

Promoting Thriving Youth and Communities through Youth-Adult Partnership

A Case Study of the Multnomah Youth Commission

Julie Petrokubi, PhD
Senior Advisor – Youth Development & Evaluation
Education Northwest
Portland, Oregon

&

Shepherd Zeldin, PhD
Rothermel Bascom Professor of Human Ecology
University of Wisconsin-Madison
Madison, Wisconsin

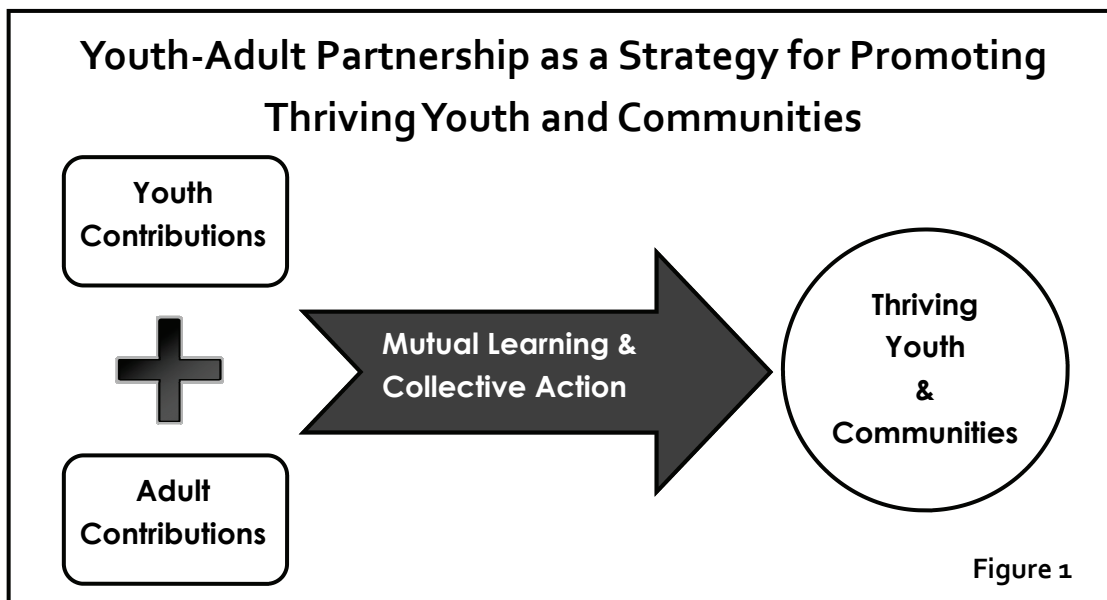
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Across the world, youth are increasingly engaged in public policy and community mobilization to strengthen democratic processes and work toward social justice. The **Multnomah Youth Commission (MYC)** is part of this international movement. As the official youth policy body of the City of Portland and Multnomah County in Oregon, MYC swears in over 40 youth commissioners annually between the ages of 13 to 21 for a year of service. These young people actively engage in collective action to strengthen public policy and public systems. Youth commissions such as the MYC ensure that the perspectives of youth are seriously considered on issues of public importance, especially policy decisions that directly impact the daily lives of young people.

The fundamental strategy that guides the MYC is “youth-adult partnership” (Y-AP). Local government leaders established the MYC under the premise that youth should engage fully as active partners, rather than as passive recipients, in public decision making. By interacting with youth as thought partners and collaborators, adults gain valuable perspective that enhances the quality, equity, and effectiveness of community institutions. Communities work better when youth and adults combine their energy, expertise, and resources toward a common goal. Through mutual learning and collective action, everybody contributes to the work and everybody stands to gain from the outcomes. This guiding philosophy is illustrated in Figure 1.



The Multnomah Youth Commission (MYC) has developed an extensive track record over 18 years, and is considered a national model of "authentic youth engagement" according to the National League of Cities (2010). That said, prior to the current study, there was no systematic research or evaluation of the MYC. While youth commissions and youth councils are found in many US communities, there is very little research regarding Y-AP in these local government settings. The research reported here aims to address these gaps in our knowledge. The study addresses the following questions:

- To what extent do youth commissioners benefit from their involvement in the MYC?
- What are the practices of the MYC that contributed most strongly to these youth outcomes?
- In what ways did the MYC have a positive impact on the culture, processes, policy and outcomes of the City of Portland and Multnomah County?
- What principles and practices are most critical in sustaining the quality of youth participation in local government for future engagement efforts through groups such as the MYC?

Research Methodology and Analytical Approach

This report summarizes the main findings from an in-depth case study of the Multnomah Youth Commission. The full results and research methodology have been presented by Petrokubi (2014). The research employed multiple methods, an approach that is necessary for understanding highly complex initiatives such as the MYC. For two years, Petrokubi conducted over 30 observations of the MYC during committee meetings, community dialogues, and public forums. These observations involved hundreds of youth and adults working in partnership to enact and implement public policy. Over 35 current and former youth commissioners participated in interviews or focus groups about their experiences including, both their victories and struggles. Additionally, 29 adult partners of the youth commissioners - elected officials, city/county employees, and community-based organizations – participated in interviews or focus groups about the strengths and limitations of the MYC. To complement the observations and interviews, many internal memos and archival public documents were reviewed.

These data were analyzed using rigorous methods to triangulate data from these diverse sources. For example, first the interview and focus group data for each group (e.g., youth commissioners, MYC staff, elected officials) were analyzed separately. Additional analysis was conducted to identify common themes as well as areas where the perspectives of these youth and adult partners diverse. These perspectives were then considered relative to the observation data and archival documents in order to examine similarities and differences across sources. Through this iterative approach, this study incorporates a diverse range of perspectives and weighs them against real-time observations. In this report we emphasize the common themes, with the aim of providing data and analysis that informs the policy and implementation concerns of local government and community leaders, specifically regarding efforts to authentically and democratically engage young people in local governance.

MYC Structure and Role

Established as a county youth advisory board in 1996, seven years later the MYC adopted a commission structure to more closely resemble adult citizen advisory groups and enable youth to create their own agenda. In 2006, after working closely with the Mayor's Office to engage thousands of youth in drafting a local Youth Bill of Rights, the MYC adopted the Bill as their "guiding policy framework" and established standing committees around the core priorities outlined in the Bill.

