

Working on supply and access are necessary but not sufficient for the task of increasing young people's engagement in positive youth programs, activities, and informal opportunities. Youth become the marketing experts in this endeavor to increase participation in youth programs, particularly by those who typically do not participate.

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Beyond access and supply: Youth-led strategies to captivate young people's interest in and demand for youth programs and opportunities

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MOST PEOPLE WOULD PROBABLY agree that participation in quality youth programs and neighborhood-based, informal relationships and opportunities is a good thing for young people. The problem is that not nearly enough children and youth are engaged in these growth-enhancing opportunities.

Whereas estimates vary—ranging from far less than half to more than half of young people reporting that they have participated in a youth program¹—and regardless of the actual percentage, what is clear is that there are far too many nonparticipants. This is particularly true for young teenagers: those thirteen- to fifteen-year-olds who are too old for many after-school programs and too young

to find jobs. We see participation rates drop substantially when youth reach the middle school years.² This is especially troubling because these nonparticipating young teens may be particularly vulnerable to a variety of alternative competing temptations and thus, one could argue, might have the greatest need for the horizon-broadening experiences and safety nets that youth programs can provide.³

What can we learn from young people about designing captivating opportunities for positive youth development? And how can the unique expertise and perspectives of young people be unleashed to create effective marketing strategies to increase the interest and participation of their peers in these programs and relationships? These are the fundamental questions, the common threads that wind through the journey described in this chapter.

The journey begins with focus groups with young people in rural, suburban, and urban communities in Minnesota, then moves to two youth community-mapping projects in which young people interviewed other youth in their community. These experiences led finally to a pilot project that moves beyond issues of supply and access to a social marketing project designed by and for young people.

The journey

There are several primary sources of data from which this journey and chapter draw. The first source comes from focus groups⁴ that were conducted with just over one hundred middle and high school youth ($N = 101$) in eight Minnesota towns and cities during the spring of 2004. Sites were chosen to represent a broad range of community size and type, including two rural communities (one with about 400 residents and another with about 3,000); two small towns, both between 10,000 and 20,000; two suburbs that represent two very different communities in terms of average family income and new development; and three inner-core neighborhoods in two cities with populations between 250,000 and 350,000.

The only criterion for participation was that the young people represent the range of youth in that community in ethnicity, family income, and participation or nonparticipation in after-school youth programs. Young people of color were intentionally overrepresented in our sample compared with state demographics, with nearly half (46 percent) of focus group participants being nonwhite. Data from these focus groups led to a typology, described later in this chapter, for categorizing communities based on the primary location and type of youth programs available in that community.

The second source of data was two parallel youth-mapping projects, one rural and one urban, that involved youth interviewing other youth in their community about the availability of youth-friendly programs, people, and places.⁵ These projects provided a unique opportunity to better understand the supply side of the supply-and-demand equation from the perspective of young people in these communities.

When it comes to increasing participation in youth programs, the youth-mapping projects led to these conclusions:

- Young people often do not know what is available even in their own neighborhoods
- Young teens have far more say about how they spend their discretionary time out of school than they did when they were younger
- To actually get nonparticipating young people to come to a youth program, let alone become fully engaged in it, we need to learn from and with young people about how to market youth programs and opportunities much more effectively.

Young people themselves hold the keys to solving the participation puzzle because only they know where to find and how to talk to nonparticipants, they know what mediums to use to reach teens, and youth are in the best position to create and deliver messages and invitations to become involved. Recognizing that when it comes to social marketing as a strategy to increase participation rates, young people are experts, and a pilot project called the Youth Action Crew (YAC) was created.⁶ YAC is a

youth-led strategy to increase awareness of and demand for youth programs. A more in-depth discussion follows the key lessons from this journey.

