

Youth Voice and Participation on the National Youth Summit Advisory Board... and Beyond

It is Saturday morning. Nine young people from Oregon, Massachusetts, California, Texas, and New York have gotten out of bed, picked up their phones and dialed the 1-800 conference call number. What motivates them to spend two hours of their Saturday this way? They are all members of the 2009 Portland National Youth Summit Advisory Board. These youth, who have never met face to face, are working together with adult allies and the Portland State University Research and Training Center on Family Support and Children's Mental Health (RTC) to build a youth-driven event from the ground up. All their monthly Saturday planning meetings and email communications will come together this June in Portland, Oregon for the 2009 Portland National Youth Summit. There they will meet with 30 peer leaders from around the country to share unique stories about their own experiences with mental health challenges, foster care placements, homelessness, the juvenile justice system, and residential treatment placements; and to identify common themes and areas for improvement within services for youth.

The Youth Summit Advisory Board

The Youth Summit was intended to be a youth-driven event, and so the first step in the planning process was to hire a young adult who had personal experience with mental health services to act as the Youth Summit Coordinator. The Coordinator, with support from RTC staff, led a process to recruit "systems-experienced"



young people to join the Youth Summit Advisory Board and plan the Youth Summit event. This Advisory Board was appointed to identify specific goals and intended outcomes for the Summit, initiate recruitment for youth and young adult participants, oversee the creation of a participant application process, and plan the Summit agenda.

Recruitment of Youth Summit Board members began with a request circulated nationally to youth leaders, youth coordinators and adults connected to systems of care. Identified and interested young people submitted resumes and cover letters stating why they wanted to become a part of the Youth Summit planning team. Young people were then selected based on their experiences as youth leaders, their passion for making improvements within youth services, and their ability to commit time. Board

members were also expected to be leaders during the event, and to take part in presenting outcomes from the Youth Summit during the following Building on Family Strengths Conference. In return for their involvement, individuals would receive compensation for time spent on conference calls, funds to travel and stay in Portland and attend the Youth Summit and Building on Family Strengths Conference, and a stipend upon completion of the event.

The Summit Coordinator was committed to creating an atmosphere where young Board members felt heard and valued, and where decision-making was transparent. Board members received meeting agendas and relevant documents before each conference call, and were invited to send any comments or request changes. Members were encouraged to lead team-building exercises at the beginning of each call to facilitate relationships. During the first conference call, members voted on which day of the week and time of day future calls should take place. Because members of the Board had many existing commitments, such as school, work and volunteering, they also received reminders about conference calls through emails, individual phone calls and text messages one or two days before each call. For those youth who could not attend certain calls but could communicate electronically, a group website was created through Google Sites to facilitate comments on planning and application materials, as well as to provide access to previous meeting agendas and minutes. Most importantly, youth were encouraged

to speak up if the language being used through any communication avenue was not youth-friendly or clear.

