

Abstract: This case example describes key elements necessary to prepare for sustained Youth-Adult partnerships. The example from Iron County, Wisconsin, highlights a large-scale effort to make the County a youth-friendly place to live. The county has been working for several years to identify ways to include youth and young adults in community decision making – with a focus on community planning and development. This case is useful for anyone interested in how Y-AP can benefit large-scale community change initiatives.

Y-AP is commonly viewed as a strategy for engaging younger (8-18 year olds). This case is a great example of Y-AP as a strategy to engage a spectrum of age groups in the process.

Case Example #3: Planning for Sustained Youth Engagement

Location: Iron County, Wisconsin

Project Title: Gogebic Range Next Generation Initiative

Background:

In 2008, local Leaders in Iron County, Wisconsin analyzed local demographic and economic trends and recognized that the area was losing young people through out-migration to larger cities and simultaneously failing to attract young professionals to the area. In response, the county began an asset-based effort to develop strategies to counter those trends. Since 2008, the resulting “Next Generation Initiative” has grown substantially. Today, the Next Generation Initiative has four active working groups (*Strengthening our Niche, Retaining Students, Promoting our Strengths, Retaining Young Adults*) that coordinate activities. The initiative is driven by a diverse group of private and public partners, active participation of adults and growing youth participation. Next Generation is recognized by individuals in the community. The initiative is seeing progress in building a community that values and promotes authentic youth participation, and one that actively recruits and welcomes young professionals to the area.

Next Generation Initiative participants frequently refer to their planning related processes as important factors in the initiative’s progress toward building a community dedicated to engaging youth for community sustainability.

Understanding Youth Perceptions – Data Gathering

Rigorous data collection underpinned Next Generation’s initial project planning. To understand youth perceptions of the community’s assets, project leaders conducted a survey of 668 young people. Survey participants included high school aged youth, community college freshman, and young adults age 20-30. Survey data formed the basis for planned project activities that sought to connect young people with the community’s assets and to create opportunities to include youth as participants in strengthening those local assets. Next generation’s commitment to data gathering is significant for two reasons. First, it recognizes that effective planning for youth focused community change must be rooted in youth’s own perceptions of the community. Second, it recognizes that youth and youth voice is a valuable community asset. Next Generation’s dedication to understanding the community from the perspective of youth contributed to development of a plan that was relevant to youth needs and offered opportunities for authentic youth engagement to build community assets.

Next Generation continues to demonstrate a commitment to ongoing data collection to monitor and evaluate the initiative’s progress and to inform project activities. The initiative frequently collects various forms of data from people of all ages. As a result, participants are continually aware of the overall effort, feel they have a voice in the project, and have a growing awareness of how to connect young people to the community. As the Next Generation Initiative evolves, opportunities for youth to engage in data collection and analysis may emerge, further strengthening the project.

Inclusive Action Planning:

Next Generation Initiative's planning process resulted from the work of more than 100 participants, including community and economic development specialists, government officials, business representatives, educators, parents, and interested residents of all ages. By including a diverse group of community members in the planning process, new collaborative partnerships developed naturally. Additionally, the inclusive nature of the process allowed new leaders to emerge, created a sense of community ownership of the project, and provided opportunities for the project activities to operate in multiple settings. The inclusive planning process led to a truly cross-disciplinary plan in which all community stakeholders –youth, families, business, government, schools, and others are included and engaged in the work. In other words, a sense of community was being built and strengthened through the community planning process.

Most importantly, Next Generation's planning process was not limited to conversations. It was, and continues to be, action oriented. Participants and project leaders created a written plan, based on a logic model that described desired outcomes, designated responsibilities, identified benchmarks for evaluation, and described the relationships between the various project activities. The written plan became a guide and a reference for a long term process that could evolve.

Intentional Coordination and Partnership:

Next Generation leaders and participants frequently speak to the inclusion of data and inclusive planning process as important factors contributing to the project. Those processes created opportunities for a comprehensive plan, but the initiative's real key to success, according to participants, has been a dedication to network and partnership development among businesses, government, development specialists, families, schools, and youth serving organizations. This dedication to partnership is written into the project logic model and coordinated through the leadership at the County Extension Office.

As the Next Generation Initiative has evolved, communication and coordination among various project activities continues to improve. This coordination is proving to be beneficial in emerging project activities such as a school garden project that depends on contributions from multiple partners. Highly coordinated partnership maximizes resources, and is useful in quickly pursuing new opportunities to engage youth as they emerge.

Raising Awareness – Visibility, Communication, and Public Outreach

Public outreach is a core component in all Next Generation activities. The initiative communicates frequently and in multiple ways. Whether releasing community data to the local press, conducting public presentations, maintaining a web-based presence, distributing promotional materials, sending e-mail notifications, or hosting public social events, Next Generation reaches the community and creates a "buzz" about its activities. By including public outreach in the plan, participants become dedicated to ongoing communication and the entire community becomes aware of the initiative. Public outreach serves as a recruitment tool, possibly piquing the interest and participation new youth, adults, and organization. Visible community recognition of the initiative is also important to current participants – fueling their passion and continued participation because the project appears relevant and recognized by the greater community. Whatever the result, inclusion of public outreach strategies in project planning contributes to recruitment and retention of project partners, youth, and adult participants.

Keys to Success

Learn what you don't know: Next Generation Initiative recognized a "brain drain" of youth, but didn't assume that a few adults knew why and how to address the issue. Rather, they understood that workable solutions required input from youth about youth and about their community.

Identify Key Issues: Next Generation Initiative (NGI) plan rested on rigorous data collection that centered on understanding youth perceptions. This youth-generated data resulted in creation of a plan relevant to community youth.

Initiate an Inclusive Planning Process: A diverse group of private and public institutions and broad representation from the community in the planning process fosters a sense of community ownership of the project, and is useful in developing and strengthening partnerships.

Include young people in the planning process in authentic ways: Youth voice in issue identification/ data gathering is not enough. Authentic roles for young people in the ongoing project planning are essential for transforming communities that value contributions of youth and adults. As Next Generation Initiative evolves, it is identifying and creating opportunities for youth in decision making.

Build partnerships, coordinate activities: strong, well coordinated partnerships maximize resources,

Write it down: Written plans that are created with multiple adults and youth are essential to ensuring that a project moves forward with activities that can be sustained. Strong, written plans convey a clear mission and message that can serve as a rallying point for the project.

Build a framework to learn, adapt, and grow: Logic models provide a mechanism for understanding progress in the short, intermediate, and long term. Clearly defined frameworks delineate duties, identify participants, and

Create Outreach Strategies: Communication and public outreach raise awareness of the initiative, are effective recruitment tools, and enhance overall project support and legitimacy.

Identify Youth and Adult roles: While not fully developed, NGI's logic model identifies roles of participants in each program activity. Role identification is useful in ensuring that activities deliberately include youth and adults, and can serve as a check on the degree the initiative is invested in core elements of Youth-Adult Partnerships.