This shift brought new focus. A 2007 intergovernmental agreement designated the MYC as the official youth advisory body for the county and city. The mission and by-laws were amended. The mission of the MYC is "to provide a voice for youth in the decisions of government agencies and community organizations that affect the lives of young people" (MYC By-Laws, 2008). The by-laws charge the MYC with: (a) advising on city/county youth policies and programs; (b) creating "youth friendly communities" by articulating long-range policies and coordinated action, and (c) promoting positive youth development strategies community-wide.

Youth commissioners are required to be between the ages of 13-21, and must live, work or go to school within Multnomah County. After submitting an application and references, select candidates participate in an interview process with a panel of current youth commissioners and adult staff. This panel forwards recommendations to the Mayor and County Chair, who make official appointments. Youth serve unpaid one-year terms with a monthly time commitment from September to June of 15 hours for voting members and 7 hours for at-large members. Two youth are elected as co-chairs to lead the MYC in collaboration with sub-committee chairs. There were four standing committees at the time of this study: Sustainability, Health and Wellness, Education and Youth Voice. The entire MYC meets twice monthly and sub-committees meet more frequently. The structure also includes ad-hoc committees and a liaison program to elected officials.

MYC Roles in the Public Sphere

Former Portland Mayor Tom Potter proposes that groups such as the MYC may be “The vital spark in the renewal of our democracy.” To meet this potential, the MYC plays two main roles in the public sphere: representation and engagement. Drawing from a repertoire of ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ strategies, the MYC represents youth voice in settings of governance while also directly engaging a broad base of community members in public issues (see Table 1).

MYC Roles in the Public Sphere		Table 1
<p>Representation: "Amplify" youth voice in governance</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advise • Advocate • Collaborate 	<p>Engagement: "Bridge" community and government</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Convene • Build alliances • Conduct outreach • Model Y-AP 	

Representation: The MYC seeks to represent by speaking on behalf of the broader youth community on issues. Some stakeholders describe this as “amplifying” the voices of youth in governance. For example, the MYC played a representation role in the process of securing and sustaining YouthPass, a free public transit pass for Portland Public School students. The MYC advocated for youth interests by giving public testimony, organizing letter-writing campaigns and lobbying individual officials in support of YouthPass. The MYC then collaborated with officials to develop the proposal, and advised on program design and implementation.

Youth and adults in this study placed a high value on the representation actions of the MYC, especially advocacy. They described youth as bringing a “different mindset” that is valuable in public policy, in terms of breaking down “silos” and promoting equity and effectiveness. Winning YouthPass in 2008 was a pivotal moment for the MYC, in terms of increasing the visibility of the MYC as a group with the potential to influence public issues and policies. Furthermore, this win strengthened the group identity of youth commissioners as they came to view themselves as powerful advocates for the interests of youth. A youth commissioner explains:

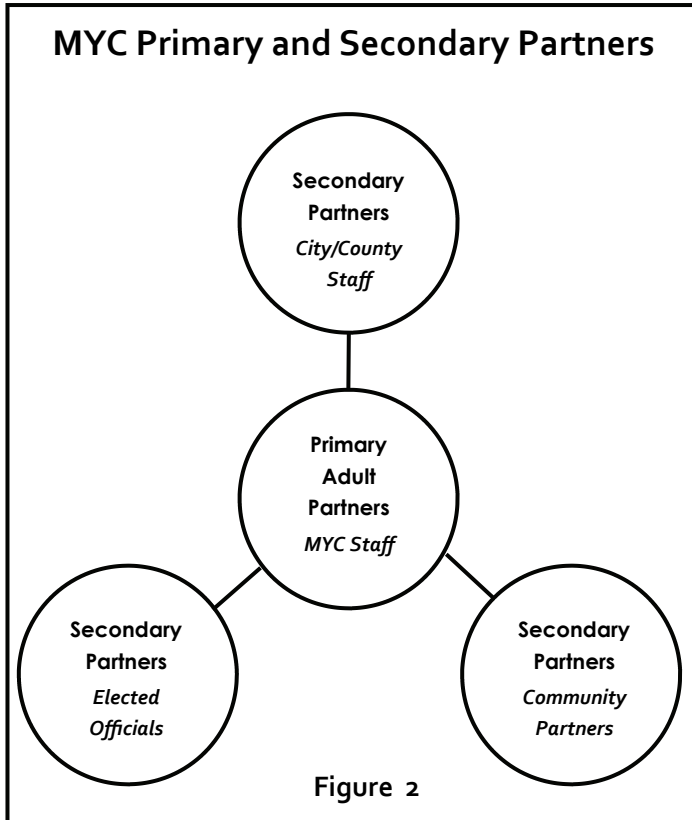
"Prior to YouthPass, we really saw ourselves as advisors to adults. YouthPass was in a lot of ways much more of legislative or political action for youth, which I think is a different role. I think it changed the way the Youth Commission thinks about itself too."

Engagement: In addition to representing youth in policy settings, the MYC also seeks to directly engage a broader community in the work of government. They function as a two-way “bridge” that promotes dialogue between public systems and community members. The MYC’s involvement in the Multnomah County School-Based Health Center system offers examples of this engagement role. The MYC convened multiple forums for youth to provide input on health center services and marketing. Youth commissioners conducted outreach to increase awareness of health issues and recruit youth for School-Based Health Center Youth Advisory Councils. To carry out this work, the MYC built new alliances with County health outreach workers, Cascade AIDS Project and AmeriCorps. The MYC also modeled Y-AP practices for health workers.

By convening public forums that privilege youth voices, MYC plays a unique role in the community. The MYC connects the broader youth population with local government through events to vet candidates, make budget proposals and discuss public issues. In recent years the MYC deepened and expanded their engagement actions, and convening has become a more central aspect of their role. For example, in 2012-2013 youth commissioners facilitated focus groups and a day-long summit to inform their policy agenda regarding addressing youth exposure and experience of violence. The MYC used the issues and recommendations surfaced through these activities to drive their actions in the policy sphere.

MYC as a Network of Youth-Adult Partnerships

Many adults — elected officials, government staff and nonprofit leaders — played pivotal roles in the evolution of the MYC. These adults understood that thriving communities require intergenerational collaboration. Diverse study participants described Y-AP as part of the “Portland Way” of progressive, process-oriented and participatory governance, with the MYC as the “anchor” for youth engagement in government.



The MYC partnered with a range of adults in a variety of ways. Policy settings are active spaces characterized by temporary coalitions and shifting priorities. Adults may be deeply involved with the MYC around a specific project or campaign and then transition into a more peripheral relationship upon completion. Within this context, youth commissioners interacted with three main groups of adults: government staff (e.g., MYC staff, departments), elected officials (e.g., City/County Commissioners) and community partners (e.g., nonprofits).

