sports, music, dance, community service); as well as informal activities (e.g. pick up basketball, block parties, a garage band).

Benefits of Participation

Research associates participation with a wide range of positive developmental outcomes for youth, including physical health, positive psychosocial development, enhanced academic achievement, mastery of specific skills, reduction in violence and risk-taking behavior, and positive identity development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Pittman et al., 2007; Resnick et al., 1997; Scales et al., 2000; Scales & Leffert, 1998; J. Walker, 2006; Weiss et al., 2005; Zeldin, Camino & Calvert, 2007). For
many young people, youth programs offer a “second home” (Hirsch, 2005, p. 41) a safe place in which young people develop supportive relationships with peers and adults that help them cope with a variety of life stressors, and allow them to explore ideas about who they can be and who they want to be as a member of the broader community. They also build capacities, commitments, and social connections (Kahn & Westheimer, 2003) they need to succeed in their chosen roles.

Scales et al. (2010) found that 15-year-olds who scored high on a Relationships and Opportunities Index (measuring opportunities for participation and supportive relationships), were much more likely than low scorers to: work up to their ability at school (60% vs. 25%); have a grade point average of 3.5 or higher (73% vs. 53%); have a sense of purpose and hope for their future (59% vs. 17%); and have a positive sense of their ethnic identity (56% vs. 15%). And yet only 19 percent of study participants scored high on this index.

Participation, especially in diverse groups, can build a sense of belonging and social trust, a belief that “most people are fair, helpful, and trustworthy” (Flanagan, 2003, p. 167). This breeds ongoing participation in community organizations and institutions throughout adolescence and adulthood (Hart, Donnelly, Youniss & Atkins, 2007; Youniss & Hart, 2005) and widen one’s sphere of others to whom we feel a sense of connection and responsibility (Flanagan, 2003).

Lessons Learned: Having fun while connecting to positive people and places can be an important step toward developing a sense of responsibility to a community beyond one’s immediate friends and family.

The Garage, in Burnsville, Minnesota, is a place where people of all ages create, run and participate in programs. These include opportunities to hang out with friends or participate in a variety of daily activities after school, and all-ages music concerts on weekends. When asked why they come to the Garage on a regular basis, participants said:

“I come because my friends come here, and I like to have fun talking to the staff members and stuff. . . I know everybody, and we call each other family . . . if you don’t have a place somewhere else, if you come here, you have a place and you feel like you belong.”

For some, that feeling of connection has led to a sense of commitment to the Garage as a community, which affects youths’ behavior within and outside of that community. One participant said,

“Since I’ve been coming here, I’ve only gotten into one fight, and that’s amazing for me, cuz I used to get into like three fights a week. . . You have something to lose. . . If I get in a fight out there, it looks bad for the Garage, and I get in trouble, staff gets in trouble. . . You don’t want to mess up, because it hurts you even more to know that you’ve hurt somebody here that you care about or the place you care about.”
Dynamics with other “Rings”

New experiences and a sense of connection to people, places and ideas developed through participation can help youth find new passions that motivate the commitment that fuels further development (Kahn & Westheimer, 2003). Participation also often provides exposure to opportunities for voice and collective action that young people may then choose to access (MN Youth Engagement Masters, 2008; MN Youth Engagement Regional Forums, 2007, 2008).

Keys to Building Participation

For youth to actively participate over time, we must provide experiences they value. This requires knowing what they value; and using what we know to inform the experiences we offer. It also requires marketing programs in ways that allow prospective participants to effectively identify programs that offer experiences they value. Young people commonly say they join activities to:

- do something other than hanging out by themselves at home;
- meet and spend time with friends;
- develop specific skills;
- fulfill school requirements (e.g. community service hours);
- improve their community; and/or
- build a resume for college admission.

They keep coming back when they have fun, develop positive relationships, and feel like they are growing or accomplishing something that matters to them (Hirsch, 2005; MN Youth Engagement Case Studies, 2008; MN Youth Engagement Regional Forums, 2007; Pearce & Larson, 2006; Sullivan, 2006).

Hirsch (2005) found that strong youth-staff ties motivated continued participation in programs, even as they provided the main vehicle through which young people developed skills and learned to make positive choices. Finding the right balance of structured programming and informal social time is critical to ensuring opportunities to build these ties (MN Youth Engagement Case Studies, 2008; MN Youth Engagement Masters, 2008). Hirsch found that staff who were particularly effective in building strong relationships with youth participants shared the following characteristics.

They understood and communicated their appreciation and respect for youth culture (e.g. music, clothing styles, and the centrality of social interaction), establishing them as “cool” and opening the door to deeper relationships.

They used self-disclosure and storytelling as means of communicating ideas.

They listened, offering helpful feedback and providing emotional support related to school and non-school issues.
Lessons Learned: Accessibility and a sense of community build participation.

The Duluth East High School Nordic Ski Team has 75-100 participants per year, about 10 percent of the student body, compared to 30 participants at all other Duluth public high schools combined. Team members said that, in part, that’s because the school makes it really accessible for kids who want to ski. They have a bus that takes them from school to the ski hill each day. And they provide equipment for kids who can’t afford to buy it. Perhaps even more importantly, they said, the coaching staff makes participating on the ski team accessible to many through it’s core philosophies. As one team member put it, “There’s not an emphasis on racing. [The coach] wants us to race, but if a kid just wants to come and play ping pong all day, she’s fine with it. She’s not going to make them do anything. She’s trying to instill a love in skiing. . .”

Team members come back year after year, even after they graduate, because they become part of a ski community, which coaches intentionally work to build. When the team travels by bus each year to participate in a race in another part of the state, they stop to swim at a municipal pool and have dinner together on the way home. Ski team members mentor elementary school children in an annual “Kidski,” exposing younger children to social as well as athletic aspects of team membership, enticing many to be part of the team as they grow up. “Mentor Mondays” help them feel a part of the team once they join, as described by a senior on the ski team:

“[For] Mentor Mondays, an older 10th, 11th or 12th grader is paired with a seventh through ninth grader, to make them feel more a member of the team. That could be a major reason why we have so many more kids that actually stick with it the whole time, because the older kids actually do interact with the younger kids. When I was in seventh and eighth grade, Mondays were the best day of the week.”

In addition to understanding and providing that which youth value, we can help boost youth participation by understanding what motivates parents, and using that to create and market programs they value. Youth commonly report that parents encouraged or “made” them join a particular program (Pearce & Larson, 2006). And parents often provide transportation, juggle family priorities and schedules, and cover associated costs to enable their children to participate (MN Youth Engagement Regional Forums, 2007). If they don’t value or know what a program offers, they are less likely to support their children’s participation in these ways. A recent study of Minnesota parents (Lochner et al., 2009) said they most value opportunities for their children to develop their interests and hobbies and keep busy. Parents are also looking for activities that:

- keep their children occupied and out of trouble;
- while building academic skills and relationships with positive peers;
- in safe environments, supervised by qualified adults (Lochner et al., 2009; Marczak, Dworkin, Skuza & Beyer, 2006; MN Youth Engagement Regional Forums, 2007).
Young people generally have more autonomy to choose activities in which they will participate as they enter adolescence. Participation rates for out-of-school programs drop overall at age 12 or 13, and remain low (Saito, 2006, 2009). This is troubling given that this is an age at which young people are developing important knowledge, attitudes, skills and habits that will impact their opportunities, choices, and experiences throughout youth and adulthood. We may need to work even harder to attract and hold the attention of youth as they get older. These youth tend to be attracted to opportunities for leadership, multiple options for participating, and opportunities to increase their academic success and workforce readiness (Harris, Valorose, Martin & Ishizaki, 2007).

In addition to understanding the motivations of program participants and parents, engaging those who are not participating requires understanding why they don’t. Following are among the most commonly reported barriers to participation:

- Parents and young people don’t know about programs that do exist.
- Programs are inaccessible due to times, locations or associated costs.
- Programs are perceived as disorganized, chaotic, or unproductive.
- Families and young people themselves have competing priorities, including work and care of other siblings at home.
- Young people prefer having unstructured time to just hang out with friends.
- Young people feel unwelcome by staff or uncomfortable with other participants.
- Programs don’t offer the kinds of activities that interest them.

Overcoming these barriers requires listening to and working with disconnected youth and their parents to create programs in which they can and want to participate. It also requires effectively marketing those opportunities so parents and young people know they exist and know how they can get involved (Blyth, 2006; Marczak et al., 2006; MN Youth Engagement Masters, 2008; MN Youth Engagement Regional Forums, 2007; Saito, 2006; Scales, Roehlpartment & Benson, 2009; Serido et al., 2006; Weiss et al., 2005).

