

From Periphery to Center: Pathways for Youth Civic Engagement in the Day-To-Day Life of Communities

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Inclusive participation is a primary component of civil society. Yet opportunities and pathways for youth civic engagement remain limited for youth. This limitation has been significantly influenced by the daily segregation of youth from adults, negative public beliefs about adolescents, and stereotypes, both negative and overly romantic, about the capabilities of adolescents. However, this state of affairs is being challenged by youth and adults across the country. Five contemporary pathways for youth civic engagement are described: public policy/consultation, community coalition involvement, youth in organizational decision making, youth organizing and activism, and school-based service learning. Three overarching qualities among these 5 pathways are also discussed: youth ownership, youth-adult partnership, and facilitative policies and structures.

Inclusive participation is a primary component of civil society. The assumption of inclusive participation is that all citizens have legitimate opportunities to influence decisions concerning the identification, leveraging, and mobilization of community resources (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swindler, & Tipton, 1985; Camino, 2000; Etzioni, 1998). Involvement of a broad range of citizens, with no group excluded, and who are ensured equitable participation set up conditions for heterogeneity of ideas, which promotes democratic deliberation and action. As such, diverse participation ensures a balance between individual rights and responsibilities to the collective good (Etzioni, 1998; Selznick, 1998). Research suggests that governments and communities work better in places with social and interorganizational networks, which allow for collective decision making and recreation, which disperse information and decision making broadly, and which offer a multiplicity of pathways for civic engagement (Glantz, Lewis, & Rimer, 1997; Minkler & Wallerstein, 1997; Putnam, 1993).

But whereas engagement is both a right and responsibility of citizenship, and whereas inclusivity benefits both the individual and the collective, it is ironic that pathways for civic engagement remain extremely limited for youth. For the majority of youth, the parameters of opportunity are narrow. Foremost, there are limited spaces, both physical and metaphorical, in which youth can exercise civic responsibilities (Flanagan & Faison, 2001). A framework of civil society offered by

O'Connell (1999) posits five domains or pathways: individual, community, government, business, and voluntary. O'Connell asserts these domains as spaces in which citizens engage as participants, rather than as "complainers, victims or accomplices" (S. M. Evans & H. C. Boyte, quoted in O'Connell, 1999, p. 13). An examination of O'Connell's framework reveals that while the pathways are not totally exclusive of youth, on the whole, they offer only minimal opportunities for young people to act affirmatively on civil society.

Even the standard, traditional pathways of voting and voluntary service carry limitations for youth. Several studies show that youth voting and interest in politics are at an all-time low (Peter D. Hart Research Associates, 1998; Sax, Astin, Korn, & Mahoney, 1998, 2000). However, youth participation in community service is high (Independent Sector, 1996; Sagawa, 1998; Sax et al., 2000). The puzzle over how to interpret the apparent contradiction between youth apathy toward voting and high commitment to voluntary service has been explained as lack of specific youth-focused agendas devised by political candidates (Boyle, 2000), lack of understanding among youth about how the voting process works and the implications (Eisenberg, 1999), and a new-era preference for personal, local action (Giles & Eyler, 1994; Peter D. Hart Research Associates, 1998).

However, there is another contributing factor: age restrictions codified in laws. Youth may vote, but not until age 18. Such a limitation encourages youth to seek out alternatives. Opportunities for community service have burgeoned over the past decade through schools and community organizations, and youth are taking advantage of them. Nonetheless, like voting, opportunities in the voluntary sector remain somewhat limited in terms

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of decision-making power. In many states, laws exist prohibiting youth under the age of 18 from serving on boards of directors of nonprofit organizations, the chief organizational vehicles of the voluntary sector. Relatively speaking, there are few institutional mechanisms or societal norms for encouraging young people's involvement in community governance or to support young people as social entrepreneurs or activists.

This state of affairs is being challenged, however. Young people and adults are confronting stereotypes, societal norms, policies, and practices that assume youth are unable or unwilling to participate in a full spectrum of civic activities. In this article, we address the issue of pathways for youth civic engagement. We seek to illuminate this issue through identification of several barriers to youth civic engagement, presentation of examples of contemporary trends in broadening pathways for youth, and discussion of implications.