Given the fluidity of policy and the changing strategic purposes of partnerships, the MYC implemented a hub-and-spoke model of Y-AP (Figure 2). A set of primary adult partners (the hub) provided foundational training and support for youth to engage in issue-specific partnerships with secondary adult partners outside of the MYC (the spokes) who collaborated with youth commissioners around their common agenda.

While primary adult partners were typically MYC staff, other adults formed deep connections with youth commissioners. Primary adult partners offered stability by helping the MYC navigate difficult situations. MYC staff also facilitated youth access to information, resources and social capital necessary to do their job. As experienced Y-AP practitioners, the primary adult partners coached both youth commissioners and their secondary adult partners. Government officials and community leaders were motivated to partner with the MYC because they were viewed as an “organized group” that is “empowered” and “prepared” to engage in policy.

The secondary adult partners played a critical role by offering instrumental or strategic support for the public work of the MYC. Elected officials “open doors” and acted as champions within policy-making processes. Staff people within City/County departments offered access, knowledge and support for MYC efforts to strengthen public services. Alliances with community partners such as nonprofits significantly expanded the social networks and expertise of the MYC, especially around convening and organizing community members.

A Network of Youth-Adult Partnerships to Improve School-Based Health Centers

Multnomah County operates a long-running but underutilized school-based health center (SBHC) system. The Youth Bill of Rights Action Plan listed access to healthcare as a top priority, so the MYC approached the SBHC Program to investigate: why more students were not using the health centers? The MYC conducted action research project and presented results to SBHC staff. As a result, SBHC staff invited the MYC to partner with them to address the issue. The MYC secured a \$60,000 foundation grant to partner with the SBHC Program and Cascade AIDS Project (CAP) to develop SBHC Youth Advisory Councils and a youth-friendly marketing campaign.

During the study, the MYC staff served as the primary adult partner by assisting youth in identifying their priorities, developing meeting agendas, and carrying out their tasks. However, other adults partnered with the committee on a regular basis in more specialized roles. SBHC health outreach workers met regularly with the MYC to provide information and technical assistance on the marketing campaign and school-level outreach events. AmeriCorps Members from Cascade AIDS Project partnered with the MYC to develop the SBHC Youth Advisory Councils and health education activities at schools. All of the adult partners provided examples of how working with the MYC strengthened their Y-AP practice. In addition to these projects, the MYC lobbied state and local elected officials to sustain funding for the SBHC. School-Based Health Center Program Manager Jill Daniels describes how the MYC provided support to help the SBHC Program integrate Y-AP into their practices:

"I might have 25-plus years of School-Based Health Centers experience, but I am a novice at youth engagement. So it's evolving, and I'm looking forward to continuing to work with the Youth Commission on helping me make that happen... We got a bunch of successful [SBHC] Youth Advisory Councils and that feels good. Now how do we sustain that and make it grow?"

As illustrated by this example, the MYC partnered with a variety of adults in different ways to identify a common agenda. This includes supporting the infusion of Y-AP in the everyday work of public agencies such as school-based health centers. The next section discusses how youth commissioners personally benefit from these experiences.

MYC as a Setting for Youth Civic Development: Outcomes for Youth Commissioners

The MYC is often described as a “civic development pipeline” for diverse youth. This study finds that participation promotes civic motivation (e.g., attitudes, identity) and civic capabilities (e.g., knowledge, skill)

Civic Motivation: Increased Sense of Empowerment and Connection

Over their tenure with the MYC, youth commissioners increased their sense of personal empowerment, interpersonal connection and collective empowerment (see Table 2).

Youth Development of Civic Motivation		Table 2
<i>Domain</i>	<i>Outcomes</i>	
Personal Empowerment	Civic agency and sociopolitical awareness	
Interpersonal Empowerment	Sense of belonging, community and purpose	
Collective Empowerment	Group identity, collective efficacy, and collective action orientation	

Youth empowerment occurred through experiences of civic agency. The fact that the MYC has a formal place in local government - with staff, a budget, and access to officials - assured youth that they belong in this setting. Youth started to see themselves as legitimate civic actors with a right to be heard in the public sphere. Central to this empowerment process is a strong sense of interpersonal connection. Proud to be a member of the MYC, youth were motivated to do their best and “live up to each other’s expectations”. Youth also experienced a sense of mutual respect from their adult partners, along with support for the development and expression of their personal identity. Working alongside diverse peers on complex public issues and participating in anti-oppression training prompted new sociopolitical awareness, which youth described as “realizations” for how social, economic and political forces impact the lives of individuals.

For many youth from communities underrepresented in public decision making, this combination of training, social support and access to discussions regarding public policy increased their confidence to “represent ” in spaces dominated by other groups, as one youth commissioner relayed:

"It's a very abstract thing and it's scary to say that you are going to get up in front of a group that you've never met, and they're all 20 years older than you, with 20 years of experience, and like, 10 years more of education, and you're going to go up there and you're going to say what you feel..."

I think half the battle is just getting over that fear and knowing that you can do it. And the MYC allows me to do that. It gives me opportunities to not only practice that, but to feel confident. Like I know who I am, and I can hold my head up high, and talk in front of people who look nothing like me and still say this is what I feel and this is what I know. You asked me for my point of view and I am giving it to you. And sometimes you didn't even ask me for my point of view, and I am still giving it to you.

...[MYC] makes me feel like I am part of my community. You know, honestly, it makes me feel like I have a role and I have a say in what is happening."

This interview excerpt highlights a foundational aspect of civic life: people feel connected and are motivated to engage when they have a “role” and a “say” in how their community works. This study finds that this sense of community often went beyond the borders of the MYC to include local government and the region. Youth commissioners proposed that the MYC may be a way to “fix” problems in government by mitigating the lack of trust in public institutions and amplifying the perspectives of underrepresented groups. Youth perceived public officials as typically being “open” to what youth have to say, even when they challenge the status quo.

Not only did individual youth start to feel more empowered and connected; the MYC as a group started to develop a shared belief in their collective power to produce results. Youth expressed collective efficacy as a sense of control over the internal workings of MYC (e.g., group decision making), as well as a sense that the MYC influenced community issues external to group (e.g., securing resources for a program). As one youth commissioner observed, this sense of collective efficacy may empower other young people as well:

"We are working with government to create great projects like YouthPass. I think its empowering to us and the other youth to see that: Hey, my friend, they helped to get a program started that helps me - like they changed policy."