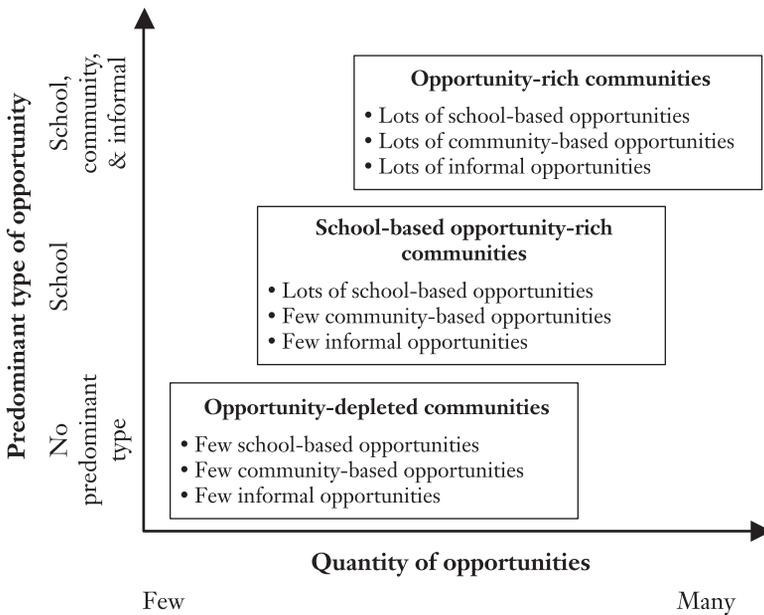
The supply side: Toward a typology of youth development opportunities

In any given community, youth development opportunities—that is, relationships, experiences, and programs that promote the healthy development of young people—could theoretically occur in myriad settings and situations, including formal and nonformal programs in schools, nonprofit youth organizations, and faith institutions, as well as informal (that is, nonprogrammatic or naturally occurring) relationships and experiences. As a result of our visits and focus groups with youth in these eight very different communities, a framework was created for describing what types of youth development opportunities a community might offer its young people.

The typology described in Figure 4.1 categorizes communities by the quantity and location or type of youth development programs and opportunities that are available to young people in that community. It provides a lens for thinking about and assessing the extent to which a community provides the opportunities for growth that young people need.

Ideally, a community that is rich in opportunity offers a comprehensive array of high-quality accessible programs in schools and in the broader community and surrounds young people with caring, involved neighbors, businesses, and other organizations. Our analysis of the focus group data revealed no opportunity-rich communities in which school-, community-, and faith-based activities were prevalent and complemented by informal supports. According to the young people who participated in the study, communities were either school-based opportunity rich or opportunity depleted. In no community were positive informal nonprogrammatic supports or opportunities cited as common or adequate.

Figure 4.1. Three types of communities based on the quality and predominant type of youth development opportunities



Small townships (populations less than one thousand) and large urban centers appear to share some similarities in terms of this typology. In both types of communities, the ratio of the number of programs to the number of children and youth appears to be low, and access to school- or community-based activities was reported to be limited because of both transportation issues and cost. In contrast, somewhat larger but still rural towns (more than three thousand) and suburbs seem more likely to have school-based after-school opportunities available to them, though relatively few community-based programs and informal relationships.

Previous studies of Minneapolis⁷ suggest that there are pockets of the city with many community- and school-based activities for certain age groups (especially for elementary school children), whereas in other neighborhoods there are almost none. In no neighborhood, however, are there nearly enough options to accommodate the sheer number of youth and their varied interests.

Formal programs

The location and type of youth development opportunities (whether school, community, or faith based) that are available to youth in a particular community are important because each may attract different kinds of youth, provide different benefits, and have differing levels of access and support, according to focus group participants.

Generally, young people said that community-based programs do or should allow youth to explore a broader range of interests and experiences than school-based programs but that they also require more initiative on the part of the young person to find out what is available and to make the effort to get and stay involved. School-based programs, on the other hand, are more likely to have built-in supports and motivational factors that affect participation—for example, earning public recognition, late-activity buses, or seeing program staff on premises for school-based programs. However, young people said that school-based activities might be less attractive to students who are not doing well academically. In particular, youth talked about the differences between school-based and community-based programs in these ways:

You get a different feeling in school-based activities. Like, with school softball, you get school pride, but with nonschool softball, I'm doing my passion.

There is a different kind of engagement in nonschool activities because being less structured allows you to take initiative and make choices and different friends.

It's more challenging to be in nonschool-related activities because it gives you the chance to think and be separate from the identity you have in school. It also takes more motivation to be in nonschool activities because the structure, the consequences, the school-related motivational factors—like teachers seeing you throughout the day—are not there.

Young people's perspectives on school-based and community-based youth programs are compared in Table 4.1.