Challenges

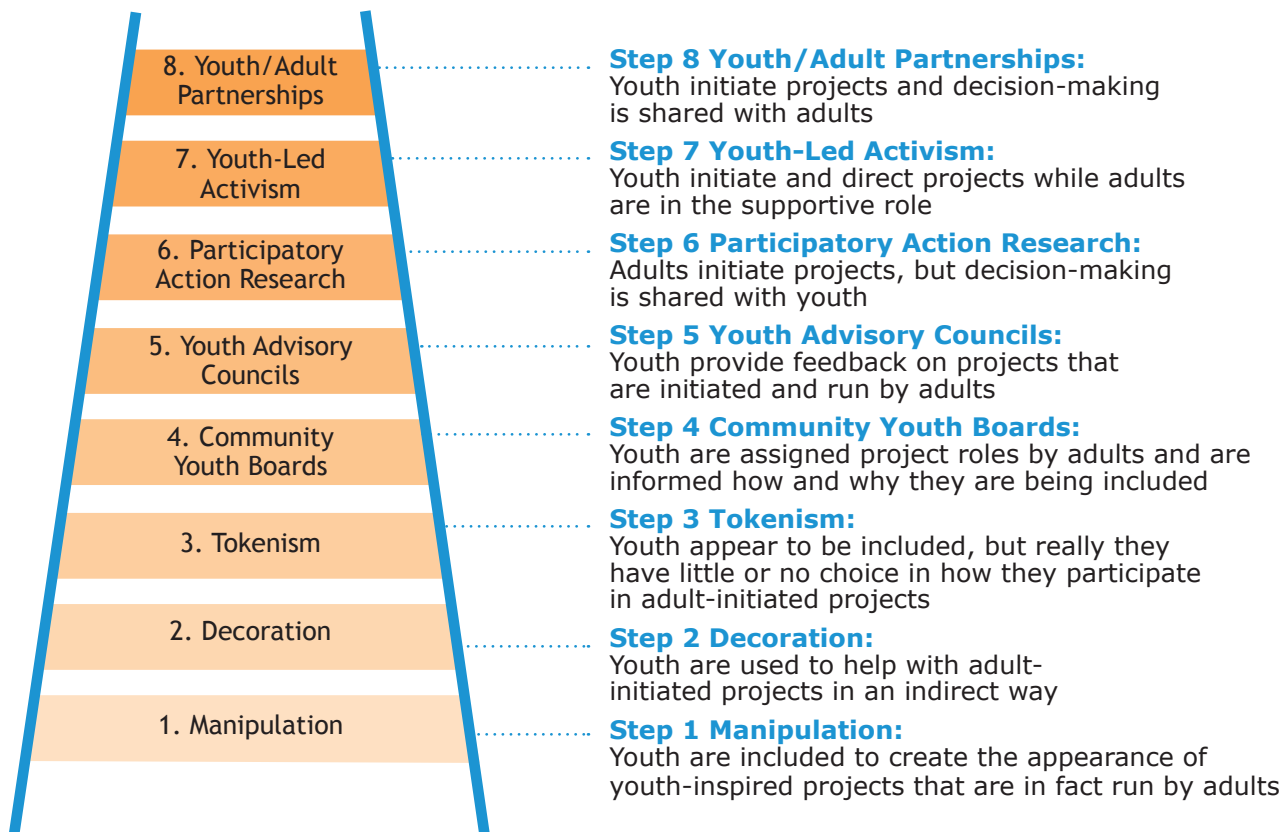
Despite the above efforts and dedication, it was at times a challenge for the Coordinator to encourage participation and completely let go of the steering wheel. In his 1997 book *Children's Participation: The Theory and Practice of Involving Young Citizens in Community Development and Environmental Care*, sociologist Roger Hart identified eight levels of youth involvement, outlined into a "Ladder of Youth Participation."¹ Each sequential rung of Hart's participation ladder (Figure 1) facilitates more youth participation and therefore, more youth empowerment. The goal of meaningful youth involvement is facilitation of mutual adult and youth

decision-making, initiation and action. In the process of planning the Youth Summit, the Advisory Board hovered in between the fifth and sixth rung: The Board was consulted on and included in many decisions, but more often than not, youth were informed and asked to give input on decisions and actions initiated by adult allies.

Many of the Youth Advisory Board members, though well intended, did not follow through with planned attendance on conference calls, or respond to requests to review documents with edits and ideas. As a result, the RTC Coordinator became less comfortable assigning tasks to board members, given the time constraints of planning the Youth Summit. Some youth did not have easy or consistent access to the Internet; therefore, communication was often done primarily by phone, and collaborat-

ing on documents electronically was a challenge. When initiating phone correspondence, time zones had to be considered as well as school and work schedules. At times, individual Board members understandably needed to focus on managing their own mental health in addition to dealing with life difficulties such as homelessness, providing child care, and obtaining social service support. As participation from some members began to wane, Board members collaborated with the Coordinator to create participation expectations and outcomes. The Coordinator, youth allies, and other board members strived to be supportive of and flexible with each member's level of involvement when creating membership expectations. However, a handful of youth were not able to complete their obligations, and Board membership dropped from nine active members to six.