Age Segregation and the Narrowing of Opportunities for Youth Civic Engagement

Civic engagement is usually defined as being able to influence choices in collective action; it is the purview of every citizen, not only officials and professionals. It has long been a bedrock value of democracy. In fact, Dewey (1944) viewed youth participation as inextricably linked to the generation of knowledge of community affairs. In recent years, *youth participation*, in civic life, has been defined as a spectrum of involvement from tokenism and objectification to involvement that carries legitimate influence (Hart, 1992). But an older definition of youth participation is as follows:

Youth participation [is] involving youth in responsible, challenging action, that meets genuine needs, with opportunity for planning and/or decision making affecting others, in an activity whose impact or consequences extend to others, i.e., outside or beyond the youth participants themselves. (National Commission on Resources for Youth, 1975, p. 25)

Note the date of the citation, nearly 30 years ago. The immediate question that arises is, why have things apparently changed so little? To answer this question, it is important to consider the confluence of historical trends and deeply entrenched cultural barriers that manifest themselves contemporarily.

Over the past century, changes in industry, workplace, schooling, and family life in this country have contributed to widening the gap between the daily separation of groups of people based on age. For example, shifts from agriculture to manufacturing to service economies have impacted family life and the diminished amount of time parents spend with children

(Coleman, 1987). Additionally, mandatory school laws and child labor laws have tended to prolong the isolation of youth from the civic life of communities (Bakan, 1971; Chaducoff, 1989). The culmination of these trends is that at no other time have people of different ages spent large amounts of concentrated time in their day-to-day routines with their age peers. For young people, the result is that few have even one significant, close relationship with a nonfamilial adult before reaching adulthood themselves (Steinberg, 1991). In a national sample of over 250,000 adolescents, only 49% could identify three or more nonfamilial adults they could go to for help with an important question about their life (Benson, 1997). For youth civic engagement, the result is a narrowing scope and quality of pathways available for youth to participate in the day-to-day civic life of communities. In addition, regarding lack of contact between youth and adults in civic affairs, three manifestations of attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors are witnessed: (a) persistent and entrenched negative beliefs about adolescents, (b) amplification of age differences, and (c) denial of age differences (Camino, 2001).

Negative Beliefs About Adolescents

Segregation between groups of people is a powerful generator of stereotypes and negative attitudes (Barth, 1969). In the United States, the dominant public belief of adolescents is as a time of storm and stress, despite research to the contrary. Accordingly, public characterizations of youth revolve around themes of resistance to adult authority, conflict with parents, risky behavior, identity confusion, and conformity to negative peer influences (Arnett, 1999; Gegas & Steff, 1990; Offer & Schonert-Reichl, 1992). Adult perceptions of, and attitudes toward, young people are critical because they provide a foundation for public discourse about adolescents, and a cultural blueprint for policy formation (Gilliam & Bales, 2001).

The problem is that contemporary beliefs about adolescents convey the implicit message of youth as a source of worry or threat, not potential. Youth are not seen as being integral to civil society. Recently, for example, Zeldin (2002; Zeldin & Topitzes, in press) surveyed over 700 adults in Washington, DC, and Wisconsin cities about their confidence in the ability of youth to contribute to the civic life of their communities. Relatively high percentages of adults had only marginal confidence in the ability of youth to engage in those civic functions that youth are already taking on around the country. For example, almost half of all adults had little or no confidence in youth to represent their community in front of the city council or to serve as a voting member of a community association.

These beliefs have been adopted by adults across sociodemographic categories (Buchanan & Holmbeck,

1998; Zeldin, in press). And they are held with vigor. In one study, involving multiple focus groups with parents, the participants unanimously and consistently discounted positive statistics about youth that were presented to them (Gilliam & Bales, 2001). In brief, it seems as though many adults are more comfortable in perceiving youth as the embodiment of storm and stress, rather than as individuals who also have the motivation and skill to contribute to others.

Amplification of Age Differences

Another consequence of segregation by age is the amplification of difference by assumed orientations and capabilities. For example, in a recent study, only 16% of a nationwide sample of over 1,500 adults believed that young people under the age of 30 share most of their moral and ethical values (Bostram, 2000). Moreover, Offer & Schonert-Reichl (1992) reported five common misconceptions held by adults about adolescence. Included is the belief that adolescent thought is more similar to that of children than adults. Presuppositions such as this, in addition to those about adolescents as being less active, friendly, and prosocial than elementary-school-aged-children (Buchanan & Holmbeck, 1998), create an interlocking social dynamic whereby youth are marginalized because they are portrayed as *other*, and they continue to be portrayed as other because they are marginalized.

