



**INNOVATION CENTER**  
for community & youth development

**Youth Engagement  
Discussion Brief**

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## I. WHY YOUTH ENGAGEMENT?

**Youth engagement has had a profound impact on America.** Youth engagement has catalyzed and fueled social change movements throughout history. Across time and cultures, youth leadership, organizing and engagement has inspired the innovative approaches of social change efforts. Without the active engagement of young people the environmental, civil rights, anti-war, immigrant rights, juvenile justice, GLBT, women's and labor movements would have achieved much less significant results. The energy, enthusiasm and creative wisdom contributed by youth in these movements over time has laid the foundation for today's approaches to social justice. Today young people fuel the action of social change, bring new understandings of how to use technology as a tool for promoting justice, serve as an informal early warning system that draws attention to new threats to social justice, demonstrate contemporary approaches to addressing issues and community-based action, and provide results oriented leadership for social change.

Young people also are reinventing our understanding of youth engagement as a change strategy. Across the nation, we are experiencing a surge of youth engagement using a variety of traditional methods such as volunteering, boycotts, youth organizing, direct action, and civic activism as well as the influx of new pathways to engagement such as boycotts, blogging, and Web 2.0 activism. A recent report by the Corporation for National and Community Service found that 55% of surveyed young people aged 12-18 reported that they had volunteered in 2004, giving over 1.3 billion hours of service.<sup>1</sup> In 2004 voter registration rates among young people reached its highest rate in 30 years with 70% of young people ages 18-29 indicating that they were registered to vote in the 2004 presidential election.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Corporation for National and Community Service. (2005) *Building Active Citizens: The Role of Social Institutions in Teen Volunteering*. Brief 1 in the *Youth Helping America Series*. Washington, DC: self.

<sup>2</sup> Marcelo, Karlo B. *Voter Registration Among Young People*. (2007). College Park, MD. The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement.  
[http://www.civicyouth.org/PopUps/FactSheets/FS07\\_Registration.pdf](http://www.civicyouth.org/PopUps/FactSheets/FS07_Registration.pdf)

Youth engagement is a deceptively simple and compelling idea. On the surface as a strategy it is misleadingly straightforward – get more young people involved. While this feel good approach seems right, it begs the question- youth engagement for what? Why do we need youth engagement and what do we need to do in order to ensure that our efforts achieve intended outcomes? What indicators will measure our success and document our progress? What are the dangers of this approach? What are the unintended outcomes that may result from our efforts and how do we need to prepare for them?

In actual practice, for organizations, youth engagement is a complex and labor intensive effort that can be utilized as a change strategy to achieve a variety of different levels of outcomes. At the organizational level in order to be successful, youth engagement requires clarity of purpose, deliberate positioning within the organizational structures, strategic actions, cross-organizational commitment and collaboration, a spirit of ongoing learning among youth, adults and the organization as a whole, a reward system that supports innovation and risk taking, and ongoing evaluation of results.

Youth engagement is most often imagined in its most visible and easily understood form - youth participation through volunteering, voting, and other forms of active civic engagement. Images of hundreds of thousands of young people participating in mobilization efforts such as rallies, protests, communication campaigns or other forms of direct action to support social change efforts often are perceived as the gold standard for successful youth engagement. Yet, as important as youth engagement is as a strategy for mobilization, it is only one of several ways youth engagement can be deployed as a successful change strategy. Arguably as, if not more, important, youth engagement initiatives and activities can also be designed as intentional change strategies that contribute to outcomes and changes at the individual, organizational, community, and field levels. Change at these multiple levels requires deliberate efforts to ensure that the varieties of multiple outcomes are achieved. Organizations that take the time to strategically position youth engagement as an individual and organizational development strategy focused to a variety of outcomes can reap great benefits that reflect well on the labor intensive investment required for all youth engagement work.

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## **II. GOALS AND PURPOSES OF YOUTH ENGAGEMENT**

There is a plethora of youth engagement programs and approaches. Operating within formal and informal structures ranging from youth led efforts to youth adult partnership approaches to support of adult directed efforts, youth engagement is at its best when it is deployed as a strategy tailored to the needs and interests of young people, adapted to support the organizational and community context of the work, focused to measurable outcomes, and meaningful to the young people and the organization. As the number of programs suggests, there are variety of goals and purposes that youth engagement aims to achieve. Most programs work towards several of these goals simultaneously while others may have one or two that are paramount.

Target age ranges for youth engagement work also vary, but youth engagement is most successful when tailored to developmentally similar cohorts such as follows:

- early adolescence/middle school - ages 11-13
- adolescence/high school ages 13-18
- young adult/college ages 18-25
- young adult /non-college ages 18-25
- young professionals ages 23-30

Organizations wishing to strengthen their youth engagement would do well to consider how the following overarching goals of youth engagement might support their mission as well as how youth engagement can be successful given their organization context, readiness and adaptive capacity.