Table 4.1. School-based versus community-based youth development opportunities from the perspective of youth

<i>Characteristic</i>	<i>School based</i>	<i>Community based</i>
Structure	Activity tends to be more structured	Activity tends to be less structured
Supports and incentives	External supports and motivational factors: easier to join because it is more convenient and familiar	Internal motivation: young person must be motivated to seek out opportunities
Transportation	Easier to coordinate transportation issues	Difficult to deal with transportation issues
Cost	Tend to cost more, especially sports	Tend to cost little or nothing
Perceived outcomes	School pride	Personal fulfillment; new people, places, experiences, and opportunities

Informal opportunities and relationships

In this typology, informal youth development opportunities include such things as neighbors getting involved with the youth in their neighborhood as well as youth-friendly businesses and community organizations. Somewhere on the continuum of formal to informal lie places in which young people can go to “hang out” and relax without being on task. Youth talked about informal opportunities in these ways:

My dad said he would let people build a skateboard park on his property with the extra lumber he has from a building project if he could get some help.

A lot of businesses are not youth friendly. They have rules about how many kids can be in a store at one time, and so forth. They think all kids are going to steal things or wreck stuff.

Have a supervisor available to staff the school building after hours to offer stuff like open gym, movie nights, etc., since it is the best alternative to a separate rec center.

Like, I always wanted to go golfing, but there aren't courses around where kids can go and golf, and no one will take me.

Programming for teens

Another dimension of the after-school youth program landscape is the distribution of programs for different age groups. In general, the number of programs available for young teenagers (thirteen- to fifteen-year-olds) compared with those available for elementary students appears to drop substantially. The exception is school sports and other school-based clubs and activities where new opportunities become available in middle and high school but only to those who are interested in the sport or activity, are good enough to make the team or squad, and can afford the activity fees.

In summary, when we think about the opportunities—and missed opportunities—for young people in any community to continue learning and growing outside the regular school day, we should think about the programs, relationships, experiences, and opportunities that could be available throughout the community, including programs in and out of schools, and nonprogrammatic, informally occurring relationships and experiences in neighborhoods.

The typology provides a framework that enables a community to assess and hopefully work to enhance the “supply side” of the equation. But paying attention to supply is not enough. We need to learn more about the demand side, that is, the needs, wishes, interests, and motivations of young people—the customers in this sense—particularly those who do not already typically participate.

Understanding and igniting demand

Regardless of community type, clearly there is much work to be done on the supply side to enhance the availability, richness, and diversity of youth development opportunities. But what do we know about the demand part of the equation? Although there may be some debate among youth programs about who their real customer

is—participants, parents, or those who fund their programs—the reality is that as children mature into the middle school years, they are likely to have more say about where or even whether to participate in youth programs. In this sense, as youth reach preadolescence and early adolescence and make more decisions about how and where they spend their discretionary time, teens themselves increasingly become the customers that program providers must satisfy. Yet, as indicated previously, findings suggest that as age increases, participation in after-school programs decreases.⁸

What do these young customers want in terms of people, programs, and places to grow? How could programming and marketing or recruitment strategies change to attract these older youth? What would make it more likely that those who do not typically participate become engaged in these youth development opportunities? These are the questions that guide our examination of the demand side of youth development opportunities and programs.

Participation, nonparticipation, and characteristics of attractive young teen programming

National estimates of the percentage of youth that participate in youth programs vary greatly.⁹ Nonetheless, in an earlier study of Minneapolis children and youth,¹⁰ overall about half of young people (49 percent) reported participating in at least one youth program a week, although this varied substantially by ethnicity, neighborhood, and family income. Results from a more recent study of youth engagement opportunities in three small communities in greater Minnesota and several inner-core neighborhoods in Minneapolis¹¹ show participation (that is, those who have ever participated in a youth program) ranging from about 39 percent in Minneapolis to 67 percent in greater Minnesota.

Regardless of the actual percentage of youth that are engaged in youth development programs and opportunities in a specific community at a particular point in time, these data suggest that at least in Minnesota, somewhere around 30 to 60 percent of youth typically do not participate in any youth development opportunities. And that is far too many.

Why youth do not participate

There are many reasons why young people do not participate. In some communities and for many youth, there simply are not many formal programs or informal opportunities available to them (opportunity-depleted communities). But even in communities where some level of programming exists, far too many youth are not engaged in these growth-enhancing youth development opportunities.