Indeed, this sense that "we can get it done together" lies at the heart of the MYC’s group-based belief system. Veteran youth commissioners share the legacy of past wins and tell newcomers: “When you get stuff done, that’s when you really feel like a member of the MYC.” Youth portrayed the MYC as a “powerful body” that “really creates change” in the community. Youth expressed great pride in being able to point to projects and tell their peers: “I was part of that.” All of this motivated youth to become and remain civically engaged.

Civic Capability:

Increased Capacity to Network, Strategize and Bridge Difference

In addition to increasing their motivation to engage in public affairs, youth commissioners also increased their capability to do so. Youth developed their capabilities through a process of situated learning by collaborating with their peers and with adult partners. As with any skill development, those youth who most actively engaged in the MYC were most likely to report significant increases in competence. These youth report gains in three types of civic capabilities: social networks, strategic capabilities, and bridging difference. (See Table 3.)

Youth Development of Civic Capabilities		Table 3
<i>Domain</i>	<i>Outcomes</i>	
Social Networks	Networking skills Social capital, in terms of new strategic and personal connections	
Strategic Skills	Strategic thinking, communication and action skills Group process skills	
Bridging Difference	Relationship building skills Capacity to be an ally	

Youth typically arrived at the MYC with relatively small social networks. Very quickly, the demands of the MYC required them to learn how to expand and sustain their social networks. Youth commissioners figured out how to approach strangers in meetings, make cold calls, and craft e-mails. To realize their policy goals, youth often networked with community leaders and policy makers. Without these contacts, policy wins were few and far between. Youth commissioners gained confidence in their ability to professionally approach policy makers and sustain collegial relationships over time, as one youth commissioner noted:

"I have learned how to network and connect with people, and connect with groups that may help me in whatever I am working on... how to create partnerships, how to look for other groups that are working on the same issue that you are; just contacting them and trying to work together. And also knowing important people in the community who can also help you as well."

Some strategic contacts broadened into personal contacts. The MYC provided youth with a critical "jumpstart" for expanding their personal social networks, especially youth from groups underrepresented in public leadership. As one youth commissioner who went on to run for public office stated:

"I wouldn't have the large network of people I know without the jumpstart of the Youth Commission...the opportunities that I was given to rub elbows with the big boys and to go to important events and meetings."

Furthermore, youth started to develop the strategic capabilities to mobilize these networks and advance their agenda through collective action. A key part of this process is the development of strategic thinking, communication and action skills. For example, youth practiced strategic communication skills by writing editorials and public resolutions, giving public testimony, and mobilizing through social media. Youth learned how to frame their issue in terms that resonate with their audience, use personal stories to highlight the urgency of the problem, and offer tangible solutions that call for a specific action by policymakers. To enact strategic action, youth honed in on their group processing skills such as meeting facilitation and project planning.

Lastly, through collaborative learning and collective action youth learned how to bridge different groups. Because youth were challenged and trained to work across ethnicity, class, and age, in this process they gained a new set of capabilities for how to find a common cause among individuals with diverse perspectives and life experiences.

Promising Practices for Promoting Civic Development: Developing Groups and Leaders

These positive youth civic development outcomes did not occur by accident. Youth commissioners and their adult partners continually refined a set of intentional practices that evolved over eighteen cohorts of youth. As summarized in Table 4, these practices centered around two goals: group development and leadership development. Analysis indicates that implementation of these practices was a responsibility shared by both youth commissioners and their adult partners.

MYC Practices for Group and Leadership Development	
<i>Group Development</i>	<i>Leadership Development</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Actively recruit diverse youth • Establish safe space for dialogue • Cultivate a group identity around common goals 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Situate youth in visible positions of power • Scaffold youth leadership and responsibility • Facilitate praxis to promote learning and accountability

Group Development

Youth commissioners frequently highlighted the power of an organized group of youth to create change in adult-led systems. Indeed, group process is the heart of public work, as individuals come together around a shared community goal. Each year the MYC brings together a new group of youth who represent a wide range of ages, identities and interests. To “move forward” as an organized group, the MYC invested deeply in practices that cultivate group cohesion and inclusion.

In inviting youth of different backgrounds to work together toward common goals, the MYC aims to foster a group identity that values inclusion and diverse viewpoints. One way the MYC promoted group inclusivity and cohesion was by establishing and maintaining a safe space. Youth commissioners expressed appreciation for the opportunity to interact with youth of different backgrounds while experiencing support and recognition of their own personal identity. Formal trainings at the opening retreat about the dynamics of power and privilege created a foundation of respect and trust, which youth and adults tended to throughout the year through community building activities, inclusive facilitation techniques and by “calling out” behaviors that inhibit the voices of underrepresented youth. One youth commissioner described the value of this practice:

"[Anti-oppression training] was definitely important to not only my growth and my learning, but also, me feeling like I wasn't the only one, that I could really be more open about the issues that I faced, because the more that we could do that as a group, the more we could move forward and the stronger bonds we had."

As this excerpt illustrates, investments in group culture and development were critical for both the personal development of youth commissioners as well as the collective action required to advance the MYC’s policy agenda.

Leadership Development

Leaders are not born; they develop over time and with experience. To support leadership development, the MYC situated youth in visible positions of power and offered an array of scaffolding to ensure their success. Typically, youth practiced their leadership skills on smaller projects within committees before moving into roles with higher levels of responsibility. Veteran commissioners coached novices in their development by explaining by-laws, demystifying acronyms, or clarifying how government works. After critical wins or missteps, youth and adults engaged in praxis to surface group lessons learned from the experience and strategize for the future. Mutual learning and support is central to the MYC group ethos. Youth said “we live up to each other’s example” by inspiring peers to achieve higher levels of commitment and productivity.

Quite often, adult staff operated behind the scenes to encourage youth leadership development. For example, youth reported that MYC staff played a critical role in “opening doors” and “getting meetings” with influential adults. Prior to these meetings, adults prepared youth by holding “pre-briefs” where youth practiced their arguments. In post-meeting “de-briefs” adults helped youth make sense of the meetings and identify follow up actions. Youth commissioners indicated that because they took the time to build personal relationships with youth commissioners, MYC adult staff people were attuned to when they needed help, as well as stepping back when they were able to handle a situation on their own. Youth were motivated to “take risks” and try out their burgeoning civic skills because they trust that adult staff are behind them as a “support system”. One youth commissioner expressed a common sentiment about the role of adults on the MYC:

"Adults are one of the strongest roles on the Youth Commission, and they don't play really a forefront role. They're kind of in the back in a supporting role and I think that really helps the youth to step up their game and to prove themselves."