**Passion**

Passionate engagement involves becoming engrossed in some activity. Doing the activity becomes rewarding in its own right, regardless of the outcome or external rewards like social approval, money or power (Nakamura, 2001; Weiss et al., 2005). This kind of engagement is marked by high levels of attention, concentration, enthusiasm and commitment. The latter can be seen in high levels of effort and persistence, as well as pride in success. When youth find an activity with which they engage in this way, Benson & Scales (2007) call it their “spark.” Nakamura (2001) calls it “vital engagement.” Csikszentmihalyi (1997) calls it “flow,” a state he and others assert we can find through any activity we find enjoyable, worth doing, and at which we can improve over time (Damon, 2008).

In a Search Institute study of 3,500 young people and 2,000 parents, the most commonly reported youth sparks, in order of the frequency with which they were reported are: creative arts; athletics; learning an academic subject (e.g. math, science or history); reading; helping others/volunteering;
spirituality/religion; a commitment to living in a specific way (e.g. with joy, passion, caring); animal welfare; and leading (Benson, 2008).

Lesson Learned: To create and sustain passion, effective practitioners identify and build on individual strengths, balancing work toward specific goals with having fun.

New Moon Magazine and its associated online communities aim to “provide respectful, creative, energetic and safe communities where girls explore, discover, create, grow and share their voices to make a positive difference in their lives and in the world” (New Moon Girls, 2009). The Girls’ Editorial Board (GEB) for the magazine, which is read by 8-12 year old girls around the world, meets every other week to go through stacks of articles, poems, stories and artwork submitted by readers, ultimately deciding what will appear in the bi-monthly publication. It’s hard work. And yet the girls say it is fun and exhilarating. Board members say a combination of building on their strengths, having fun and accomplishing something important keeps them coming back:

“You want it to be good for the readers... It’s really intense, and sometimes it gets frustrating... To have all that talking and soaking in at the same time is really exhilarating... Then at the end of the meeting you talk about what happened and then play a game, mainly to relieve the stress.”

“It’s not like if you were going to a teacher conference and listening to what you do wrong. New Moon celebrates what [we] do right...we do a little bit of discussion of what [went] wrong, and see how easily [we] can fix it.”

Benefits of Passion

People who are more psychologically engaged in an activity tend to learn more (Pearce & Larson, 2006), and not just in the activity about which they are passionate. Research has shown that young people who have identified a spark or passion are more likely than others to do well in school. In addition, youth say that pursuing their spark(s) has helped them learn new things outside of school, including skills that could help them in a career. They also reported higher levels of initiative, sense of purpose, desire to make a difference, and tended to be less driven by external rewards like fame, power, comfort and money (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975; Scales et al., 2010, 2009).

These outcomes can lead to social approval and increased attention from supportive adults, as well as the satisfaction of mastering challenges which, in turn, motivate ongoing learning and practice (Benson & Scales, 2007; Blyth, 2006; Csikszentmihalyi, 1975; Pearce & Larson, 2006). When they pursue an activity over a long period of time, young people often become integrated into a community of people who engage in that activity, providing extended opportunities for in-depth social connection and the development of social skills (Benson & Scales, 2007; Minnesota Youth Engagement Case Studies, 2008; Nakamura, 2001).
Young people who get a taste of these social and emotional benefits through the passionate pursuit of one activity often seek out additional activities that might offer similar benefits. This can lead to the ongoing pursuit of growth and meaningful connection in all aspects of their lives (Benson & Scales, 2007; Csikszentmihalyi, 1975).

Damon (2008) distinguishes between self-oriented passions (e.g. looking good, money, happiness), and those which reflect a sense of purpose beyond the self (family, career, academic achievement, faith, sports, arts, community service, political/social issues). Researchers agree (Benson, 2008; Csikszentmihalyi, 1997; Damon, 2008) that activities which enrich the common good are those most enriching for the individual, because they help us feel part of something greater than ourselves. A sense of purpose beyond one’s own self-interest has been found to build resilience in hard times, and to help young people control destructive impulses (Damon, 2008).

Young people feel best when doing something they want to do. And yet they feel better doing something because someone expects them to do it than doing something simply because they have nothing better to do. The latter produces negative emotions like boredom, fear and anxiety, which make it difficult to focus on external tasks. In response, we seek out “quick fix” stimulation from television and other passive activities, to distract us from this discomfort. This produces a self-perpetuating cycle of negative emotions that can be difficult to break. The positive emotions that accompany a state of flow, on the other hand, allow us to invest our attention and energy in whatever task we find worth doing, and reap the many benefits of doing so (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975).

**Dynamics with other “Rings”**

Passion breeds intrinsic motivation and commitment, which leads to more frequent and sustained participation (Benson & Scales, 2007; Blyth, 2006; Csikszentmihalyi, 1975, 1990, 1997; Pearce & Larson, 2006). Scales et al. (2010) suggest that youth voice and collective action are important to ensuring that youth passions don’t become self-centered or isolating, by offering opportunities for them to identify ways to use their passions to make the world a better place. As activities or programs become more important to them, youth are more likely to want to have a voice in how it is run or to work with adults through collective action to make it more satisfying for everyone (MN Youth Engagement Masters, 2008; MN Youth Engagement Regional Forums, 2007, 2008).

**Keys to Building Passion**

Csikszentmihalyi (1975, 1997) found that experiences are more likely to elicit passionate engagement when they offer clear goals, immediate feedback, and challenges for which success is within our grasp, and yet our capacities are stretched to achieve. As such, to remain engaged, we need opportunities to tackle increasingly difficult and complex challenges (Larson, Walker & Pearce, 2005; MN Youth Engagement Regional Forums, 2008; Nakamura, 2001; Pearce & Larson, 2006). Passive activities are needed for rest, and certainly can bring pleasure. What matters is having *enough* experiences of growth and achievement that we value (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975).
It often takes awhile for activities to produce enjoyment, making it difficult to get started and to sustain commitment even when we are passionate about an activity. External structure (e.g. set practice times, nudges from trusted others) can help get us started. As noted above, while emotions are most positive when we are doing something we want to do, we are generally happier doing something that moves us toward our goals than not. This is true even when we feel pressure from others to do it through, for example, rules that say I’ll get kicked off the team if I miss more than three practices (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975). We can prime intrinsic motivation by asking young people why an activity is enjoyable for them. This gets them thinking reflectively, which can help them uncover elements of the activity that give it meaning (e.g. a sense of accomplishment, purpose, growth, connection), making those benefits more salient and motivating. Adults sharing what they find enjoyable and meaningful about their own passions can help young people uncover theirs. Researching what drives other people whose passions we admire can do the same (Benson, 2008; Damon, 2008).

Lessons Learned: Passion leads to ongoing growth, which further fuels passion and commitment.

The Duluth East High School Nordic Ski teams have won 9 state championships in the past 12 years (boys and girls teams combined). What’s their secret? According to participants, they win because the coaches don’t focus on winning. Instead, they focus on developing a love for skiing and help skiers achieve individual goals. The satisfaction of getting better at doing something difficult builds passion and commitment, which ultimately helps them win. The joy of winning becomes icing on top of an already sweet and satisfying cake. Participants said:

“The coaching staff at East is far superior to any other coach in the city. . . They are really good with . . . making sure everyone enjoys it. . . They’ll make you a training plan that you can follow. . . It’s incredibly hard, but then there’s a great satisfaction that you get from doing that incredibly hard task. . . East has a prestige when it comes to skiing. We’re good, and it’s fun to do well. You know the coaches are going to do their best to help you do well. . . . That keeps me coming back.”

Scales et al. (2010) highlight the importance of authentic relationships for helping young people identify and develop their passions, and vice versa. They found that 15-year-olds who have meaningful relationships with caring adults are more likely to have a strong passion or “spark.” Adults offer opportunities and encouragement for young people to develop their passions. At the same time, adults are drawn to teens with sparks. And yet they found that fewer than half of 15-year-olds who had identified a spark said that someone outside of their family has helped them identify and develop their passion (Scales et al., 2009, 2010). This suggests an opportunity for teachers, school staff, youth workers, religious leaders and others who work with youth to provide this support. They suggest introducing youth to new interests and issues, while helping them prioritize and focus. This helps young people keep their options open, giving them a chance to find the passions they care about most, without getting overwhelmed or discouraged at trying to do too many things. Study participants said the most common way adults help them nurture their sparks is through support and encouragement, though two
thirds also said people help by providing transportation, helping financially, and attending performances, games or events (Scales et al., 2009).

Sharing flow experiences with others can be particularly rewarding, offering benefits of moving toward goals while building relationships that are enjoyable and beneficial in their own right. Shared flow requires that people have compatible goals and ideas about acceptable behavior, and are willing to invest energy in helping each other achieve goals. Again, this reinforces the importance of authentic relationships in creating shared flow experiences (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975).