Focus group participants listed several barriers to participation, including:

- Restricted access, including cost and transportation
- Youth feel unwelcome by adult staff or uncomfortable with other participants
- Lack of knowledge or interest in what is available to them
- The program is run poorly

Access. A program is accessible if you can afford it and can get to it. So, if you are a student who likes to participate in traditional extracurricular activities and there is a late-activity bus, then you are in luck (assuming the bus stops in your neighborhood). If, however, there is no late bus—as was the case in most of the school districts from which we drew focus group participants—and you do not have another means of transportation, then it is far less likely that you will be able to participate in any youth program, school based or otherwise. Furthermore, we learned that in some schools late-activity buses are reserved for youth who participate in only certain activities (usually mainstream sports) and are not available to youth who participate in other school-based or community-based after-school programs.

In some communities, particularly small towns and urban communities, youth often live far from their school, sometimes twenty to twenty-five miles away, and have no means of transportation outside of the one school bus that leaves right after school is done, effectively preventing them from participating in anything that is

not close to their home neighborhood. It seemed that transportation was less of an issue for youth who lived in midsized towns where the school was relatively close or in suburbs where transportation seemed more readily accessible. Young people also cited cost as a barrier, particularly to participate in sports, which are likely to charge an activity fee.

Basically, if your family has money to pay for the cost of participating in programs and someone to drive you to and from various activities, then you have good access. If your family does not have money to pay various fees or cannot provide transportation, then you are probably out of luck.

Youth feel unwelcome. Beyond the issue of access was the question of social climate: whether or not young people felt welcomed and comfortable in after-school settings. A disturbing number of young people in this study talked about feeling like outsiders, that they were unwelcome or that the staff did not like them. In their words:

There are a lot of cliques, and that makes participating uncomfortable. I just don't want to be in it. In a small town, everyone knows your business, and they judge you because of your family or your brothers and sisters.

Like, there's always supervision here; they're really strict, always people watching us, like they don't trust us.

Change the staff to be nice. Get staff that talks to you in a good way. Respect you.

Lack of interest in and knowledge about what is available. One of the ironies of youth development programs (that by their nature are supposed to help youth make smart choices and be better leaders in their community) is that, for the most part, adults decide what programs to create. One of the strategies that were suggested in almost every focus group was to start with young people's interests and then develop programs based on what they like to do. Remarkably, there appear to be relatively few after-school youth development opportunities for young people to explore their own interests. Some youth mentioned small school-based grants for young people to start their

own clubs, but they have to be school based and thus do not necessarily reach the low participator. There is also the Tiger Woods Foundation's Start Something, which invites young people to apply for small grants after completing a ten-session program designed to help participants achieve a goal or dream.

Lack of knowledge about what is available is another barrier to participation that is disturbing both because it is cited so frequently and because it is something we ought to be able to overcome. Advertising and marketing to teenagers is something professionals know how to do. Why do we not utilize their expertise in combination with the unique "insider" perspectives and expertise of young people and transfer this to our work in the field of out-of-school time?

A recent example of a project that is attempting to address this marketing niche is the YAC project referred to earlier. YAC is a youth-led strategy to increase participation rates in youth programs by creating a neighborhood map (Exhibit 4.1) of all the youth development programs and informal places in a community. YAC members then disseminate the free maps through a variety of targeted marketing strategies.

Quality programming

A common thread throughout these data regarding quality programming for preteens and early teens was the need to create programming that recognizes this age group's unique developmental need to have increasing levels of autonomy and authority in the design and implementation of their program or project. From the perspective of young people, quality means safe places where they can hang out with their friends and do cool things and where they can be involved in leadership opportunities and decision making, have new experiences, and develop caring, respectful relationships with other young people and adults. Further, they want to know that their opinions matter and that they can effect real change.

Caring about, being invested in, and having a stake in the success of a program increases individuals' motivation to participate

Exhibit 4.1. An example of a youth-led marketing tool designed to increase participation in youth programs



fully, which in turn reinforces commitment and ownership. From the operational side, good programs work effectively toward something, have goals that are attractive to young people, and are organized and supportive enough to accomplish the goals.

This is what young people said about creating programs based on their own age-appropriate interests and skills:

If you give a person a sense of purpose, give them a voice, then they'll participate.

You don't usually want to listen to adults tell you how to have fun.