Adult Support for Leadership Development			Table 5
<i>Technical Support</i>	<i>Strategic Support</i>	<i>Personal Support</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Manage logistical details • Provide training and coaching • Offer information, knowledge and resources 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mediate relationships with influential adults • Prepare youth for meetings • Reflect on progress and plan next steps 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Help youth to identify their personal strengths and their role • Serve as accessible role models and colleagues • Know when to step up and when to step back 	

**Collective-Level Outcomes of the MYC:
Influences on Local Government and Community**

"When you get stuff done, that's when you really feel like a member of the MYC." (Youth Commissioner)

Using the personal development of youth partners as the only indicator of success tells an incomplete story regarding the potential value of Y-AP. The MYC vision and influence is far broader. Youth commissioners and their adult partners are motivated by a shared sense of purpose; a desire to “get stuff done” by making positive change in the lives of others. This analysis shows that the contributions of youth and adults, learning and working together around a common goal, resulted in a range of collective outcomes for local government and the broader community. The collective-level outcomes of the MYC included changes in the institutional culture of local government; the nature public processes; and public policy and programs (Table 6, next page).

Collective-Level Outcomes		Table 6
<i>Domain</i>	<i>Outcomes</i>	
Institutional Culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased contact between diverse youth and adults; • Establishment of a public leadership pipeline; • A cultural expectation for Y-AP and some new norms for government 	
Public Process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased use of inclusive participation strategies; • Shifts in power dynamics in deliberations as new voices and issues emerge; • Formation of new alliances and coalitions 	
Public Policy & Programs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Movement of issues to action on public agenda; • Increased allocation of public resources to benefit youth; • Improvement of existing public programs 	

Institutional Culture

Changing institutional culture is not easy or swift. This study finds that, over time, the MYC increased youth presence in spaces of power by implementing intentional strategies to amplify youth voice in local government. Consequently, the norms, assumptions, and attitudes that guide everyday interactions in the City and the County gradually shifted. Youth commissioners entered roles and settings traditionally reserved for adults, such as talking with reporters in City Hall meeting rooms. By “being seen” in these positions and spaces of power the MYC fostered a climate where Y-AP is now an expected component of how these institutions operate. Community partner Annika Shore from Cascade AIDS Project described how the MYC shifted some adults’ norms of working by operating in a more youth-friendly manner:

"[MYC] is a big powerful body that engages adults on a different schedule and in a different way of thinking... There is this series of professionals in our city who are involved in important decision making who have to work on Sundays sometimes - part of their job is to go to MYC meetings on Sundays."

The MYC’s influence on the culture of City and County government is most clearly evident in two key outcomes: increased intergroup contact and establishment of a public leadership pipeline.

Increased contact between diverse youth and adults: Through interactions with youth, government leaders came to view young people as constituents and resources rather than relying on preconceived stereotypes. This shift in attitude deepened adult motivation to partner with youth and provide resources for Y-AP. Direct contact with youth also influenced how adult leaders understood public issues and made policy decisions. Officials commonly reported that the MYC reduced the isolation and “echo chamber” of public office because youth speak directly and personally about issues that affect them. County Commissioner Judy Shiprack suggests that hearing about the lived experience of youth breaks down “silos” within government:

"[The MYC] knocks on the door of my awareness all the time so that the impact of our budget decisions, the impact of our policy decisions on children in the community is present... Youth move freely between systems and jurisdictions but we don't. So more contact will help us understand the context of our own services, and it's going to help us to become better conveners."

Establishment of a public leadership pipeline: One of the most visible, powerful and long-lasting effects of the MYC is the establishment of a public leadership “pipeline” for diverse youth. The MYC actively recruited youth from groups that are underrepresented in government, such as youth of color, immigrant youth, LGBTQ youth, and youth who experience poverty or homelessness. However, it is not enough to simply recruit diverse youth and put them at a table together. The MYC engaged and retained these youth through intentional practices such as monitoring safe space for dialogue, promoting an inclusive group environment, and recruiting multiple youth from within underrepresented groups.

Diverse study participants frequently highlighted the fact that the leadership of the MYC is far more demographically diverse than the leadership of other public entities. Elected officials portrayed the MYC as a valuable access point to underrepresented communities, and suggested that youth commissioners spoke about issues of identity and equity in a more nuanced manner than many adults. Community partners described the MYC as a pivotal force for transforming the face of public leadership.

Youth from underrepresented groups portrayed their involvement in the MYC as a way to shift existing power imbalances and amplify the perspective of their communities. The MYC offered them direct access to institutional leaders and insider settings, along with support to develop and exercise their public voice. Most alumni interviewed for this study were pursuing careers in government or the nonprofit sector. One former youth commissioner described the impact of this public leadership pipeline for underrepresented youth:

"If I don't see a person of color in politics, or if I don't see a queer person in politics, how can I ever feel like that's my place - right? We're kind of trying to make young people understand that they do belong there [in local government] and they can have a voice there."

The diversity of the MYC was a benefit not just for youth commissioners but also for the larger community. At the time of the study, two youth commissioners participated alongside adults on a committee to establish a Department of Equity for the City of Portland as part of an effort to ensure that local government decision-making represented the interests of historically marginalized groups. City Commissioner Amanda Fritz observed that these youth commissioners made many valuable contributions to this committee, in terms of “astute observations” that helped adults to “break through the same old thinking” about the issues. Fritz suggested that the MYC is unique in comparison to other public bodies because the youth commissioners themselves personally represent diverse communities:

"The race and ethnic diversity of the Youth Commission is not something that you see in a lot of other commissions and city processes...So their life experiences and the challenges they face... is also really a built-in equity committee..."

Clearly, the MYC influenced not only the culture of public institutions, but by inviting a diverse group of young people to participate, the MYC also influenced the nature and tenor of public processes.

Public Process

Young people interact with public systems in multiple ways: as student, as the ‘target group’ of programs to reduce risk and as “super users” of services like parks. However, youth are often treated as guests in public dialogue even though youth have as much at stake in deliberations as other groups. The MYC works to change that status quo. Since 1996 the MYC involved hundreds of youth commissioners who in turn prepared and engaged hundreds more youth in public dialogue. This youth infusion makes a difference in terms of who is at the table and how the conversation takes place. Specifically, this study found that the MYC directly and indirectly influenced public process through: increased use of inclusive participation strategies; shifts in power dynamics in deliberations; and formation of new alliances or coalitions.

