Youth-Adult Partnership in Nonprofit Organizations
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Youth-adult partnership (Y-AP) in nonprofit organizations refers to the process of involving youth and adults in responsible, challenging, and collective action that seeks to benefit an organization or larger community. All individuals in the partnership have the opportunity to engage in planning, decision-making, and action consistent with their own interests and skill. As Nicole Yohalem from the Forum for Youth Investment so clearly stated, “Young people are not only at the center of many problems, they are the source of many solutions. Without direct youth and family input … [youth services and policies] can miss the mark” (Zeldin, Petrokubi & Camino, 2008; p. 4).

Along with several research collaborators at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, Shepherd Zeldin has studied how Y-AP is practiced by two organizations that exemplify effective Y-AP, Austin Voices for Education and Youth (AVEY) and Oasis Community IMPACT (OCI). A report, Youth-Adult Partnerships in Public Action (Zeldin, Petrokubi & Camino, 2008), documents what we learned through interviews and focus group discussions with a range of participants, observation of the organizations in action and analysis of organizational documents. Findings show that Y-AP created many benefits for these organizations. In the report, we describe how the principles of Y-AP are put into practice, and identify elements of organizational culture that supported effective Y-AP in both organizations.

These findings were used to create Being Y-AP Savvy (Zeldin & Collura, 2010), a manual that guides practitioners in learning about Y-AP and applying what they learn to their work. The manual lays out a process for using the manual in collaborative learning, presents research-based information and outlines activities that guide readers in reflecting on their practice and learning. You do not have to be an expert to use the Being Y-AP Savvy manual. It was written for all practitioners, both youth and adult.

This digest highlights the important information from these publications and recommends resources for further information and training on Y-AP in nonprofit organizations.
Why should our organization practice Y-AP?

Y-AP creates benefits on different levels. It facilitates the development of youth, adult staff and community leaders, and makes an impact on institutions.

Youth members of Austin Voices for Education and Youth (AVEY) and Oasis Community Impact (OCI) developed a sense of safety and belonging through Y-AP. They learned to critically analyze social issues. They became more confident and empowered as they gained knowledge, skills and community connections they needed as civic actors.

Adult participants developed confidence and competence in partnering with youth. They developed a new respect for youth competence and expertise. Passing along their knowledge and experience to the next generation of community leaders boosted adults’ satisfaction and motivation.

In the cities where AVEY and OCI work, new community coalitions emerged to tackle key community issues as youth organizers reach out to engage a wide range of community partners. Public institutions have become more responsive to community needs.

What practices lead to successful Y-AP?

Researchers have identified several principles for effective Y-AP (Pittman, Martin & Williams, 2007). Both AVEY and OCI have translated these principles into practice in different ways.

Opportunity. Youth must be given opportunities to use their skills and take action to address issues they are concerned about. They need access to decision makers and connections to the broader youth community. Principle in action (OCI): During meetings with public officials, adult staff members arrange the meetings, but intentionally play a secondary role. Youth are the ones who give presentations and “speak truth to power.”

Capacity. Youth need training, tools and teams to be prepared to create change. Principle in action (AVEY): AVEY offers a civics class and an after-school program for youth mobilizers to learn about the history and methods of civic engagement, understand community issues and develop skills to participate.

Motivation. Youth are more motivated when they understand root causes of systemic problems that are connected to their lives, when they have authentic decision-making power, and when actions are embedded in clear goals and strategies. Principle in action (AVEY): Youth start out as participants in educational programs, then become organizers, and finally advance to a consultant level. Through this progression, youth receive recognition for their growth and gain increasing decision-making responsibility according to their experience.

Foundation. Youth need to be connected to a solid organization that is able to recruit diverse youth membership, foster continuity of youth participation and provide a supportive work environment. Principle in action (OCI): The OCI environment – a well-equipped office housed in a local high school, with ample space for dialogue. Youth perceive it as “their space”. Youth take the lead in recruiting young people who will be their colleagues.

How do we build a culture of partnership in our organization?

Fostering a culture of partnership is crucial for sustaining Y-AP in the long run. Partnership values, partnership structures and public action are crucial elements of this culture.

Partnership values. Both AVEY and OCI have a core set of partnership values centered on the belief that the organization is strengthened when youth and adults are fully involved together. These beliefs are integrated into all aspects of the organization’s work and are reinforced in word and deed by leaders.

Partnership structures. AVEY and OCI have established partnership structures that sustain a culture of partnership, such as job descriptions that clarify roles and responsibilities, structures for coaching and mentorship, and recruitment and retention systems.

Public action. Public action provides a common experience among youth and adults in the organization that
reinvigorates partnership values. The action should address issues of high priority to the community, should be sustained over the long-term, and should involve youth as key actors.

**How do we get started?**

Learning about and practicing Y-AP may seem like a daunting task. However, it is important to keep in mind that organizational change toward Y-AP is not only a collective process, but also a gradual and continuous practice.

Like any effective organizational change, planning for Y-AP requires members of the organization to engage in shared learning and planning. We suggest forming groups of at least two people who are able to devote focused attention over a sustained period of time to collective learning about Y-AP. The learning process should focus on these three key steps:

- Participants should acquire core knowledge about Y-AP and reflect on how the knowledge relates to the work of the organization.
- Each participant should establish his or her own point of view about Y-AP, based on the acquired knowledge, and communicate it to others in the organization and community.
- To achieve change at the organizational level, the group must build consensus by moving from different individual points of view to a shared commitment to action.

**Further Resources and Reading on Youth-Adult Partnerships**

- Zeldin’s other research and tools can be found on the University of Wisconsin–Extension page on “Youth-Adult Partnership in Community and Government”, which provides resources for youth engagement, including those discussed above. [http://fyi.uwex.edu/youthadultpartnership/](http://fyi.uwex.edu/youthadultpartnership/)
- The Advocates for Youth website provides information on a range of youth involvement models, including Y-AP. The Y-AP section provides recommendations, methods and case studies. [http://www.advocatesforyouth.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=81&Itemid=125](http://www.advocatesforyouth.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=81&Itemid=125)
- The Free Child Project offers an array of information and resources about youth activism, including a tip sheet for Y-AP and a section devoted to adult allies. [http://freechild.org/](http://freechild.org/)
Works Cited

