**Engaging Young People to Sustain Communities, Families and Farms:**

**A Framework for Promoting Engagement [[1]](#footnote-2)**

**Introduction**

The University of Wisconsin Extension *Engaging Young People to Sustain Communities, Families, and Farms Initiative* team began as a multidisciplinary working group in 2012. The primary goal of the initiative was to identify the multidisciplinary strategies to build economically and socially vibrant communities that value, include, and ultimately retain young people in all aspects of community life. As we have learned about the complexity of the issues associated with young people oriented community change, we have also refined our thinking and definitions of terms as seemingly simple as “young people.” The information we have gathered draws from community development, youth development, education, political science, sociology, and practical wisdom.

The Initiative focuses on three core questions:

1. How can we support civic and business oriented networks and educational programs that build the social capital and skills of young people?
2. How can we engage young residents in appreciating and promoting the civic, economic, and recreational assets of their communities?
3. How can we support young people and adults working together to promote sustainability and to model ways that young people can be contributing citizens?

This paper outlines the theoretical rationale for the initiative. We discuss the critical role of youth to community; the importance of young people’s participation in community life; and the necessity of building institutional supports to ensure opportunities for young people of all ages. We describe varying theories on the value of engaging young people and examine promising practices from communities that engage young people in authentic ways. We take the position that engaging young people is imperative to the success of any

community. Places that engage young people tend to excel in indicators commonly associated with economic and social vitality, while also demonstrating lower levels of effects considered detrimental to rural and urban community life (Ross and Coleman, 2000; Dennis, 2006; Annie E. Casey, 2005; Brennan and Barrett, 2007). Strategically implementing approaches to achieve those outcomes is complex, and necessitates an interdisciplinary understanding of the problem and potential solutions.

In ***Section 1***, we provide a rationale for youth participation. We discuss the consequences of unengaged young people on the economic and social fabric of their communities. We define key terms, draw from recent thinking and trends in community development, and consider the questions: Why is engaging youth important for communities? How can we engage young people in multiple aspects of community life? What are the key strategies for engaging young people? What would a young person-inclusive community development framework look like?

In ***Section 2***, we outline a framework for engaging youth in community life. Our theory of change centers on a place-based, participatory approach that seeks to retain young people and that builds communities that are attractive for new residents. We explore some best practices that may be applicable, but we emphasize a framework for thinking about engaging youth that is context driven (place-specific) and asset-based rather than a specific blueprint program.

In ***Section 3***, we discuss gaps in our knowledge about these issues. We consider the questions: What are the characteristics of places that retain and attract young people? What is the role of UW-Extension in facilitating youth-inclusive community change? In what ways can we make our work more efficient? What kinds of research would broaden our understanding of the necessity for engaging young people and the strategies that generate youth-inclusive communities?

**Section 1 – Rationale: Why is engaging young people important for community sustainability?**

*The Economic and Social Importance of Young People*

Many rural communities are concerned about a loss of young people from their communities (Carr and Kefalas, 2010; Brown and Schafft, 2011). This concern stems from a phenomenon described as “brain drain” in which young people from rural communities frequently migrate to more populated areas that have more opportunities for education, employment, recreation, and other amenities (Carr and Kefalas, 2010). Brain drain has important economic and social consequences. For example, communities are left with a smaller pool of would-be workers, community leaders, entrepreneurs, and active citizens that form the foundation of a flourishing community. A similar phenomenon of out-migration occurs in high poverty urban areas (Wilson, 2011, Sampson et al, 2002). In the urban context, the entire city may not suffer, but neighborhoods certainly do, often with severe social consequences to those who remain in place.

In both rural towns and urban neighborhoods the most pronounced negative effects of losing talented young people include:

* Decreased ability to address community needs as the most intelligent and motivated leave (Artz and Yu, 2011);
* Weakened social capital (Wilson, 2011; Barnett and Brennan, 2006);
* Loss of productive lands (Carr and Kefalas, 2009);
* Increased costs of critical community services including schools, critical infrastructure, public services and recreational opportunities resulting from decreased population base (Artz and Yu, 2011);
* Lower quality of life from reduced opportunities and vitality resulting from population loss (Artz and Yu, 2011).