Program features identified as critical to creating passion, spark and flow overlap substantially with program features found to produce general positive youth development outcomes (Connell, Gambone & Smith, 2000; Eccles & Gootman, 2002). They include:

- balance of freedom and structure;
- opportunities to socialize with peers;
- opportunities to choose specific activities as well as modes and levels of participation;
- cultural relevance, a personal connection to a shared ideal or cause;
- interactive/experiential learning;
- opportunities to identify and create individualized plans to develop one’s own strengths and interests;
- opportunities to experience autonomy, mastery, empowerment, leadership;
- opportunities to make meaningful contributions in the real world; and
- opportunities to experiment with and reflect upon one’s sense of who I am and who I want to be as an individual, as a member of a group, and as a member of the community at large (Akiva, 2007; MN Youth Engagement Masters, 2008; MN Youth Engagement Regional Forums, 2008; Pearce & Larson, 2006; Smith, Akiva, Arrieux & Jones, 2006; J. Walker, 2006; Weiss et al., 2005).

**Voice**

Voice refers to opportunities for youth to express their ideas and have input into programs, policies and practices that affect them. While youth do not have decision-making authority in this type of engagement, they have authentic input. This means they have the power to influence programs and policies by sharing new perspectives, information and/or making a persuasive case to adults who truly consider their ideas as they make decisions.

Youth find opportunities to voice their ideas and have input into programs and policies in a variety of ways, including: youth media (e.g. print, broadcast, internet, film); advisory boards; political advocacy; participating in surveys, interviews and focus groups; promoting ideas/products/services they value to other youth; and boycotting those they don’t value.

**Benefits of Voice**

Youth voice benefits organizations, communities and the young people they serve.
When youth have a voice in the development of programs and activities, they help create programs in which they and other youth like them are more likely to participate (Boyt & Skelton, 1997; Pittman et al., 2007; Saito, 2006; Smith et al., 2006; J. Walker, 2006).

In addition to helping ensure that programs are relevant and attractive to participants, youth voice presents opportunities for youth to gain new knowledge and skills. For example, youth learn about the structure and politics of organizations and institutions as they figure out how to effectively promote their interests within them. They can also develop problem-solving, communication and advocacy skills. Beyond direct learning from these experiences, youth who express their voice tend to do better overall in terms of academic achievement (Kahn & Westheimer, 2004; Zeldin Camino et al., 2007).

Along the way, youth develop a sense of efficacy and agency, coming to see themselves as people who can and do make organizations and communities better places. This in turn can motivate them to continue to try to make organizations and communities better places for all (Kahn & Westheimer, 2004; Pearce & Larson, 2006; Zimmerman & Campillo, 2003). Flanagan et al. (2010) found that when they were encouraged to voice their views in schools, students were more likely to act on behalf of a greater good beyond their direct self interest. For example, they were more likely to speak up if a peer was talking about doing something dangerous at school. In addition, they felt a sense of solidarity and a personal sense of acceptance in their schools.

When diverse youth voice their ideas and perspectives in the policy arena, it helps align the public agenda with the interests and concerns of a broader citizenry. It also enhances the likelihood that youth-oriented policies will achieve their intended outcomes, because they are based on an understanding of the interests, values and motivations of those they are intended to serve (Boyt & Skelton, 1997; Noguera & Cannella, 2006). Along the way, when youth have authentic opportunities to share their ideas, adults begin to appreciate their insights, wisdom and commitment, counteracting common adult perceptions that today’s youth are academically lazy, prone to crime and violence, and uninterested in anything beyond themselves (Noguera & Cannella, 2006). This makes it more likely that adults will continue to create new opportunities for youth to engage in this way.

Many in the field, including those supporting the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, assert that youth have a fundamental right to a voice in policies, programs and practices that affect them and their communities (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2006; Hart, 1992; MN Youth Engagement Masters, 2008).

Dynamics with other “Rings”

Youth input into programming can enhance opportunities to build participation and passion, by ensuring that programs are relevant and enticing to the people they want to attract. It also gives young people a sense of ownership, which can increase passion and commitment. The dialogue between youth and adults required for authentic voice can help each begin to understand and appreciate the other’s perspectives, wisdom and other strengths, which can help foster the respect and trust required for collective action (MN Youth Engagement Masters, 2008; MN Youth Engagement Regional Forums, 2007, 2008).
Lessons Learned: Youth voice builds passion and commitment; which can also lead to more frequent and sustained participation.

The Garage has regular “pizza parties” where all participants are invited to give input into programming. When asked how having a voice affects participants’ experience in the program, a teenager on staff said, “[When] people can express themselves and just be part of something, it’s a really big deal. . . . There’s plenty of places where they ask your opinion, but when it comes right down to it, they might not use it, they might not really care. They just want you to think they are listening. . . . When people see a cause and effect, something happening with their idea, it gives them a lot of passion for it.”

One participant in the Nobles County Integration Collaborative said, “Everybody has their own things they like to do. If you don’t have a chance to say what you like to do or things you’d like to see changed, you kind of get bored with being in that group.” Another added that having a voice also builds a sense of efficacy she brings to other parts of her life. “Being involved here and having a say in whatever goes on,” she said, “leads to like your adult life, whether you’re involved in who’s going to be president, and voting. . . . It helps you understand that what you say does count, and that you can influence someone else’s decision.”

Keys to Building Youth Voice

Opportunities to voice their ideas must be authentic if youth are going to continue to offer input. It is important that programs not engage just a few token youth in this way, but rather engage enough diverse youth to meaningfully represent the perspectives and needs of the many youth they serve. At the same time, adults must truly listen to and value the wisdom that young people bring, integrating it into their own thinking and using it to guide their decisions. (Hart, 1992; MN Youth Engagement Case Studies, 2008; Noguera & Cannella, 2006; Pittman et al., 2007; Serido et al., 2008; W. K. Kellogg Foundation, 2007; Zeldin, Camino et al., 2007). Reporting back to young people how their ideas were incorporated into policies and programs can help them see their voice did have an impact. If youth ideas were not used, reporting back is equally important, to make sure they know why they weren’t used. This is one way young people learn about things like budget constraints and political ramifications that impact organizational decisions (MN Youth Engagement Case Studies, 2008).

Again, Scales et al. (2010) highlight the importance of authentic youth/adult relationships to foster youth voice. They found only 55% of 15-year-olds scored high on comfort expressing their ideas to adults. And yet teens who have a strong web of relationships with adults were more likely to feel comfortable expressing their ideas and were more likely to believe they can help solve community problems.

Adults need to develop unique perspectives and capacities to provide impactful opportunities for youth voice. They include:

- active listening;
Lesson Learned: Formal infrastructure to support youth voice helps to ensure it happens consistently.

Eric Billiet, Executive Director at The Garage says he is working to build an infrastructure to ensure that youth consistently have a voice in all the organization does. "We make sure that at least once a month any young person who comes after school is invited to a pizza party. They meet in small groups with staff, they talk about what’s going well, needs in the community, things The Garage can address. . . We also have a monthly meeting for musicians and music fans who come to weekend concerts . . . We’ll talk about policy as it relates to performing, we’ll talk about music industry issues, maybe have a guest speaker. . . There’s also a volunteer team, anyone can join that. You volunteer, you attend staff meetings and from that group you can get hired as paid staff.

Members of the booking team, the planning team and the volunteer team . . . all meet once a month. The first month is a work session, to address different issues [that arise in the bigger meetings with all participants]. Then the second month, they sit down with the mayor, a couple of police officers, the county often has someone from corrections. [If there are issues] young people see in the community that The Garage can’t address, well maybe the mayor’s office can. Or the mayor brings something to the group, and the planning team takes that down, maybe kids will want to be involved in that. . . The ability to have feedback is at all the levels. That’s the structure. You may come in once a week after school, once a month, but if you have something to say, you have an opportunity to say it.”

Collective Action

When youth and adults partner to achieve common goals, sharing power and authority to make decisions along the way, we call it Collective Action. Watts & Flanagan (2007) distinguish between two distinct types of youth/adult partnerships for collective action, based on the breadth of decision-making power youth and adults share. The first seems to be more common than the second.
In the first type of collective action, young people have clearly defined authority to shape policy and make decisions within current systems (e.g. setting editorial guidelines and making editorial decisions for a youth magazine; or identifying goals, setting criteria and awarding a subset of a foundation’s grants to youth programs).

In the second, youth and adults share power to change or create new systems. This happens when youth and adults share decision making authority for overall governance of an organization or when they organize together to make things happen in the broader community. Youth and adults partner in this way to achieve a wide range of goals, for example: creating and running new programs to attract previously disengaged youth (MN Youth Engagement Case Studies, 2008; K. Walker, 2011); reducing youth violence (Wheeler, Sullivan & Saito, 2011); strengthening the power of student councils (Kirshner, 2009); and advocating for increased funding to youth programs in underserved areas (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2006).