FIGURE 1. HART'S LADDER OF YOUTH PARTICIPATION



(Adapted from "Ladder of Participation" from "The FreeChild Project Youth Voice Toolbox" www.freechild.org)

Meaningful Youth Participation

As mentioned, Youth Summit Board members were selected partly based on their involvement with many other youth service organizations. Seventeen-year-old Chelsea Garcia, from Houston, Texas is a youth board member with three additional organizations. As a part of the statewide initiative Youth On Board, Garcia and other young people work with non-profits and government organizations to create more youth-friendly spaces on planning committees and other decision-making bodies. To Garcia, the thing that really drives her to be a part of these groups is the fact that she feels her ideas and words are really valued. "It makes such a difference when the people in suits ask you your ideas, listen, and then put them into action. Once you see you are putting yourself out there and they are going to listen, it makes you feel like more than just the 'token youth.' You are an important part of making the changes happen."

Martin Rafferty, age 22, of Eugene, Oregon, is also very active in his community as a youth board member. In addition to serving on the 2009 Portland National Youth Summit

Advisory Board, he is a part of the Oregon Family Supports Network, the Leadership Education Adventure Direction program in Oregon, and the Resources, Education, and Assistance for Community Housing program in Kentucky. When asked what he believes is most valuable in encouraging youth voice as a part of board membership Rafferty replied, "Having at least two young people present makes a difference. It is much more comfortable for that young person to say 'Hey can you repeat that?' if another young person is present." Rafferty and Garcia agree that board members must be ready to slow down for youth. "Not because youth can't grasp the concepts," Rafferty elaborates, "but because youth aren't spending 40 hours a week around those concepts and ideas like most of the other members are." Also, Rafferty believes it is helpful to have an advocate there who can speak up if an adult-dominated board is veering away from "youth-friendly language" or is using unclear acronyms. "You would be surprised how many times a young person or ally speaks up because they need something explained, and other adults are relieved 'cause they don't get it either," laughs Rafferty.

Something else to consider when inviting a young person to be involved with an organizational board is to make sure that young person feels like part of the group. Taking the time to build relationships facilitates youth investment and leadership. "It is really nice when each person in the room goes around the table to introduce themselves and say what they do," Garcia explains. "It takes a lot of the intimidation away when you realize 'Hey these are people just like me.' It also makes you feel more a part of the process when you can say what you do and see that they respect your experience." Garcia and Rafferty both believe it would have been helpful if the Youth Summit Board could have met as a group in person for their planning conference calls. "It just makes such a difference to be able to see body language." Rafferty says, "You also eliminate so much talking over each other that you get when you are only hearing voices on the phone. That is why I am a big fan of web cams if they are possible. Having that eye contact makes all the difference."

Including a youth in service assessment and planning through organizational board membership not only benefits that young person, but it greatly benefits the organization's ability to hear from the population they serve. By making a few small adjustments, organizations can ensure that their programs are taking steps "up the ladder" towards youth participation and empowerment.

TIPS TO MEANINGFUL YOUTH BOARD INVOLVEMENT

- *Take time to have team-building exercises. Whether it is an all-day activity or a quick icebreaker, it creates healthy working relationships and gets energy up.*
- *Use acronyms sparingly, or include a key that lists acronym meanings.*
- *Have a "youth ally" available to meet with youth in between meetings, review concepts, and speak up for youth if non-youth-friendly language is being used.*
- *Include at least two youth seats on the board for a more comfortable setting.*
- *Consider the school or work schedule of the young people involved.*
- *Include youth in voting and other decision-making processes.*
- *Wear name tags the first several meetings so everyone can be identified by their first name.*
- *When you ask a young person their thoughts, take them into serious consideration and follow up with youth on the progress of their ideas.*
- *And in the words of Chelsea, "When all else fails, bring brownies!"*

Reference

1. Hart, R. (1997). *Children's participation: The theory and practice of involving young citizens in community development and environmental care*. London: UNICEF and Earthscan.

Author

Rebecca Strachan is a graduate student of social work at Portland State University and the Youth Summit Coordinator with the Research and Training Center on Family Support and Children's Mental Health at Portland State University.