Increased use of inclusive participation strategies: The MYC made participation accessible by modeling engagement strategies not regularly seen in public meetings, such as: deliberative polling, frequent small group discussions, storytelling, performance and kinesthetic activities. These activities acknowledged diverse communication styles and provided participants with time to get to know each other and reflect on the issues. MYC events were highly interactive, such as a candidate forum structured as a speed-dating event where all participants got to sit at small tables and interact with each of the candidates. MYC events included music, food, and a raffle. In short, MYC forums were youth-driven, active and fun!

These innovations, according to youth commissioners, made meetings more engaging and productive. Many adults agreed and called upon the MYC to implement “youth-friendly” strategies into meetings for the general public. During the study the MYC worked with adult partners to integrate activities such as a fish bowl and digital storytelling into a regional summit about education issues. In some cases, adults adopted these inclusive strategies into their work. The City of Portland’s Youth Planner Program, where the motto “youth friendly is people friendly,” offers a useful example of this. By translating technical concepts into terms that relate to youth, youth planners reportedly helped to “demystify language” in planning materials, making them more accessible to community members. According to Youth Planning Program Director Pam Phan, adult planners started incorporating youth-inspired design strategies into their own work:

“They started to shift how they engaged the public because they realized it’s not so hard. They made their survey less wordy, they made it colorful, they attached pictures to it, they made a kind of fold-out game so that survey engagement on the street wasn’t so bureaucratic... They took our advice about giving incentives when you ask someone a question or you ask them a series of questions ... they started taking our advice to ‘youth-ify’ their language.”

Shifts in power dynamics as new voices and issues emerge: Youth-led public forums explicitly shift the balance of power from adults to youth. Youth set the terms for adult engagement, often taking intentional steps to limit adult voice to make room for other youth to be heard. Elected officials reported that they find themselves “in the hot seat” as youth question their stance on particular issues; a position that one official described as the “ultimate power” in the public sphere.

MYC-led forums created space for youth to raise new issues and ideas; which were not yet on the public agenda. Elected officials suggested that youth forums provide “eye-opening” insight that challenges adult assumptions and influences their decisions. Mayor Tom Potter reflected on a pivotal moment in understanding that youth offer a different worldview that may challenge policymakers’ assumptions about youth interests and needs:

“It really struck me how much we lose by not listening to our young people, because they had ideas that we would have never, never thought of without their influence. When we were doing our rounds in developing the Bill of Rights, we were holding community meetings... There was maybe about a 100-120 kids there... And it sort of set the tone for me in terms of hearing things that I would not hear otherwise.

A young woman stood up--she was maybe 14--and when I asked the general question: ‘What do you think should be a right for all children and youth?’ And she said: ‘I think every child should have the right to play.’ And it really struck me. I thought, you know, of course kids play. My kids play, my grandchildren play, but not every child gets to play. Some children are put into raising siblings and taking on more responsibilities within families. It just, it really struck me that, you know, if we just take the time and listen to what youth are saying, they’ll tell us things that are very insightful and very important in terms of public policy. That link between public policy and them is extremely important.”

Less obvious yet equally important, the MYC also shifted power dynamics in adult-led meetings. Stakeholders observe that policymakers adopt a more open-minded and collaborative tone when youth commissioners are in the room, particularly around contentious issues. Youth “disarm policymakers” and inspired a degree of collaboration

not typically seen in deliberations and negotiations. Youth commissioners noticed this as well, suggesting that adults were unable to rely on negative stereotypes when youth are making their case in person. City and County staff in particular observed policymakers change in tone and discourse, especially around issues such as tuition equity for undocumented college students. This change in public discourse was further relayed by one government staff person:

"Because they're youth, they have an opportunity to engage in some more divisive issues in a way that adults aren't able to...I think the perfect example is what they're advocating for around tuition equity. They've created...more of the political will to address it than I think in you would have if had an adult saying: We've got to care about it."

Formation of new alliances: To realize their collective goals, the MYC sparked partnerships within local government, across government systems and with community-based organizations. For example, the MYC advanced their health agenda by securing private foundation grant funds for a partnership among Multnomah County Health Department, Cascade AIDS Project and AmeriCorps to establish school-based health center youth advisory boards and a youth-driven outreach campaign. Such alliances build political power laterally and strengthen the capacity of youth and community groups to affect change on common issues of concern.

Youth Commissioners Flip the Script in Public Dialogue around "Youth Violence"

In fall 2011, the MYC formed a new committee in response to two violent incidents that summer: a beating of a youth and the shooting death of a middle school student. To understand youth experiences of violence, the MYC partnered with Portland State University students to conduct 16 focus groups in places such as schools, afterschool programs and detention centers. The MYC used the insight from these focus groups to develop policy proposals around seven forms of violence: home violence, dating/sexual violence, school violence, gang violence, police violence, cyberbullying and anti-LGBTQ violence.

The MYC organized the Youth Against Violence Summit to draw attention to the issue and engage more youth in developing these policy proposals. Over 300 youth spent the morning learning about issues of violence through performances, presentations and a panel discussion before breaking into smaller groups to refine the MYC's policy recommendations related to specific forms of violence such as police violence or school violence. After lunch and a raffle, adult leaders such as the Mayor, school superintendents, and Chief of Police were "invited into the space". Youth reconvened in their small groups to discuss their recommendations directly with the adult leaders who had the power to implement them. Youth commissioners facilitated these conversations with the support of an adult ally. Finally, the MYC asked officials to make a public commitment in front of the entire summit to act on specific recommendations. The event was covered by three media outlets and attracted over a dozen high-level adult leaders.

This example illustrates how the MYC offers a more expansive and inclusive vision of what public process can look like. The MYC engaged new voices and surfaced new issues through inclusive participation strategies with the focus groups and summit. The MYC shifted power dynamics by inviting adult leaders to their summit and exerting public pressure on those leaders to address their policy agenda. The MYC's broad anti-violence agenda expands public dialogue around "youth violence" from the limited focus on gangs to talk about "youth experiences of violence" in multiple forms, including institutional violence against youth. To develop and carry out this agenda, the MYC built alliances with a diverse array of government and community-based groups.