Moreover, an exaggerated view of youth as other has contributed to acute role limitation and stratification, whereby the chief meaningful roles an adolescent can occupy in society is as a student or athlete, or consumer. For the health of civil society, the implications are enormous. Young people lose the opportunity to gain a sense of full membership in civil society, and to create a broader identity other than that of “kid,” “teenager,” or “high school student.”

Denial of Age Differences

With the shift toward “positive youth development” and increasing youth participation in community-based activities, we are beginning to witness a tempering of amplification of differences between youth and adults. The irony and the risk, however, are a full swing of the pendulum back to the opposite end of the spectrum, to the denial of age differences. Denial of differences can be characterized as “one size fits all.” This orientation embodies an expectation that adolescents think and behave in ways not merely similar to adults, but in fact, identical to adults. For example, a study of youth engagement in 58 communities found this orientation was common among adults partnering with youth (Camino, 2000). Adults assumed no difference between themselves and their youth partners, and overlooked the fact that the young people had little to

no experience in planning and implementing community activities. Consequently, adults did not offer necessary guidance and support. In this way, the orientation evokes notions of earlier historic periods when adolescents were conceptualized as “little adults” (Aries, 1962).

Denial of age differences denies that adolescents live in different contexts from adults, and that adolescents frequently have experience levels that differ from adults. These differences bear significantly on adolescent capabilities, level of skill development, and opportunities to practice. Another consequence is that young people are denied the opportunity to bring their own beliefs or lifestyles into a setting where such an orientation dominates.

Summary

The consequences of isolation of youth from adults—negative adult attitudes, role stratification, amplification of and denial of age differences—translate into low expectations for young people. Low expectations, in turn, impede the creation of broader and multiple pathways for civic engagement, and the involvement of youth as partners in building civil society. The cycle is self-reinforcing—isolation and low expectations feed off each other—with the consequence that pathways for youth civic engagement remain truncated. Fortunately, however, new pathways are being created, implemented, and tested, as discussed later.

New Pathways for Youth Civic Engagement

In recent years, there has been a global push toward inclusive participation as a strategy and goal for civil society. Citizens are increasingly demanding and exercising their rights and responsibilities to enter public policy debates and courses of action. Defining the public good, determining the appropriate policies, and monitoring actions and services to achieve the public good represent a re-emergence of the spirit of participatory democracy (Brinkerhoff, 1999; Kymlicka & Norman, 1994).

In the United States, the trend toward inclusive participation has been witnessed in advocacy and action for youth civic engagement. As we look over this landscape, it appears that five contemporary pathways of civic engagement have gained prominence over the past decade: public policy/consultation, community coalition involvement, youth in organizational decision making, youth organizing and activism, and school-based service learning. All of the pathways, at their core, seek to concurrently promote positive youth development and community change. They challenge

prevailing negative beliefs about adolescents, and moreover, explicitly promote youth empowerment through high expectations for youth. At the same time, however, the new practices and policies reflect the fact that youth rarely can, or should, go it exclusively alone. When adults serve as allies or partners to the youth, young people gain the support and institutional power that help them achieve individual and collective goals.

Public Policy Consultation on Youth Issues

In this pathway, young people advise public leaders and policy governance bodies. The aim is to ensure that no public policy deliberation or action, particularly that focused on youth issues, is taken unaided by the perspective of youth. With this input, it is assumed that, over time, new institutionalized pathways for youth civic engagement will be created through state and local government. Funding and program priorities will increasingly reflect the importance of youth involvement in community affairs.

In some cases, youth sit at the tables of governance with full voting rights. For example, the board of Oakland Kids First! Public Fund¹ decides how to distribute 2.5% of the city's budget for youth development programs. Young people sit on the board and have the same rights and responsibilities as their adult colleagues. In most cases, however, youth sit as members of advisory boards that report and provide consultation to public policy officials. Twelve state boards of education have student members, for example.² While youth are rarely allowed to vote on the boards, they do have the opportunity to influence the direction and scope of proposed state regulations.

In other cases, youth work with top policymakers. In Iowa, for example, the state Department of Health and Human Services sponsors a state-wide youth advisory committee, consisting of high school students, charged with advising the department about key issues. The committee confers with representatives from state executive leadership and federal agencies on identified issues and, through monthly telecommunications, offers its findings and recommendations to department staff. Over the past 3 years, the youth advisory committee has also served as an intermediary for the state department. It has connected with community agencies and resident task forces, reviewed grant proposals, and arranged technical assistance workshops and policy education for these constituencies.