For some, the term “collective” is associated with forgoing individual responsibility and rights in support of the collective. We use the term collective action here to represent a process of developing and sharing one’s own perspectives, passions and skills while working in collaboration with others to achieve shared goals. This includes thinking critically and asserting one’s own rights and responsibility to disagree with the group; as well as speaking and acting independently from the group when the group’s beliefs and values do not align one’s own.

Benefits of Collective Action

Shared decision making has been shown to increase youth and adults’ commitment to and learning from experiences in organizations and communities (Innovation Center & National 4-H, 2003; O’Donoghue, Kirschner & McLaughlin, 2002). For some it has been shown to increase commitment to school and college (Larson et al., 2005). Perhaps its greatest benefit, however, comes from a shift in focus away from individual outcomes to developing a group’s capacity to reach shared goals, what Watts & Flanagan (2007) call “collective human development” (p. 784).

Participants develop skills for collaborative goal setting, decision-making, planning and implementation, competencies they often carry into other parts of their lives (Larson et al., 2005; Zeldin, 2004; Zeldin, Camino et al., 2007)

They learn to co-construct ideas through research, dialogue and critical thinking, negotiating the development of individual beliefs and values within, and yet still independent from those of the group (Noguera & Cannella, 2006).

Youth and adults build relationships of mutual respect as they work in partnership. In addition to offering emotional support, these relationships can open other doors in the community for young people, as adults offer to write college recommendations, connect them with job and internships, scholarships, and other opportunities (Zeldin, 2004).
As youth and adults affect tangible change in the community together, they develop a collective identity, collective efficacy and collective agency (Ginwright and Cammarota, 2006; Kirshner, 2009; K. Walker, 2011). They come to see their own self interest as tied to the common good and recognize that together we can accomplish more than any of us can accomplish on our own (Kahn & Westheimer, 2004; Kirshner, 2009; Larson et al., 2005; Pearce & Larson, 2006; Watts & Flanagan, 2007; Wheeler et al., 2011). Within this sense of collective agency, adults come to perceive youth as crucial contributors to organizations and communities (Innovation Center & National 4-H, 2003; Zeldin, 2004).

Collaborative attitudes and skills like those outlined above have been touted as particularly important for citizens, workers and leaders to achieve their goals in the rapidly changing, multicultural world of the 21st century (Appiah, 2006; Gastil & Keith, 2005; Heifetz & Laurie, 1999; Levine, 2007; W. K. Kellogg Foundation, 2007; Youniss et al., 2002).

Lessons Learned: Youth empowerment does not mean turning over all the power to young people. In collective leadership, youth and adults share power and benefit from each other’s guidance and expertise.

“The tendency is to think [youth empowerment] means adults have to slowly disappear . . . [But what it really] means is we are committed to be in relationship together . . . not necessarily with the young people in front or behind, but alongside of us. . . . It goes back to the basic concept of embracing each other’s humanity. I don’t care if it’s ageism or racism or sexism or whatever ‘isms’ we tend to be controlled by . . . how do we transcend that and embrace each other’s humanity that that person has value, that person has a right to walk next to me?

“. . . We have to really learn how to move out of the way, just giving space as young people develop their own ways of doing things, to allow them to do it. . . . That’s the call. . . . to learn how to navigate . . . the ‘white water’ of that transition of power taking, and stay in the struggle and in the discussion versus saying ‘Okay, if you’re going to take it then I’m just going to leave. Bye. You do it your way and I have no part in it.’ But no, let’s stay in there. Let’s wrassle with this thing. . . Are you willing to take that risk with young people and welcome them into that space, walking and navigating all that stuff together?”

Ed Irwin, Executive Director, Nia-Imani Youth and Family Development Center, Kwanzaa Community Church

Nationally, there is a trend toward facilitating collective action to change systems (e.g. schools, government, media) among youth who have disengaged because those systems and whatever opportunities for engagement they produce do not reflect their values or meet their needs (Kirshner, 2009). Scales et al. (2010) found that African American and Hispanic/Latino 15-year-olds were more likely than their white peers to think it’s important to correct social inequalities, be a community leader, help the poor, and improve race relations. Collective action offers a way for alienated youth to help create a community in which they want to engage (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2006; Kahn & Westheimer, 2004; Pittman et al., 2007; Search Institute, 2005; Watts & Flanagan, 2007; Wheeler, 2007 a&b).
As noted earlier in this paper, *participation* builds social trust. And yet social trust is also precursor to participation (Flanagan, 2003). Collective action may provide a way for disengaged youth and adults to build trusting relationships within a group while helping to create or shape systems they can trust and in which they want to participate. Putnam (2003) asserts that the social capital built through such endeavors represents “not a comfortable alternative to social conflict, but a way of making controversy productive” (p. 3).

When they work together to grapple with and address environmental, social and political issues, youth and adults develop critical social consciousness. They learn how to analyze social and political power dynamics and to identify, develop and mobilize community resources to solve real-world problems (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2006; Kahn & Westheimer, 2004; Kirshner, 2006; Larson & Hansen, 2005; Pittman, Martin & Williams, 2007; Search Institute, 2005; Watts & Flanagan, 2007). Along the way, they try on new civic identities, new ideas about who they are, who they can be and who they want to be in relation to a community beyond family and friends (Kirshner, 2009; Watts & Flanagan, 2007; Wheeler et al., 2011; Youniss & Yates, 1997).

Past research has shown those who are engaged in this way during adolescence come to feel connected to a broader community, and to see themselves as the type of person who can and does contribute to the greater good of the community. This makes them more likely to continue to do so throughout youth and adulthood (Colby & Damon, 1992; Haste, 2003, 2004; Kahn & Westheimer, 2003; Pittman et al., 2007; Watts & Flanagan, 2007; Youniss & Hart, 2005; Youniss et al., 2002 Youniss & Yates, 1997).

As people of all age, cultural and socioeconomic groups come to believe they can help shape organizations, communities and society, and actually have opportunities to do so, these institutions will come to more closely reflect the values and meet the needs of all their members (Sirianni and Friedland, 2001; Verba, Schlozman & Brady, 1995; Zeldin, Camino et al., 2007).

*Dynamics with other “Rings”*

In Minneapolis, youth and adults work together in *collective action* to: map and market existing youth programs while advocating for, and sometimes creating programs that are relevant and enticing to diverse youth; ultimately building *participation and passion* (Walker, 2011). Shared decisionmaking has also been shown to enhance young people’s *passion* and commitment to the work of an organization (Larson et al., 2005; MN Youth Engagement Case Studies, 2008). Internationally, youth and adults are working together in collective action to generate support for the United Nations. Convention on the Rights of the Child, which asserts all young people have a right to have a *voice* in programs and policies that affect them (UNICEF, 2008). Others are working together to create more opportunities for student *voice* in policies at their schools. One participant in such an initiative said she first got involved by *participating* in a hip hop workshop, only to find herself intrigued by and eventually *passionate* about opportunities the program offered for collective action (Kirshner, 2009).
Keys to Building Collective Action

Collective action requires youth and adults to be open to new ideas about their roles and relationships in order to collaborate in ways that fully capitalize on the strengths of each individual to achieve shared goals (Search Institute, 2005; Watts & Flanagan, 2007; Wheeler, 2007a&b). It requires participants to develop skills for facilitating collective goal setting, planning, evaluation and decision-making to ensure that collective decisions and actions in fact reflect the values, desires and needs of all participants (Larson et al., 2005; Noguera & Cannella, 2006; W. K. Kellogg Foundation, 2007). A critical aspect of this process is openly discussing and coming to a shared agreement about who has authority and responsibility to make what decisions and to get what done, with youth and adults holding each other accountable for commitments (MN Youth Engagement Case Studies, 2008; MN Youth Engagement Masters, 2008; MN Youth Engagement Regional Forums, 2008; Pittman et al., 2007; W. K. Kellogg Foundation, 2007).

Lessons Learned: Youth and adults in collective action see their work changing individuals, organizations and society.

The eight- to twelve-year-old members of the New Moon Magazine Girls’ Editorial Board (GEB) believe their having authority to decide what goes into the magazine keeps it fresh and relevant to its readers, who are girls like them. One member asserted, “Young people come up with better ideas because we are more creative and we don’t automatically think, ‘Oh, that’s not possible.’ . . . The adults are able to do things we aren’t able to do because of our age. . . like the publishing, contacting other companies and other stuff like that. That’s really important, but the GEB girls’ job is really important, too.” When asked how being on the editorial board has affected her, one member said, “It makes me feel good and powerful.”

In addition to making a difference in their own lives and in the magazine, these girls see their work impacting society at large. For example, one board member said, “[The magazine] talks about stereotypes. And if people read about that in New Moon, they might start thinking, ‘Oh maybe that wasn’t really true, or I think I should stop stereotyping those people’. . . Those things might seem kind of small, but they actually might make a big difference.” Another added, “Our Letters to Congress issue, it was about girls writing their opinions to Congress. And Congress I think is paying more attention to younger people’s ideas because [of that].”