Public Policy and Programs

The MYC lays the foundation for more responsive policy and programs by enhancing institutional culture and public processes. Evidence indicates that the MYC also influenced policies and programs in a more direct manner as outlined in the third box in Table 6. First, the MYC moved issues to action on the public agenda. Through lobbying, public testimony, and interactions with the media, the MYC sustained attention on issues until government leaders responded. Often, the MYC provided information to help government staff increase the accessibility, effectiveness, and equity of existing public programs for youth. The MYC increased allocation of public resources for youth by directly securing new funds or signing on to coalitions, writing letters and giving testimony in support of investments in youth. As one alumni recalled, the MYC worked “behind-the-scenes” to retain funds for core programs:

“We evaluated how the County does budgeting and program offers, and we evaluated every program offer that had anything to do with children and youth... We saved program offers. We told them [County Commission] that the things they thought were really important weren’t really that important. So that was a really big achievement, but that’s an example of something no one knows about, except us. It’s very behind-the-scenes. ”

Stakeholders commonly cite the YouthPass program - a free public transit pass for 13,000 Portland Public School students annually - as the MYC’s most significant and visible policy “win”.

Winning Free Access to Public Transit for Portland Public School Students

The MYC moved the YouthPass issue to action by generating the “momentum” necessary to prompt three agencies to establish a free public transit pass for youth. In a series of closed-door and public meetings, youth came to the table armed with research, models, personal stories, and letters of support from leaders across the region. The MYC maintained attention on the issue through persistent advocacy and collaboration with Mayor Tom Potter and Mayor Sam Adams. Media coverage of the campaign cited youth commissioners as major spokespeople alongside elected officials. MYC efforts resulted in YouthPass, a new \$3.5 million inter-agency partnership between the City of Portland, Portland Public Schools and TriMet Public Transit. Mayor Potter says that persistent advocacy by the MYC transformed the idea of YouthPass into a reality:

“The MYC did that research, and found out that the City of Eugene had bus passes for their students and they got the money through a state program called the BETC [Business Energy Tax Credits]. And they even told the general manager of TriMet how to go about doing it...I mean they basically handed it to TriMet on a platter, and to us, to the City.”

Youth commissioners went on to advise agencies on tasks related to the YouthPass program pilot and implementation, recommending that the pass be a sticker on student ID cards. The MYC assisted TriMet to launch a “Respect the Ride” outreach campaign to encourage youth to ride safely, and served as a liaison between PPS students and TriMet. Mayor Sam Adams applauded the MYC’s on-going advising work to ensure that the images and messages in TriMet outreach materials were reflective of, accessible to, the diverse youth who ride public transit:

“The MYC’s work on our transit safety messaging was stellar... it was really good in saying that this doesn’t relate to us, and then to go further than that to talk about equity...it is good to ask youth and involve youth in that kind of tactical or strategic planning.”

According to TriMet, ridership studies indicate that YouthPass increased public transit use by youth, especially to out-of-school time activities and jobs. YouthPass has operated across the district without interruption since 2009. When the loss of the tax credit funding source occurred in 2011, the MYC stepped back into an advocacy role to work with Mayor Adams to find alternative sources of funding for the program. Adams suggested the increased collaborations between elected officials and the MYC on YouthPass resulted from collective learning over time of “how to do” Y-AP in government.

Youth commissioners often pointed to YouthPass as a model for their own work because this “win” impacts the everyday lives of large numbers of youth, making it easier for the MYC to see and explain the impact of their work. Successes such as YouthPass also raise the visibility and credibility of the MYC in the eye of policymakers and the public. Today, the MYC continues to advocate for sustained funding for YouthPass. They have also expanded their transit equity agenda and activities through partnership with local advocacy groups such as OPAL Environmental Justice.

Creating the Conditions for Youth and Policy Development:

Recommendations for Sustaining Youth-Adult Partnerships in Dynamic Public Systems

The MYC constantly addressed barriers. Policy contexts are dynamic, charged, and complex. Within this context, a major challenge was that of ensuring sufficient human and financial stability for the MYC. While flux may be the rule for contemporary public institutions, this study found that the MYC operated most effectively during the times when stability was offered to the MYC. Such stability – in expectations, in resources, and in staffing levels – provided the youth and their adult partners with a firm foundation from which to engage in effective public work.

This study found two conditions facilitated the success of the MYC. First, the MYC was supported by a larger youth engagement infrastructure of people and policies within the City and County. Second, the MYC maximized this infrastructure to strategically frame issues and proposals in terms that resonated with important allies.

Establishing Structures and Values for Y-AP

The MYC is an institutional structure for youth-adult partnerships in public action, authorized and operated through intergovernmental agreements. The MYC is the official youth policy advisory body for the City and County. While this statement is obvious, it is critical. In the United States, there are few structures, enacted and supported by public policy, that are designed explicitly to provide youth with a significant voice in public decision making. An intergovernmental provided the MYC staff and youth commissioners with an institutional “home,” legitimacy and visibility. Youth report that the “official” nature of the MYC makes them feel like a valued part of government.

The MYC is governed by an official set of by-laws that codify the group’s guiding values and traditions. There is an expectation that youth and adults would respect each other’s voices and ideas, and persist until a common agenda or strategy was achieved. These values were not simply embedded within institutional structures and guidelines. In the case of the MYC, Y-AP values were reinforced by two distinct groups of adults. First, powerful adult leaders championed Y-AP as an institutional priority. Second, adult practitioners provided coaching to ensure high quality practice and implementation consistent with Y-AP values.

Study participants commonly portrayed the MYC as the backbone for a larger youth engagement infrastructure in local government. Multiple public agencies, from the library system to the planning department, were integrating Y-AP practices into their work, often with support from the MYC. Moreover, the MYC was able to readily mobilize these diverse entities around emerging policy issues. Analysis indicates that the MYC was able to take on these roles because of its statutory and institutional legitimacy within Multnomah County and the City of Portland.

Former MYC Staff Nate Waas Shull suggested that a stable “backbone organization” such as the MYC provides a critical base for Y-AP in public systems:

"I think you can't underestimate the value of having a backbone organization of an on-going funded, supported entity that could be the go-to for something like this. Having a Youth Commission makes all the difference because otherwise it's just a series of ad-hoc meetings and it's hard to keep consistency...to keep young people coming and engaged."

Framing Issues and Building Relationships for Resonance

As representatives of the larger youth community, the MYC endeavored to be both strategic and inclusive in developing their policy agenda. Through meetings, listening sessions, and focus groups, the MYC incorporated diverse ideas from the larger community into their policy positions and action plans. The MYC experienced the most success in promoting their agenda when they were strategic about their relationships and activities. Since one of the greatest sources of leverage available to them is access to public officials, the MYC strategically framed their agenda in terms that resonated with the agenda of specific political leaders. Adult leaders were willing to leverage their own social and political capital to support the MYC's agenda because an issue resonated with their personal interests, or the interests of those whom they represent. Once the MYC gained the support of these “natural allies”, officials used their institutional power to “open doors” and move the MYC's recommendations to action.