¹Sources for the examples illustrating the five new pathways are Alexander (2001); Camino (1998); Innovation Center for Community and Youth Development (2001); Lesko (n.d.); Zeldin and Tarlov (1997); Zeldin, McDaniel, Topitzes, and Calvert (2000).

²These states are Alaska, California, Connecticut, Hawaii, Massachusetts, Maryland, Montana, Nebraska, North Carolina, Tennessee, Vermont, and Washington.

Community Coalitions for Youth Development

Often operating at a more proximal level than policy consultation, community coalitions have demonstrated that they can provide an effective forum for citizen representation and voice and the benefits of participatory democracy (Minkler & Wallerstein, 1997; Wolff, 2001). At their best, community coalitions are able to move on whatever youth issues are at the center of the community's interest. Because coalitions involve a diversity of institutions and interests, and can engage in cross-sector networking and resource sharing, they hold great potential to transform communities (Chavis, 2001), particularly in their ability to build community capacity for positive youth development (Benson, 1997), and potentially, to create and strengthen pathways for youth civic engagement.

The Hampton Coalition for Youth in Virginia, for example, serves as the coordinating and catalyzing organization for youth issues in the city. The coalition researches the strengths and needs of the community from the vantage point of positive youth development, and engages in strategic planning to disseminate best practices. Activities are then implemented through teams of youth and adult residents, staff from multiple agencies and organizations, as well as Coalition staff, some of whom are young people. Other coalitions sponsor demonstrations and model programs to showcase innovative practice and create new pathways for youth civic engagement. The Turner Youth Development Initiative in Bozeman, Montana, illustrates this approach. Governed by youth-adult task forces, the Initiative funds and operates three programs—a weekly radio show, a small grants philanthropy program, and a coffeehouse—managed by young people for the benefit of other youth in the community. Technical assistance is also increasingly becoming a central role for community coalitions. In Portland, Oregon and Madison, Wisconsin, community coalitions are facilitating youth-adult partnerships to teach organizations how to assess their own programs, with the explicit aim of enhancing the participation of youth in civic affairs.

Youth Infusion in Organizational Decision Making

Community-based youth organizations are also creating new pathways for youth civic engagement by involving young people in organizational decision making. These organizations orient their programming to create strong, caring relationships between young people and adults. Second, and most important, the organizations are seeking to ensure meaningful involvement of young people in all aspects of their structures and programs. It is recognized that powerful influences can be exerted by young people

throughout organizations. In these “youth-infused” organizations, young people have a strong potential, often realized, to exert positive effects on the adults with whom they work. These effects, in turn, translate over time to the creation of new pathways within the organization and in the communities with which the organizations collaborate (Zeldin, McDaniel, Topitzes, & Calvert, 2000).

The intent is for all young people to find a way to participate in the day-to-day life of the organization consistent with their interests and abilities. Herefore, organizations can create opportunities for engagement. Most fundamentally, youth in infused organizations are invited to sit at the highest levels of governance, such as boards of directors or administrative boards, where vision and priorities are established and monitored. At the Sexual Minority Youth Assistance League in Washington, DC, for example, 5 of the 15-member board of directors are between the ages of 16 and 23. To further engage more young people, a youth advisory board has been created. Before each board of directors meeting, board members consult with the youth advisory board to ensure that the voices of their constituents are considered centrally in deliberations. In other organizations, such as the West Eugene Teen Court in Oregon, and Y-Press in Indianapolis, youth are fully involved in staff hiring and evaluation processes. At the Mi Casa Resource Center for Women, Inc., in Denver, youth and adults work as partners on almost all committees to oversee the majority of youth development programming.