To achieve the sustained commitment this kind of engagement requires, youth and adults must identify issues about which they have a deep, shared interest, connecting larger organizational and societal issues to those that affect their daily lives. Some of the issues youth and adults commonly partner to affect include school reform, environmental issues and youth violence. These issues provide a vehicle for youth and adults to partner in changing broad-based attitudes, behaviors and policies in which youth and adults each have a clear vested interest. And each brings unique knowledge and connections to the partnership, making the whole greater than the sum of its parts. For example, youth understand youth culture and have influence with other youth related to these issues that adults simply do not. At the
same time, adults have access to other adults, including those within systems that affect these issues. It is important to help individuals identify their own strengths, interests and needs, in order to connect them with opportunities to continually grow and develop in ways that are important to them, which also contribute to their value in the group (MN Youth Engagement Masters, 2008; W. K. Kellogg Foundation, 2007).

Lesson learned: Collective action takes time. And it’s worth it.

“We right now we have one group that’s kind of floundering, they don’t know what direction they want to go and it’s taking a long time to get there. It’s really easy to . . . say ‘you guys are taking too long. [The adults] are just going to plan something and you guys go along with it.’ The problem is then they drop out and quit coming. So they are wrestling through it, and I think they’ve finally come to what I think is going to be their next project. They want to plan some college visits and invite students from the six school districts to sign up to go. . . Then they want to host an opportunity fair in May, with job opportunities, college opportunities and enrichment opportunities. . .

“We want youth to feel that their talents are valued, that their voice is heard, that we . . . collaborate together and decide how it is going to go. . . Sometimes it takes a little longer. . . but the end result is so much better. The quality is better. And the enthusiasm and the passion is there if we allow that process to take place.”

Sharon Johnson, Executive Director, Nobles County Integration Collaborative

If they are to affect meaningful change, those involved in collective action must deepen their understanding of the root causes of issues, the cultural and political dynamics that sustain problems, and what it takes to affect meaningful short- and long-term environmental, political and social change (Pittman et al., 2007; Search Institute, 2005; W. K. Kellogg Foundation, 2007; Watts & Flanagan, 2007). To do this, they must be in relationship over a long period of time, intentionally seeking out diverse perspectives, questioning assumptions, and pushing boundaries of current thought and practice. They must come together in ways that allow groups to heal wounds that have divided them in the past. This fuels meaningful dialogue, reflection and learning which continually build the group’s capacity to develop and implement innovative, sustainable solutions, and adapt to constantly changing dynamics as their work progresses (Aguilar-San Juan, 2006; W. K. Kellogg Foundation, 2007; Wheeler, 2009).

Activities for Engaging Youth

Search Institute (2005) provides a helpful model delineating types of activities through which organizations and communities engage youth. They include: service/service learning; leadership (in which young people influence or organize others to accomplish a mission, task or objectives); decision-making; philanthropy; civic and political engagement (contributing to charities, electoral activities, political voice); organizing (altering power relations and creating meaningful institutional change); and
Lessons Learned: Having a range of youth engagement opportunities available within a program allows young people to find opportunities as they are ready for them.

At The Garage, people of all ages come together to create and run programs that meet the needs of participants. Executive Director Eric Billiet says they try to create opportunities for young people to engage at a variety of levels,

“To come and sit and enjoy it as a sanctuary, where you can be around other people and not be judged, to express yourself in a community and be accepted for who you are, that’s very important. But maybe you want to be in a dance class, and you want [me] and my [age diverse] staff to develop and find people who can teach a dance class. Or maybe you want to teach a dance class, and we’re going to try to find the resources to help you do that. . . It’s just where you’re comfortable, where your desire is, and where your abilities are at the moment to jump into that and maybe grow in it.”
Youth Engagement Practice in Minnesota

Practitioners attending the regional forums and practitioner discussions we conducted throughout Minnesota agreed that all four of the types of youth engagement in our model are important. The vast majority rated all types as a 3 or 4 on a four-point scale in which a score of 1 indicated that type of engagement is not important and 4 indicated it is very important.

As seen in Figure 2, there was greater variation in the degree to which practitioners said each type of engagement describes their current work.

**Figure 2.** The percentage of practitioners rating each type of engagement with a 3 or 4, on a four-point Likert scale in which: 1 indicates this type is not important and 4 indicates it is very important; and 1 indicates this type does not describe current work at all and 4 indicates it describes current work very well.

This mirrors the observation of a scholar who recently studied the youth development culture in Minnesota. Aguilar-San Juan (2006) found Minnesota to be in a transitional stage, focused on youth service and youth development that is top-down and service-oriented, with youth-centered approaches not yet “clearly articulated, or firmly rooted here” (p. 247).

In facilitated discussions, regional forum participants shared ideas about what it takes to do each of these types of youth engagement well, with the group doing its own theme analysis along the way. We then presented a synthesis of what the literature identifies as critical elements for successful youth engagement, much of which is presented in this paper. In all of the forums, there was little if anything in the literature that the group hadn’t identified as critical elements in their own discussions.

This suggests that in addition to agreeing that all these types of youth engagement are important, practitioners know what it takes to make them happen. Therefore something else is getting in the way. When asked about barriers, practitioners in the regional forums, statewide practitioner discussions and case study sites identified a lack of understanding and support related to youth engagement within their...
organizations and communities, including funding, policy and parental support. When asked what is needed to overcome those barriers, practitioner responses focused on three areas:

- outcomes research and communications tools to help them generate awareness, demand and support among funders, policymakers, youth development professionals, youth and adult participants, and parents;
- sharing best practices through tools, training, coaching and networking opportunities for youth and adult practitioners; and
- other community/statewide infrastructure, such as:
  - opportunities for practitioner/funder dialogue;
  - statewide assessment of resources and gaps to encourage collaboration and to focus resources where they are needed most;
  - collaborative development and distribution of new funding resources;
  - coordinated advocacy efforts.

Again, this parallels what the literature says is needed if we are to use what we know to expand and deepen youth engagement practice.

**Building A Fully Engaged Community**

The four rings in our model, each representing a different type of youth engagement, are embedded within a fifth ring that is critical if young people are to have access to all these types of opportunities as they continue to grow and thrive. This fifth ring represents what Watts and Flanagan (2007) call “opportunity structures” (p. 786), integrated networks of people, places and programs that work together to create opportunities and connect youth to those opportunities. This requires a broad base of stakeholders to make youth engagement a priority within their organizations and to create relationships across organizations through which adults and peers help youth identify and access opportunities that meet their multi-faceted needs throughout their development (MN Youth Engagement Masters, 2008; J. Walker, 2006; Watts & Flanagan, 2007; Weiss et al., 2005; Zeldin, 2004; Zeldin, Camino et al., 2007). This kind of collaboration allows an individual program to focus on providing the kinds of opportunities it is best suited to providing, while connecting youth with other appropriate opportunities as needed. It allows the powerful dynamics among the four types of youth engagement to work their magic, with each type of youth engagement and each specific youth engagement opportunity supporting and benefiting from the others.
Lessons Learned: A Collaborative Community Opens Doors

Sharon Johnson, Executive Director of the Nobles County Integration Collaborative says that for sustainability you need “an openness in the community to receive the students as leaders . . . letting a youth actually come to present to a service club instead of an adult, having churches open to having a drama group come and perform.” This openness was intentionally orchestrated by the director of community education in the Nobles County. “He’s been in that role for 20 plus years and he has fostered collaboration . . . Not just, ‘oh we have this grant, let’s collaborate for 18 months and then when it’s over we’ll go back to doing our own thing.’ For sustainability, we collaborate long term. . . Currently, two of our staff members serve on the [county’s Healthy Communities Healthy Youth coalition] . . . We have information to share, but we also like to go because we hear what’s going on in the community. [We find out] what’s going on at the Y, ‘oh the Y needs volunteers? Well we have kids looking for community engagement.’”

Building Collaborative Organizational Infrastructure

Those who have created new opportunity structures for youth engagement within organizations say it is important to involve people from throughout the organization in visioning and planning, creating shared ownership as people work together to figure out ways in which youth engagement can help the organization achieve core goals. Developing and broadly articulating the organization’s philosophy of youth engagement – what it is, why it’s important, what it means to do it well – helps people within the organization consider ways they can engage youth to help them meet their own goals, while furthering the organization’s broader mission.

From there, it is important to provide opportunities for individuals with similar interests related to youth engagement to find each other, identify shared goals and develop strategies for achieving them. In this way, small groups throughout the organization can begin to operationalize the philosophy, developing specific opportunities for youth engagement within their own spheres of influence. These smaller operating groups can then come back together to identify things they might do together to enhance their individual efforts. For example, they might collaborate to offer: training and ongoing coaching for youth and adult leaders; process-based support to help participants evaluate and improve practice as they go; and opportunities to share learning and celebrate success across the organization (Jones, Byer & Zeldin, 2008; MN Youth Engagement Masters, 2008; Pittman et al., 2007; W.K. Kellogg Foundation, 2007; Zeldin, Petrokubi & MacNeil, 2007).