Policymakers in this study indicated that they too were seeking “intersection points” with the MYC's agenda. Elected officials are especially interested in Y-AP on issues where youth are a target population (e.g., education) or issues where youth are perceived as bringing a more progressive perspective (e.g., equity). One manner in which youth gain credibility and access to the public sphere is through sharing personal stories regarding the impact of public policy. The MYC considered this factor in developing their strategies for interacting with officials. At the end of the study, several participants highlighted the emerging work around violence as an example of an issue where both youth and adults are committed to putting in the collective effort to realize positive change. MYC Staff Marc Fernandes described how issue resonance led to other enabling factors, such as resources:

"All the decision making that has been going on around gang violence, the piece that has been missing all these years is youth voice. There's been no youth at the table having conversations with all of these folks until this summer...Everyone is ecstatic. There is funding available and adults want to get youth involved. They don't know what to do, and they are asking the young people for guidance in a really genuine way."

Striving for Stability: Fluctuations in People and Resources

This research found that that the MYC struggled mightily with issues of stability. Turnover is a constant challenge. The youth commissioners engage in this work on a voluntary basis. Youth continually “age out” of the MYC or leave to explore other interests. This instability poses a challenge, in terms of sustaining attention on issues and modeling quality Y-AP. Rapid turnover required the MYC to invest significant resources each year in orienting new members and re-building consensus around their political agenda. The loss of experienced commissioners meant that the MYC story had to be continuously recreated for new members. In cases where peer mentors were not available to communicate best practices, tips, and experiences, new youth commissioners often had to navigate difficult policy landscapes without guidance from those who came before them. Ultimately, this lack of stability made it more difficult for the MYC to get traction and maintain momentum in the policy sphere.

While youth turnover is a challenge within the control of the MYC to address, the MYC also had to respond to conditions beyond their control. Specifically, the regular threats to their own funding and to maintaining an adequate level of staff support. In recent years, for example, the MYC devoted significant time to justifying their mandate. They consistently had to educate adult leaders (elected and agency) on the value of Y-AP, and remind them of the MYC's accomplishments. Mobilizing to “make the case” for their own funding takes time way from the MYC's

important youth development and policy work. There is no doubt that uncertain political conditions and regular funding threats limits the ability of the MYC to lead long-term policy projects and to coach other organizations that wish to adopt a Y-AP model. Indeed, during the course of this study, we note that when resources were most fully aligned to enable adequate staffing and coaching, the MYC was more actively engaged and more influential in policy conversations.

Striving for Quality: The Critical Role of MYC Staff and other Adult Supports

Preparing young people to collaborate with institutional and community leaders around high-stakes and at times contentious public issues is no easy task. Yet this is what the primary adult partners, typically MYC staff, did on a daily basis. These adult partners brought to the MYC an unusual mix of youth work skills, policy knowledge, community connections, and political savvy. These staff sought to integrate the “relational” aspects of youth work with the “strategic” aspects of policy work. This striving for quality was a constant challenge; given the time it takes to develop trusting relationships with youth and the pressure to spark policy actions on relatively short deadlines. The fact that the MYC was able to promote youth civic development, while at the same time, contributing to City and County decision making, is a testament to the skill and commitment of the MYC staff and to the other adults (from community and nonprofit groups) who closely partnered with the youth commissioners.

With just two adult staff to support 42 youth working in at least four different issue areas - each of which involved a different set of challenges, opportunities, and partnerships - it is not surprising that the MYC did not always realize their collective-level goals. At times, MYC committees struggled to identify their core issue and develop a coherent strategy to organize their collective action. This lack of focused strategy and attention on issues was a major frustration for secondary adult partners who were invited to collaborate with the MYC. This was also frustrating for youth, who felt as if they were spinning their wheels in circular conversation around their shared purpose.

Recommendations

This thorough examination of the MYC offers insight into the opportunities and challenges of local government youth commissions as a vehicle for cultivating both youth and community thriving. The MYC demonstrates that youth commissions may promote social justice, civil society, and youth development via policy processes. We do not wish to imply that the successes of the MYC came easily. They did not. As this study indicates, everybody is needed and everybody has a role to play: youth commissioners and MYC staff, elected officials and government staff, and community members of all ages.

To conclude, we return to the three core questions: What is most critical for youth-adult partnerships, such as the MYC, to realize their collective-level goals? What is necessary to take youth-adult partnership to scale across a community, in a quality and sustainable way? In considering these questions, the present study reveals four recommendations for maintaining and strengthening the MYC.

Government and community leaders need to protect the youth-adult partnership infrastructure that has been created over the past two decades.

Without stability, the MYC will always struggle to meet its full potential to spark positive outcomes among youth and within public systems. We applaud recent decisions to house the MYC under City and County departments that are respectively focused on neighborhood involvement and equity. The mission and values of these departments align well with that of the MYC. These department homes may offer stability in the midst of changing administrations and policy priorities.

Government and community leaders need to consistently encourage the MYC to work across agency and community lines, and to provide incentives for adults within public systems to collaborate with the MYC.

The policy successes of the MYC stem directly from the ability of the youth and adults to reach out to others, to craft issues in ways that resonate across diverse stakeholders, and to build common strategies across interests. This takes skill, persistence, and time. Establishing cross-agency collaboration is a primary aim of the MYC. Additional supports and incentives for this work may enhance the MYC and public policy in Multnomah County and the City of Portland. To realize this potential, the MYC needs primary adult partners - within and outside the MYC - with time and skills to find the right “niche” for youth in complex policy conversations and cross-agency initiatives.

Government and community leaders need to reduce the flux in human resources available to the MYC.

As a fundamental step towards sustainability and quality, resources for staffing the MYC should be built into the core operating budgets of local government. In terms of youth stability, the MYC may consider increasing the length of service by including summer activities or through two-year terms with clear leadership expectations for returning members. Maintaining continuity of service, among both youth and adult partners, is fundamental to the success of Y-AP initiatives such as the MYC.

Government and community leaders need to establish an “ideal” staffing level for the MYC and strive to adequately fund this goal.

Expectations are rising for the MYC to influence policy issues. The diverse skill and experience needed to operate the MYC in a quality manner cannot be underestimated. As detailed throughout this research, MYC staff and other primary adult partners demonstrated extraordinary abilities and commitment to the dual purpose of Y-AP: to promote thriving youth who are prepared for complex civic engagement, and concurrently, to partner with these youth to spark policy and program improvements.

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