Youth Organizing

The most recent trend in creating new pathways for young people has been through youth-organizing programs and initiatives. More than the other pathways, the roots of this model lie in social action organizing (Alinsky, 1969). The intent is to fight for rights and reform by addressing explicitly “political” issues through direct action and advocacy. Underlying this model is the assertion that “effective youth development and concrete social change go on the same time line” (R. Sherman, quoted in Alexander, 2001, p. 17). The organizations that focus on youth organizing are highly diverse, but commonalities exist. Most saliently, there is an effort to infuse youth throughout all organizational functions. At Youth Force, for example, over half of the full-time staffers are under age 21, and the board of directors is 51% youth. Further, partnerships are fundamental to the organizations. By collaborating with other community groups, and sharing resources, the potential to increase the number of local pathways for youth civic engagement is amplified. A third commonality is that organizational staff are engaging in activism close to their hearts. Many of the founders have lived the effects of oppression, be it gen-

der, sexual orientation, economic, or racial/ethnic, and are setting out to change their communities. The Center for Young Women’s Development, in San Francisco, for example, was created by a young woman who had lived in poverty, interspersed with involvement in the juvenile justice system. The Center’s programs are designed to help young women move from being victims of their circumstances to being powerful, employed citizens working to enhance their communities. Toward that end, the organization is run completely by low-income women who have themselves progressed through the Center’s programs.

There is a keen awareness that youth organizers face personal and institutional challenges in creating pathways for youth civic action and advocacy. For that reason, across the country, organizations are being created to provide training, technical assistance, small grants, and peer support opportunities for young activists. LISTEN (Local Initiative Support Training and Education Network), Inc., in Washington, DC, for example, invests in young people and sponsoring organizations who are committed to addressing community problems and challenging institutions on behalf of, and with, young people. National and regional workshops are offered to create opportunities for social support and information sharing, and are oriented toward the delivery of practical tools for organizing, critical awareness, empowerment, and leadership development. The recently formed foundation Funders’ Collaborative on Youth Organizing Partners has made a 5-year commitment to support capacity building and administration that support youth organizing.

School-Based Service Learning

The National and Community Service Trust Act of 1993, which created the Corporation for National Service, has been a significant contributor to growth in opportunities for youth civic engagement across a wide range of community settings. Less noticeable, perhaps, is that the Act has sparked a resurgence of support for school-based service learning. Forty-eight states administer service learning programs through their state education agencies. It is likely that the high numbers of youth volunteering are due to the increasing number of schools making service a requirement for graduation, as well as to increasingly communicating the personal and social benefits of volunteering to young people (Sagawa, 1998).

School-based service learning is an instructional method that seeks to maximize individual learning while concurrently addressing community needs. Service learning requires schools to offer educational experiences integrating community service, “classroom” knowledge, and critical reflection to promote understanding and skill among students. As such, it is a vehicle for positive youth development (Zeldin &

Tarlov, 1997), education for citizen action (Newmann, 1975), and a catalyst for social change (Claus & Ogden, 1999). Youth are consistently challenged to strengthen their decision-making and collective problem-solving abilities. Service activities may provide continuity of purpose over time. For example, at El Puente Academy in New York City, youth address chronic environmental problems in their own neighborhoods. When participating youth graduate, they orient and train a new cohort of youth to take on civic leadership roles in the community change effort. Similarly, at Liberty High School in Tacoma, Washington, many youth are motivated to learn how to analyze the chemical and biological indicators of environmental health because this knowledge is essential to the team's collective goal of increasing public awareness of threats to the community.

Defining Qualities of Pathways for Youth Civic Engagement

The five pathways of youth civic engagement—public policy consultation, community coalitions for youth development, youth infusion in organizational decision making, youth organizing, and school-based service learning—have the potential to productively touch the lives of many youth and their communities. The goals of the pathways are ambitious, and cannot succeed unless certain qualities are present. Three of the most critical are ownership, youth–adult partnership, and facilitative policies and structures.

Ownership

The first, and perhaps the most important, element in creating new pathways is that youth should own the assets with which they work, and the fruits of their success or failure in solving the collective problems they face. Indeed, these are core tenants of contemporary community development and community building. Ownership can assume a range of forms, from planning and advising roles to implementation and activist ones. The ever-present risk, of course, is adult-directed activities, with youth “invited.” Youth need to be recruited and assured authentic roles. Ownership also includes an essential dimension of decision-making authority. Not only does decision making foster shared responsibility, it also assists youth in becoming architects of their communities' future. As illustrated in the new pathways, decision making requires not only that adults expand their traditional roles as the sole community actors and share power with youth, but also that youth step forward to participate.