These consequences reinforce one another, leading to continual decline in effected communities. In other words, a weakness in one area is a weakness in all.

One explanation for the downward spiral is Cornelia and Jan Flora’s Community Capitals Framework (2008) for understanding the key characteristics of a sustainable community. Flora and Flora argue that all types of capital that support a community’s physical and social flourishing are intertwined and interdependent. According to Flora framework, most sustainable communities are characterized by strong levels of natural, cultural, human, social, political, financial, and built capital (2008). Each type of capital supports the other, thus an investment in social capital may also lead to stronger human and cultural capital (2008). Looking at the negative effects of a brain drain, it is clear that the loss of young people weakens multiple types of capital, consequently weakening the entire community.

Despite these negative consequences, the loss of young people and the related social and economic decline is not inherent in all places. Many rural communities and urban neighborhoods are socially and economically vibrant. Such places retain young people and are successful in attracting new residents while maintaining a healthy and productive natural environment (Artz, 2003). Although many places certainly experience patterns of out-migration of young people and experience the negative impact of disengaged young people on a neighborhood, there are multiple stories of successful inclusion of young people in community development (Ross, 2000, Sampson, 2002, Dennis, 2006, Andresen, 2011). While the consequences of out-migration of young people may be particularly acute in rural and high poverty urban areas, one thing is clear: **engaging young people is critically important in any location.**

Studies examining the characteristics of successful communities (rural and urban) share a common element: Places where young people are engaged tend to be better off than those with high populations of unengaged, disaffected youth and young adults (Barnett and Brennan, 2006). Knowing this, scholars from multiple fields increasingly study the strategies and effects of engaging young people. Across disciplines, strategies that engage young people have shown benefits that include promotion of civic competencies (Flanagan and Levine, 2010), enhancement of social networks and social capital (Calvert et al, 2013), empowerment (Christens and Peterson, 2012), generation of a sense of place and community (Gieryn, 2000, Dennis, 2006), as well as positive economic and public health outcomes (Ross, 2010, Annie E. Casey, 2005).

*What are the benefits of engagement?*

Engaged young people benefit communities in a variety of ways. Some of the benefits occur at individual levels, others benefit the entire community. The outcomes associated with strategic, place-based engagement include:

1. Democratic Processes/Civic Engagement

Young people’s early participation in community life is well documented as a pathway to lifelong civic engagement (Flanagan, 2013). Participation may be as episodic as a one-time service-learning opportunity or entail sustained involvement that engages young people in organizing around a community issue (Theiss-Morse & Hibbing, 2005; Zukin et al, 2006; Christens and Dolan, 2011). Other examples include sustained youth-adult partnership type strategies in which multiple adults and multiple young people work together to act on community issues through democratic processes.

2. Social Capital

Social capital is a way of conceptualizing the network of trusting interpersonal relationships in a community. Social capital is about more than one-to-one relationships: it adds value to the whole community as others can tap into the networks and accumulated trust. Social capital has been defined "as the web of cooperative relationships between members of the community that allows them to act collectively and solve problems together" (Chazdon et al, n.d.) Social capital is composed of both vertical and horizontal networks, norms of reciprocity and trust, strong ties (bonding) that lead to people helping each other, and enforcing norms of social control and weak ties (bridging) that link people and organizations to resources, information, and influence (Coleman, 1988). Networks that bridge diverse members of a community are particularly important to avoid the closed and rigid aspects of a community with strong bonds and few bridges.

If a community does not link young people in its networks, an opportunity to create bridging social capital is missed. Such networks are valuable to individuals, for example helping young people escape economic isolation in impoverished urban neighborhoods (Wilson, 2011) and to communities, which benefit from the energy and perspectives of younger members. The resulting relationships are the foundation of future projects, with potential public or economic benefits (Baker and Johannes, 2013).