Sustaining youth engagement efforts requires organizations to create mechanisms for ongoing recruiting and development of participants. Since young people are constantly growing up, they are constantly growing out of some youth engagement roles. This means organizations need to constantly get new young people in the door and, ideally, develop a range of roles that enable young people to continue to participate as they grow and develop (Jones et al, 2008; MN Youth Engagement Masters, 2008; Pittman et al., 2007; W.K. Kellogg Foundation, 2007; Zeldin, Petrokubi et al., 2007). Young adult
staff are critical to the success of some programs, providing “near peer” mentors that younger participants can easily relate to, and providing bridging roles for participants to grow into as they are ready for new challenges and opportunities (MN Youth Engagement Case Studies, 2008).

**Building Collaborative Community Infrastructure**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lesson Learned: Youth and adults learn through experience how to engage with each other.</th>
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<tr>
<td>Successful youth engagement practitioners often talk of learning to do the “dance” of youth engagement. Ed Irwin, Executive Director, Nia-Imani Youth and Family Development Center, Kwanzaa Community Church, said “It’s not something I could have learned in a textbook. It’s just negotiating that dance of shifting voice and power and leadership . . . It takes both partners . . . There are probably things we all could agree we teach . . . but the dance is kind of like . . . being an artist. Anyone can learn to draw, it’s a technique. But to be an artist is about expression, it’s taking that technique to the next level . . . We need to be able to teach the technique, but how do we become the artist in doing that work?”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Eric Billiet, Executive Director, The Garage, responded, building on the dance metaphor, “When [a staff person or volunteer of any age] is newer to a role, you maybe have to lead a little bit more, teach them basic parameters, try a dip here and there. Then, as they mature in the program and get practice, then they can become more of the leader in the dance. Developmentally in programs, we have different levels of opportunity for practicing different levels of responsibility and commitment, not a one size fits all.”</td>
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Building effective collaborations for youth engagement among organizations requires many of the same strategies as building infrastructure within organizations. Those who have done this effectively highlight the importance of inviting a broad base of stakeholders to create a shared vision of an engaging community for youth, always providing opportunities for new members to infuse their ideas so the vision evolves with the group (Pittman et al., 2007; W.K. Kellogg Foundation, 2007). They recommend starting with individuals and organizations who are already interested and invested in furthering youth engagement, facilitating processes through which they can identify goals more easily achieved together than any one organization can accomplish on its own (W.K. Kellogg Foundation, 2007; Zeldin, Camino et al., 2007). These shared goals often include providing a full range of youth engagement opportunities in the community; creating shared mechanisms to recruit youth and adult participants; providing training/coaching for youth and adult participants; research and evaluation; identifying, creating, coordinating and accessing funding sources; and communication efforts to expand and deepen support for youth engagement in the community (W. K. Kellogg Foundation, 2007; Pittman et al., 2007; Zeldin, Camino et al., 2007).
Lessons Learned: Building support for a full range of youth engagement opportunities requires framing the benefits in terms that others understand.

It can be difficult to communicate what collective leadership is to a community that is “program” oriented. What The Garage offers is really a process, says Executive Director Eric Billiet. “The programs are what come out of the process, the young people’s programs.” He has found that it helps to learn the language of key stakeholders, communicating program benefits in terms they understand. “Everyone wants young people to be successful,” Billiet says. “Nobody goes out saying ‘I hope kids go to jail today’ or ‘we could use more teen pregnancies.’ . . . How do you reach them at that point, even if they come from different philosophical or political ideologies?” For example, because many of stakeholders for The Garage are committed to making the community safer, he shows them that “by getting people involved in this way . . . our community is safer.” He said it is also important to evaluate programs based on things stakeholders care about.

“Present it with facts and support that with stories, where you have people saying ‘Your funding changed my life in this way,’” he said. “That’s very powerful. Usually there’s tears. And then there’s more money.”

*Eric Billiet, Executive Director, The Garage*

In addition to active collaborators, it is important to invite the participation of people and organizations that have the power to support or thwart efforts of the collaborative but are not likely to become directly involved. Their power can be formal, as with a mayor or city councilperson; or informal, as with someone who is known, trusted and therefore influential to others who might participate. The network can connect with these stakeholders through one-on-one or group meetings to identify shared interests and specific ways they can meaningfully support the network. Shared interests for these stakeholders are often ends for which youth engagement is a means, such as workforce development or reducing recidivism in the juvenile justice system. Intentional efforts to connect the work to other organizations and ongoing initiatives with a stake in community change will help to make it sustainable, while ultimately expanding opportunities for meaningful youth participation (Pittman et al., 2007).

**Communication**

Collaborative networks are made up of relationships. And effective communication is critical to initiating, building and sustaining any relationship. Those who have formed effective networks to
support youth engagement say this begins with crafting and disseminating a clearly stated purpose, goals and philosophies that help individuals and organizations immediately see how their interests are served by the work of the collaborative and how they can get involved (Pittman et al., 2007; W.K. Kellogg Foundation, 2007; Zeldin, Camino et al., 2007). Other fundamental communications roles include:

- keeping people within the network connected, up to date, inspired (often by seeing how their piece fits into a greater whole) and informed of available opportunities and resources;
- planting and nurturing seeds of interest among potential new network members;
- generating awareness of the network’s goals and successes among policy makers and the general public (e.g. potential youth/adult participants, parents) who may never directly participate within the network, but are critical to its success (W.K. Kellogg Foundation, 2007; Zeldin, Camino et al., 2007; Zeldin, Petrokubi et al., 2007).

Thriving networks say a key focus for their communication is on sharing successes in the form of research data and inspiring stories, within and outside the network (W.K. Kellogg Foundation, 2007; Wheeler, 2007a). They also stress the importance of encouraging members of the network to pass on communication to their networks, essentially creating a network of networks (W.K. Kellogg Foundation, 2007).

Network communication efforts offer rich opportunities for youth and adults to experience working together and learning from each other, writing letters to the editor, creating web sites, and speaking at forums and conferences (Pittman et al., 2007).

Research and Evaluation

Practitioners around the state commonly identified research and evaluation as critical to their success, and more easily accomplished as a network than by individual organizations (MN Youth Engagement Regional Forums, 2007, 2008). To promote quality youth engagement practice, youth engagement practitioners, researchers and policymakers agree that an array of research products and tools are needed to:

- document youth, organizational and community outcomes;
- identify and share best practices at program, organization and community levels;
- provide qualitative case studies that concretely show how best practices lead to outcomes, and what those outcomes mean in the lives of real youth;
- document frequency and time in programs required to achieve specific outcomes (MacNeil, 2006; MN Youth Engagement Regional Forums, 2007, 2008; MN Youth Engagement Masters, 2008; O'Donoghue et al., 2002; Weiss et al., 2005; Wheeler, 2007a; W.K. Kellogg Foundation, 2007; Zeldin, Camino et al., 2007; Zeldin, Petrokubi et al., 2007).

Youth can be engaged in this research and evaluation in many different ways, reflecting each of the rings of engagement. In doing so, youth, organizations and communities directly reap the all the benefits these types of engagement offer, even as we learn together how to more effectively engage more youth.
Youth can have input into or co-create research goals, design and methods. They can recruit study participants. They can conduct surveys, interviews and/or focus groups. They can observe youth and adults in program settings. Youth can participate, offer input and/or partner with adults in data analysis, interpretation and the reporting of results to stakeholders.

Participatory action research (PAR) is gaining popularity as a youth engagement strategy. In PAR, those directly affected by an issue engage as co-researchers to study that issue, building participants’ capacity to change conditions in their own lives (Brown & Rodriguez, 2009), including the availability, accessibility and quality of youth engagement opportunities (K. Walker, 2011).

Some argue youth have a right to participate in research that impacts them. And yet even for those who do not see it as a right, it is important to recognize ways in which, when done well, engaging youth participants in research about their experience of engagement will enhance the quality of the research. Based on their own participation in the programs and other experiences we seek to understand, youth have unique insight into how we can best study those experiences; and a unique ability to critically analyze what’s going on in them. This insider knowledge helps to ensure the validity of the research, the relevance of the findings to programs and, ultimately the relevance of programs to the youth they aim to serve (Rodriguez & Brown, 2009).