Once ownership by youth is achieved, other benefits accrue. Trust sparks an interdependent relationship between engaged parties, and fosters a climate in which youth and adults are able to act with confidence, benevolence (the sense that one's well being, or something valued will not be harmed), reliability (consistency and predictability in behavior), competence, honesty, and openness (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2000). Essential to the building and maintenance of social capital, community level trust (Coleman, 1993) is directly related to adult and public attitudes about youth. A recent study found that, among urban youth and adults, those individuals who experienced a high sense of community in their neighborhood were most likely to believe that teenagers were motivated to engage in community affairs (Zeldin, 2002).

Youth–Adult Partnership

“Youth civic engagement” is a collective, not just individual, concept. The meaning of the action, as well as its consequences, is dependent on the motivation and skill of a given young person, but equally important, on the context in which it occurs. In all of the pathways discussed earlier, it is rarely youth working entirely alone. More common is civic engagement accomplished through youth–adult partnership. Sometimes the partnership will be a one-on-one youth and adult working together, sometimes a few youth working with a group of adults, and other times a few adults with a group of youth (Camino, 2000). There are always adults providing ongoing guidance, support, and expertise. Research indicates that youth want and expect certain types of support. These include coaching, dialoging, and connections to institutional resources and community leaders. Indeed, there is a complementary match between what youth and adults are likely to bring to civic life. Adults look to youth to provide legitimacy, “on the ground” knowledge and perspective, and cause-based passion (Camino & Zeldin, 2002).

Moreover, youth–adult partnerships are critical to the efficacy of pathways because they have the potential to engage a full range of human capital. Many civic involvement/development projects for youth risk becoming tokenistic when youth are equipped only with the techniques of involvement, not with the knowledge and experience of leadership and administration. Whereas involvement requires youth and adults alike to have or develop particular skills in, for example, planning, meeting facilitation, and event coordination, leadership is not a skill per se. It is rather a complex set of skills, behaviors, actions, and attitudes best developed through apprenticeship- and experiential-type learning processes, which necessitate close partnership between novices and older hands (Camino & Zeldin, 2002).

Facilitative Policies and Structures

Contemporary pathways for youth civic engagement are often transient and difficult to sustain at the local level. Typical problems include lack of financial resources, staff turnover, youth burnout, well-meaning adults who control or co-opt the agenda, and poor group chemistry (Camino & Zeldin, 2002). In addition, there does not appear to be a well-developed social norm for adults to become involved with nonfamilial young people in their communities. Scales et al. (2001) report from a sample of over 1,400 U.S. adults that, when adults were given a chance to judge 19 possible actions that adults can take on behalf of young people, one of the least frequent responses is to “seek kids’ opinions when making decisions that affect them.” Frequently beyond the control of coalitions and organizations, these factors can defeat the best-intended endeavors. Accordingly, the need to enact policies and build structures to support youth civic engagement becomes salient. Policies and structures provide the scaffolding that articulates the vision, expectations, and support for the pathways. From funding streams, such as the National and Community Service Trust Act and the proposed Younger Americans Act slated again for 2002 Congress, to organizational and coalition by-laws providing for young people on governing boards and committees, to mission statements emphasizing youth choice and voice, the range of possibilities is wide. Such structures and policies provide quality opportunities for youth to engage in civic affairs and afford substantial possibilities for individual and community benefit. The risk, of course, is that “institutionalization” will dwarf innovation and voice. However, those organizations that have successfully infused youth into decision-making roles report that the benefits of explicit policies and structures outweigh the risks (Zeldin et al., 2000).

Conclusions

While it is yet difficult to classify the trend as a “movement,” there is momentum for youth civic engagement. Youth are solving problems in a bewildering variety of ways under the sponsorship of a full array of organizations at all levels of community. Ultimately, it seems most important to create and test the feasibility of as many pathways as possible. This is the potency of youth infusion in the day-to-day civic life of communities. Youth, like adults, will gravitate to those opportunities that seem most relevant to themselves and their communities.

Communities are public spaces offering opportunities to facilitate civic values, education, experiences, and action. Tropman and Tropman (1999) use the term “trustees of civic purpose” to describe the functions of

nonprofit boards of directors. The same term well describes the intent of youth civic engagement. Looking to the future, however, will we be willing to support youth as trustees of civic purpose? Certainly, there is a groundswell of interest from policymakers, practitioners, and scholars from which to build. But, as discussed here, infrastructures are needed to support the pathways. And perhaps more importantly, there needs to be a concerted, multipronged effort, employing education and experience, to help adults perceive youth as contributors to community and to provide the supports—ownership and partnership—that young people require to develop and succeed as trustees.

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