Programs have to be more productive, be more relevant to our own community.

There's always someone to push you, to support you and help you reach your goals.

It would be the coolest of cool to start our own program.

I'd like to start something with people my own age. Sometimes I crave a place to talk to my peers about, I don't know, world affairs and politics, literature, current events—whatever! Like a philosopher's coffee shop or something like that.

Conversely, poor quality, from the perspective of young people, included such things as:

- The program is disorganized, chaotic, does not accomplish anything. For example, youth said things like:

I'll leave a program if it's wasting time, if I'm not learning anything.

Way too many kids, and way too wild.

It's not meaningful. Like, um, it isn't going the way you want it to go. Like, we planned a meeting and nobody showed up, just a few people.

- Youth are given no authority or responsibility and thus have little investment in the program:

We aren't brought onto this earth to do things into which we cannot put our hearts.

- Negative staff characteristics:

If people in charge underestimate us; if they're condescending.

Too much talking at us by leaders.

Reflections on the journey

The young people who participated in the focus groups, community mapping projects, and the YACs have taught us a great deal about engaging young people. Their insights have taken us from simply assessing what is available to a deeper understanding of why young people do not participate and what needs to be done to increase participation in captivating youth development opportunities. These forays into the issues surrounding low participation in youth development programs and opportunities at the community level have led to several key observations and recommendations.

Assess supply to identify gaps

Communities differ in the number, type, content, and settings (for instance, school versus community based) of youth development programs and opportunities that are available to their young people, and different settings may attract different kinds of young people, have different supports and barriers, and may attend to different outcomes, according to young people in Minnesota communities. Therefore, communities (and small towns, big cities, even whole states) need a way to assess supply to identify gaps in what is available.¹²

After a community learns what types of programming and other opportunities are available for their young people, it can then develop strategies to diversify and strengthen program options and work to increase access and reduce barriers to participation working with the youth themselves.

Young teens may need these opportunities the most but participate the least

It appears that the supply of and participation in community-based programming decrease as age increases. This is particularly troubling because it is precisely these youth who are developmentally ready to receive support from people outside the home and need the caring relationships, safe places, new opportunities, and attention to a variety of social and academic outcomes that youth programs can provide.

Programming for teens requires a different approach

We need to understand that programming for teenagers is different from that for younger participants. For preteens and teens, it is about developing programs and opportunities with them, not for them. Young people said they enjoy working experientially in project-based models in which they have some level of autonomy and influence over important decisions, they have a strong desire to make a difference in their community and effect real change, and they want to be treated with respect by staff and other participants and viewed as resources in their community.

As children move into their second decade of life, they have different interests and needs and growing influence over decisions about how they spend their discretionary time outside of school. As a result of these developmental shifts, program providers, youth worker training institutions, and policymakers need to change the content of programs and opportunities to match the interests of teenagers and provide training for youth workers to be facilitators of young people's growth and development, not didactic instructors or child care providers.

Attending to the supply side is necessary but not sufficient

Addressing supply issues by creating more opportunities for youth development is absolutely essential, but increasing supply alone may not be enough to reach the goal of increasing the percentage of youth who are engaged in programs and their community. For the field of after-school programming, the old adage, "Build it and they will come," does not necessarily apply, at least with regard to youth in the middle years.

Increase demand through youth-led marketing strategies

As a field of study, we need to create ways of reaching and marketing directly to teens to encourage higher levels of participation. The YAC is one example of a youth-led marketing strategy to increase participation, but we need to learn more about effective ways to reach these young people.

The power of youth as customers, market researchers, and change agents

What we learn from these data is that we need to shift our orientation from thinking of teenagers as children and recipients of service to seeing them as young adults with the power to choose what they will do with their leisure time and as resources and leaders who, if given the right supports and opportunities to succeed, will meet and exceed our expectations.

We need to develop programs in partnership with young people that will be captivating to this diverse audience. We need to use the unique expertise of young people in creating effective marketing strategies, especially with regard to reaching youth who typically do not participate in youth programs.

As a nation, we have brought attention, policies, and funding to the needs of prenatal care and early childhood. We have begun to acknowledge the need for and federally fund after-school programming for elementary school children. Let us continue up the developmental ladder to recognize the unique needs and strengths of adolescents and work to ensure that their voices are heard in this call to action.

Notes

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