**Lesson Learned:** We must be sensitive to cultural differences about appropriate roles for young people.

Youth voice may be need to be framed differently to fit within different cultures. “In African American culture, kids have their roles. ‘This is grownup talk, y’all get to the back room,’” said Ed Irwin, Executive Director, Nia-Imani Youth and Family Development Center. “People in this country who come from a minority community may feel very marginalized if all of a sudden you’re telling their children . . . that they should have voice and opinions and be judgmental about things. It is really going against [a] cultural value. We have to be very sensitive to that. So voice to me has got to mean something different than just saying ‘talk back’ or argue with them.” He asserts that “we all agree that voice means [youth] are valued; that they’re worthwhile; they have opinions; they have a right to be here.”
Figure 3. *A matrix delineating benefits of each type of youth engagement, along with strategies for making them happen within programs and more broadly throughout communities.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participation</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Benefits/Outcomes</th>
<th>Boosting Youth Engagement Within Programs</th>
<th>Increasing Scale/Sustainability</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Young people participate in formal, informal and non-formal activities offering opportunities to connect with positive people and places; and challenges/supports that promote growth and development. | • Psychosocial development  
• Academic achievement  
• Physical fitness  
• Mastery of skills  
• Reduced risk-taking  
• Positive identity  
• Civic trust, participation  
• Gateway to other kinds of engagement | • Remove barriers (e.g. location, scheduling, cost, transportation, childcare, feeling unwelcome/uneasy)  
• Understand needs/wants of youth (e.g. have fun, time with friends, develop skills, build resume, accomplish something that matters) and parents (e.g. keeping children safe, building positive skills, positive relationships)  
• Effective marketing to youth/parents | A broad base of a community’s youth, program providers, parents and policymakers collaborate to:  
• identify what enhances and thwarts participation by diverse youth locally;  
• develop, implement and evaluate strategies to overcome barriers and increase participation, e.g.:  
  - communications campaign to promote benefits of and opportunities for participation;  
  - create new activities attractive to currently disengaged youth;  
  - create new transportation options;  
  - ongoing recruitment mechanisms. |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Passion</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Benefits/Outcomes</th>
<th>Boosting Youth Engagement Within Programs</th>
<th>Increasing Scale/Sustainability</th>
</tr>
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</table>
| Young people become engrossed in or passionate about something that matters. Marked by high levels of attention, enthusiasm, effort, persistence, and pride in success. | • Life satisfaction  
• Motivation for continued learning, practice, growth and development  
• Social approval, gateway to a supportive community  
• Contributions to social good  
• Academic achievement | • Social opportunities with peers  
• Authentic relationships with adults  
• Personal connection/cultural relevance  
• Clear goals, winnable challenges, immediate feedback  
• Identify, build on strengths  
• Opportunities for mastery, leadership, real-world contribution  
• Opportunities for personal reflection  
• Choices re: types/depth of participation | Youth, program providers, parents, policymakers collaborate to:  
• provide training, ongoing coaching for youth and adults to identify and develop their own and others’ passions to achieve individual and shared goals;  
• identify and tap passions among collaborators to develop, implement and evaluate strategies to increase opportunities for youth and adults throughout the community to identify and develop their passions. |
<table>
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<tr>
<th>Voice</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Benefits/Outcomes</th>
<th>Boosting Youth Engagement Within Programs</th>
<th>Increasing Scale/Sustainability</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Young people have opportunities to voice their ideas and have input into programs, policies and practices that affect them.</td>
<td>• Enhanced sense of efficacy/agency</td>
<td>• Authentic opportunities to be heard, have an impact</td>
<td>Youth, program providers, parents, policymakers together:</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Problem solving, communication, advocacy skills</td>
<td>• Avoid tokenism</td>
<td>• develop and communicate throughout programs and systems (e.g. schools, government, churches, media, businesses, healthcare, neighborhoods) a shared philosophy of youth voice, along with data and stories that support the rationale for that philosophy;</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Academic achievement</td>
<td>• Report back with impact of youth ideas on policy, practice</td>
<td>• create, evaluate and continually expand and deepen opportunities for youth voice throughout programs and systems;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Improved programs that get others participating, passionate</td>
<td>• Build new perspectives/skills for youth and adults</td>
<td>• provide training, coaching, ongoing support for youth and adults to make the most of opportunities for youth voice to enhance programs, systems and youth experiences within them.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Fulfills a fundamental human right</td>
<td>− Active listening</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Collective Action</td>
<td>Youth and adults share decision-making authority as they work together to a) achieve shared goals within systems; and/or b) change or create new systems.</td>
<td>• Positive civic identity</td>
<td>• Identify shared passions</td>
<td>A communitywide collaborative of youth and adults works together to achieve the goals listed above and also:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Sense of collective efficacy</td>
<td>• Broaden perspectives re: youth/adult roles, relationships</td>
<td>• Identify and collectively address other issues of shared concern (e.g. violence, academic achievement disparity).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Collaborative planning, decision-making, implementation skills</td>
<td>• Transparency about roles, authority, responsibilities</td>
<td>• Continually evaluate how all types of youth engagement work together to improve youth and community outcomes.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Critical social consciousness, analysis</td>
<td>• Develop and utilize collaborative processes, skills</td>
<td>• Continually share data, learning and success stories within and outside the collaborative through formal communitywide systems and informal communications</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Social/political change skills</td>
<td>• Develop knowledge/skills re: target issues and change processes</td>
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</table>
Discussion and Recommendations -- A Call to Collaborative Action

Minnesota youth development practitioners said they value all four types of youth engagement included in the Rings of Engagement model. They recognize that these types of youth engagement are interdependent. They know what they need to do to bring these ideas to life at a program level. Yet many say a lack of organization and community support keeps them from engaging with youth in all the ways they would like to. At the end of each regional forum, we asked participants to share a word describing how they were feeling as they got ready to go back to their organizations and programs. Many said they felt “inspired,” “energized” and “affirmed.” Others said they felt “overwhelmed” and “frustrated,” not knowing how they were going to overcome day-to-day barriers in their own organizations and communities.

To take what we know and make it real in programs and practice throughout the state will require what Wendy Wheeler (2009) calls “busting out,” which she describes as moving:

- from relying on our own strengths and whatever assets we can get our hands on to meet goals for our own work;
- to unleashing individual gifts and mobilizing community resources to contribute to a common purpose, the proliferation of quality youth engagement opportunities throughout the state.

Busting out moves us as a field away from a perspective Kirshner (2009) calls “atomism,” a belief that people are only motivated by their own interests and, as such, cannot be counted on to act on behalf of a common good. And it moves us toward “collective agency,” recognizing that individual challenges are linked to a broader social and political context, and believing that together we can address shared interests better than any of us can address them alone. Kirshner points out that collective agency is not based on selflessness, but on individuals seeking to contribute to and benefit from the common good.

A recommendations section for a paper like this one is commonly organized into sub-sections delineating strategies for certain groups, “what practitioners can do,” “what policymakers can do,” “what researchers can do,” and so on. Busting out means breaking down those boundaries to think in terms of “what we can all do together.” Members of each of these groups have unique assets they can bring to the table (e.g. perspectives, expertise, resources and connections). Individuals may also, however, have strengths that belie their membership in a particular group. Furthermore, what each individual and group contributes as an ingredient is rarely as nourishing on its own as it is in a hearty soup we have created and savor together.

At program, organization, community and statewide levels youth and adults must come together to:

- identify a shared vision, philosophy, framing and language for youth engagement;
- identify and create opportunities to build participation, passion, voice and collective action into programs, practice and organization and community cultures;
- identify needs, opportunities and barriers, then strategize ways to take advantage of opportunities and overcome barriers to meet the most pressing needs;
- develop and share training, coaching and other kinds of technical assistance;
• create communications tools that effectively articulate our shared philosophy and vision to diverse others, highlighting: what’s in it for them, for their programs, their organizations and their communities; as well as what they can do to help bring it to life.

Invite others to join the work, finding through dialogue meaningful roles they can play based on their interests, skills, connections and other resources they have to contribute.

Create and implement a plan to continually evaluate and reflect upon youth engagement efforts and outcomes, identifying strengths, challenges and ways to better achieve goals, revising approaches as needed.

Share learning and success stories to inspire youth and adults facing the challenges of ongoing engagement on a daily basis, and to pique the interest of those who are considering new ventures in youth/adult engagement.

Continually revisit the evolving work with new collaborators and supporters to ensure it continues to match the values and meet the needs of the collaborative.

This can start small, with a few like-minded people articulating a shared interest and commitment to do what can be done within current realities, while also strategizing how to “bust out,” bringing others into the work to address barriers and create new opportunities.

Role of a Statewide Youth Engagement Initiative

There are already partners committed to a statewide initiative to promote quality youth/adult engagement throughout Minnesota. They include Youth Community Connections, The Minnesota Alliance with Youth, the Youth Work Institute and the Youth Engagement Partnership, a collaborative of about a dozen key youth engagement organizations in the Twin Cities. There are two core ways this founding group can catalyze the collaborative work described above. The first involves strategic framing and communications. The second is collaborative learning and professional development.