### **TO STRENGTHEN YOUNG PEOPLE IN THEIR DEVELOPMENT**

Youth engagement, when combined with intentional learning, reflection and experience is a phenomenal strategy for individual youth development. Evidence suggests that programs that engage young people in civic activism with the intent of making changes on issues that matter to the youth also provide developmental support for young people at a rate comparable to or higher than traditional youth serving organizations.<sup>3</sup> Many programs practice youth engagement to teach

<sup>3</sup> Innovation Center for Community and Youth Development. (2003) *Lessons in Leadership: How Young People Change Their Communities and Themselves*. Takoma Park, MD: self.

young people skills in communication, leadership, problem solving, and decision making, among other areas, and to prepare them to take on further responsibilities as adults. With a little extra intentionality and focused attention to individual youth needs and supports, youth engagement can also be framed as a leadership development process designed to promote specific youth development outcomes (physical, intellectual, psychological, and emotional). These programs typically are targeted to one of two distinct age cohorts, high school youth, or young adults ages 18-25, and are effective for vulnerable or non- college youth as well as those engaged in higher education.

#### **TO STRENGTHEN ADULTS**

Though not a common goal, some organizations engage young people in decision making so that the adults learn about young people and their abilities, issues in their communities and the effect of the organization and its mission on young people. Research shows that adults commitment to the organization increases when youth are involved as their partners. For adults, the opportunity to engage in partnership with young people to contribute to social justice is a refreshing and rewarding experience that provides new opportunities for personal growth and expression. Thus, youth engagement can be incorporated as a volunteer development and retention strategy for adults.

#### **TO STRENGTHEN THE ORGANIZATION**

Youth engagement is a powerful strategy to catalyze organizational development and institutional change. Many organizations engage youth so that youth involvement can become part of organizational operations, so that their programs become more responsive to youth and communities, and in order to make their organization more appealing to partners.<sup>4</sup>

For organizations, youth engagement builds organizational knowledge for the future while simultaneously building skills among emerging leaders. Youth engagement efforts form a context for organizational knowledge procreation focused to skills of the future that youth are leading today – multicultural competencies, the use of technology, creativity and innovation, lifelong learning, and understanding of global markets.

Youth participation in organizational operations takes many forms, including a wide range of youth staffing options that include part time positions, internships, structured employment pathways, opportunities for consulting or contracting at the group or individual level, and service as an operational volunteer.

## **TO STRENGTHEN THE COMMUNITY**

For some organizations, engaging young people comes from the deep-rooted belief that communities are stronger when they engage the full range of diversity of their residents. Filled with idealism and energy, young people are eager to engage in efforts to make change on issues that negatively impact them, their families and the places and people they care about. Young people are able to lead, mobilize, evaluate, and promote diverse efforts aimed at improving all types of social inequalities. Fundamentally, youth want to make their hometowns a better place for those they love. Engaging young people in place based change also often leads to the involvement of other underutilized voices and can create new pathways for civic engagement among marginalized groups.

Youth leadership in community change efforts builds community capacity to lead social, economic, and cultural change efforts. At the same time, with targeted intent, organizations facilitating these efforts can also use the youth engagement efforts to build their own capacity.

## **TO STRENGTHEN THE FIELD OF KNOWLEDGE AND PRACTICE**

Impacting far beyond organizations and communities, youth engagement strategies can serve to inform knowledge and practice on a broad scale. The lessons learned, new models, innovation in practice, and inspiring results catalyzed by youth engagement, when documented and shared, can foster fundamental change. For example, who would have expected in 1961 when the first young Peace Corps volunteers went off to do international community service that their efforts would spark the community youth service movement of today and inspire models of domestic service that are the heart of such organizations as City Year and Teach for America?

## **TO BUILD THE NEXT GENERATION OF ACTIVISTS.**

The success of future social change efforts rests in the hands of youth today. Building knowledge, skills and commitment to social justice and change among young people is imperative. Many organizations actively engage young people not only to build knowledge and advance social change issues but also to build early organizational allegiance among youth. One needs only to take a quick look at targeted commercial sector branding and advertising directed towards children to ascertain how important early brand allegiance is.

By sending the message that young people have value and can make meaningful contributions to change, and by providing the opportunity for young people to build their capacity to make a difference, organizations can strengthen future efforts by building the

skills and knowledge of young people who will grow into allies and activists for their issues as well as have significant personal affiliation for their organization. A young person's prior experience with an organization, especially one that provided them with key development opportunities, or pathways and connections that contributed to their success in later life, can be an important door opener when organizations reconnect with these young people in later life.

### **TO STRENGTHEN DEMOCRACY**

Involving youth in community change not only teaches about the responsibility of citizenship and prepares youth to be engaged throughout their lives but also connects young people to public life at a time when youth skepticism of civic life is rampant. For a young person, engaging with other youth and adults to contribute to change is empowering and can foster life long habits and personal expectations of engaging in democracy.

In summary, youth engagement is a cross-cutting strategy that intersects youth development, youth leadership, organizational development, civic activism, and community development. It builds core leadership skills and competencies of young people as well as opportunities for young people to use these skills in meaningful ways while also contributing to contextual change.