Common Framing and Communications

A common philosophy, framing and language for youth engagement, a unified rallying cry, will be required to bust out in the ways described above. Because youth engagement is a critical mechanism through which youth programming can expand and deepen developmental outcomes, it makes sense to begin a conversation about framing with those who are already working together to promote overall quality youth development programs throughout the state.

For a broad base of stakeholders to see what’s in it for them, we must highlight benefits of youth engagement for communities as well as for individual youth. There are two kinds of community outcomes to tout, those that are a direct result of youth/adult efforts to improve organizations and communities; and secondary outcomes as youth and adults flourish developmentally and are better able to contribute as citizens, students, workers and leaders. The benefits of youth/adult engagement as outlined in this report and the recommended research below can help frame the value of youth
engagement, with specific messages tailored to pique the interest of a variety of audiences, helping them see what’s in it for them.

This framing can then be the basis for an integrated communications campaign, providing communications tools to stakeholders statewide that can be tailored to meet their specific outreach needs. This would include key messages and supporting content directed toward specific audiences (program providers, youth workers, policymakers, youth, parents), helping them understand how youth engagement can help them achieve their goals.

Framing participation, passion, voice and collective action as equally important and inter-rated elements of a single thriving organism is critical to creating opportunities for all youth to engage in all these ways, when they are ready and willing to do so. Because they are currently less prevalent, there is momentum in the youth development field building toward providing more opportunities for youth voice and collective action (Zeldin, Camino et al., 2007). Collaborative problem solving involving diverse groups is being touted as a critical skill for successful workers, citizens and leaders in the rapidly changing, multicultural world of the 21st century (Appiah, 2006; Gastil & Keith, 2005; Heifetz & Laurie, 1999; Levine, 2007; W. K. Kellogg Foundation, 2007; Youniss et al., 2002). This point has been boldly highlighted with the election of a community organizer as president of the United States. Concurrently, there is a call within the University of Minnesota and elsewhere to consider participating in the promotion of youth voice as a fundamental human right, as outlined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

And yet, with only half of young people in the state are participating in any organized youth program or activity outside of school, it is imperative not to focus on promoting voice and collective action in ways that suggest the other rings of engagement are less important. Most practitioners in Minnesota are currently focusing on ensuring that all young people have opportunities to participate, connect with positive people and places, and find a passion that breeds ongoing commitment to grow and develop through those connections. They say that not all young people are interested in or ready for opportunities for voice and collective action.

As discussed earlier, participation and passion offer unique and critical developmental benefits on their own as well as in combination with the other rings of engagement. Practitioners also know that it is often through opportunities to participate and find a passion that young people come to want to voice their own ideas and get involved in collective action. The “foot-in-the-door” technique is a fundamental strategy of persuasion. We must first get people in the door by offering low-cost, low-commitment ways to enter. Once they are in the door, have benefited from and enjoyed their first experiences, they are more likely to be open to and interested in broader and deeper opportunities that involve greater commitment. Even young people who are engaged in voice and/or collective action in one setting often look for other settings in which they can simply participate and/or follow a particular passion.

We need to catalyze and support the proliferation of all types of youth engagement opportunities if we are to meet young people, adults, organizations and communities where they are and build on their interests and capacities to enhance youth and community outcomes, as research clearly shows that all
four types of youth engagement can do. Those most interested in and ready for busting out can work together to break new ground, build collaborative infrastructure and share what they learn with others. Along the way, those focusing on developing opportunities for different kinds of quality youth engagement must collaborate to connect youth with whom they work to a full range of opportunities, helping them identify and access opportunities throughout the collaborative that make sense for them at a given time.

**Research and Evaluation**

The benefits of participation and passion and what it takes to effectively engage young people in these ways are well documented, as cited earlier in this paper. In the past few years, there has been an increase in research related to youth voice and youth/adult partnerships through collective action, and yet research related to contemporary practice of these types of engagement is still in early stages. The literature reports learning from small qualitative studies focusing on the experiences and outcomes of a small number of youth and adults in a few programs, and lays out theoretical models to guide future research (Kirshner, in press; Larson, 2000; Levine, 2007; Watts & Flanagan, 2007; Zeldin, Camino et al., 2007).

The youth development field and practitioners around the state agree that research is needed to inform practice and policy decisions if we are to create communities rich with all these types of youth engagement opportunities. “Busting out” means youth and adults working collaboratively at a program, organization, community and state level to:

- gather and synthesize existing research related to all types of engagement, sharing it in ways that facilitate using it to improve practice and make the case to those who can support them in that effort;
- develop, implement and share new qualitative and quantitative research to:
- learn more about youth who are not participating, with a focus on what attracts and keeps older youth engaged;
- understand interests of youth, parents, program providers and policymakers that can be addressed through each of these kinds of engagement, and barriers that must be overcome if they are to support it;
- document individual, organization and community outcomes produced by each type of engagement;
- document stories that bring to life the impact of these kinds of engagement in the lives of individual youth, adults, organizations and communities;
- identify best practices and indicators of quality youth engagement practice, *across a developmental spectrum*.
Using participatory action research methods for achieving a research agenda will open up new opportunities for all types of youth/adult engagement, offering experiential learning even as we learn together through collaborative research.

Creating a Collaborative Learning Community

As part of the Statewide Youth Engagement Initiative, Beki Saito has already gathered partners in a Youth Engagement Partnership, which aims to connect practitioners with existing training curricula to support quality youth engagement of all types. This group has the potential to work together over time to expand its menu of training, coaching, networking opportunities and other tools to help youth and adult practitioners:

- recruit and retain youth and adult participants;
- build and sustain authentic youth/adult relationships, identifying and building on the strengths and passions of each;
- negotiate youth/adult power;
- provide authentic opportunities for youth voice;
- facilitate collective youth/adult visioning, planning and collaboration in programs, organizations and communities;
- engage youth and adult participants in research to inform and continually improve programming.

In strategizing ways to share ongoing learning related to youth engagement, the training cooperative is committed to creating opportunities for youth and adults to learn together, experiencing all the types of youth engagement in doing so.

A Parting Thought

As Ed Irwin (MN Youth Engagement Masters, 2008) said so eloquently, “Youth engagement is not just a method. It’s a lifestyle.” Creating engaging communities will require several normative shifts. The competitiveness that goes with Western individualism and materialism is associated with a decline in social trust (discussed in Flanagan, 2003). This presents a challenge to moving people from “atomization” to a “collective identity.” And yet this is the very shift required if we are to mobilize community resources to ensure that diverse youth and adults have a full range of opportunities to meaningfully engage with each other.

Youth and adults engaging together in the ways described in this paper will require a critical mass of people recognizing enough benefit in such endeavors to open their hearts and minds to see each other in a new light and to consider new ways of thinking about youth/adult roles in a variety of settings. This will involve openly examining and addressing issues of institutional and personal power (MN Youth Engagement Masters, 2008; Noguera & Cannella, 2006; Zeldin, Camino et al., 2007).

And yet it is difficult to communicate the benefits of youth engagement abstractly. Youth and adults develop a collective identity, a sense of collective efficacy, and open themselves to new ways of thinking.
about youth/adult roles by *experiencing* those benefits. A critical function community and statewide collaboratives can play is to create opportunities for youth and adults to experience the benefits of youth/adult engagement as they build communities of support strong enough to offset the gravitational pull of a culture rooted in individualism and competition for personal gain (Kahn & Westheimer, 2003). We can begin by working *together* to create such collaboratives, learning to navigate and build on the authentic relationships required along the way to identify and achieve individual, organizational and community-wide goals that will allow us all to thrive in the 21st century.
Sources


Minnesota (MN) Youth Engagement Case Studies (2008). Observations, focus groups and interviews with participants and staff of six successful long-term youth engagement programs around the state of Minnesota. Conducted by the University of Minnesota Extension Center for Youth Development in January-April, 2008.

Minnesota (MN) Youth Engagement Masters (2008). In-depth interviews and focus groups with six professionals around the state of Minnesota who are leading a variety of successful, long-term youth engagement programs. Conducted by the University of Minnesota Extension Center for Youth Development in January-April, 2008.

Minnesota (MN) Youth Engagement Regional Forums (2007, 2008). A series of seven half-day workshops around the state (Duluth, Mankato, Marshall, Moorhead, Rochester, St. Cloud, St. Paul) and two one-hour workshops connected to statewide meetings of youth development professionals, in which we asked practitioners how they define youth engagement, their goals for youth engagement efforts, what it takes to achieve those goals, and how a statewide initiative might help. Conducted by the University of Minnesota Extension Center for Youth Development from November, 2007 to February, 2008.

Minnesota (MN) Youth Engagement Regional Forums (2008). A series of three half-day workshops around the state (Moorhead, Rochester, St. Paul) in which we gathered feedback from practitioners about our emerging Youth Engagement typology and case studies. Conducted by the University of Minnesota Extension Center for Youth Development in April-May, 2008.