3. Sense of Place

Sense of place is the emotional and physical connection people have to a place and the aspects that people value about places. Two interrelated components of sense of place can be identified: 1) place attachment – the emotional connection to place, and 2) place meaning – symbolic meanings given to place. Place meaning is the symbolic meanings that people give to places (Relph, 1976; Semken and Butler Freeman, 2007; Stedman, 2002). Meanings can span ecological, social, behavioral values. The meaning that is given to (or comes from) place varies by person and culture (Tuan, 1977). Place meanings may be based on the physical characteristics of a place, but are a property of human interaction and experience in place (Relph, 1976). That is, they develop from peoples’ pre-existing values in interaction with a place. Place meanings develop and change through learning (Kudryavtsev, 2013).

Place attachment is the emotional, psychological and physical connection to a place (Altman & Low, 1992; Jorgensen and Stedman, 2001; Williams et al, 1992). Through place attachment, places can become part of part of a person’s identity (Altman and Low, 1992; Cuba and Hummon, 1993; Proshansky, Fabian and Kaminoff, 1983; Vaske and Kobrin, 2001).

Research provides some insight into how meaning and attachment to place are developed. Tuan (1974) believes that “place achieves concrete reality when our experience of it is total, that is, through all the senses as well as with the active and reflective mind” (p. 18) and “feeling for place is influenced by knowledge” (p. 32). Creation of place can result from a variety of factors including distinction, time, and notable events and people (Tuan, 1974; Feld and Basso, 1996).

Meaning and attachment are developed in relation to the land and other beings (Tuan, 1977; Mueller Worster and Abrams, 2005; Caniglia, 2011). Childhood experience is important in the development of meaning and attachment to place. Childhood sense of place develops through time in nature often with adult mentors (Chawla, 1999; Kahn and Kellert, 2002; Nabhan and Trimble, 1994; Gruenewald and Smith, 2010; Tuan, 1974).

Sense of place can motivate people’s environmental and social behavior and thinking. A few research projects have looked specifically at the relationship between sense of place and civic engagement/ environmentally responsible behavior. There is support that sense of place is at least correlated with environmentally responsible behavior (Ardoin, 2009; Brehm, Eisenhauer and Krannich, 2006; Mueller Worster and Abrams, 2005; Stedman, 2002; Vorkinn and Riese, 2001; Walker and Chapman, 2003) and a few studies have shown causation between sense of place and environmentally responsible behavior (Halpenny, 2010; Payton et al, 2005; Vaske and Kobrin, 2001).

4. Economic/Community Development Factors

Economic and community development may benefit most from engaged young people. As we have previously mentioned brain-drain has devastating impacts. Strategies to attract new residents and strengthen attachment to place have attracted significant attention in rural community development (cf Andresen, 2011; Brennan & Barnett, 2009).Clearly, engaging the young people already living in a community has benefits at multiple levels of community life. Communities that engage youth are perceived as healthier, safer, and as attractive places for families. (These are also factors often noted as reasons that people decide to move to a particular location). Engaging young people builds community capacity to address local issues. These approaches are only part of the larger picture required for sustainable community development.

*What are the driving factors that cause out-migration?*

Out migration is strongly tied to economic circumstances. Job opportunities for skilled and non-skilled workers are critical to any well-functioning town. Secure jobs bring stability to families and to the tax base that, in turn, provides the structural supports of policing, fire services, and other infrastructure (Ferry, 2006; Brennan et al, 2007; Nitzberg, 2005; Carr and Kefalas 2010). Education and youth development professionals may part ways from community development professionals if they emphasize youth developing their economic and personal potential away from their communities of origin.

*What are the factors that decrease out-migration (promote new residents, create a sense of place)?*

Outmigration may not be the issue here. For rural communities, opportunities to attend college are typically away from home. For non-college bound young people, the military, technical schools, and meaningful employment may only be found elsewhere. More is known, though not enough, about factors that encourage the return of young people to their hometowns after attaining college degrees and other life experiences (cf Carr and Kefalas, 2009). Similarly, the field of community and economic development has much knowledge about community assets that attract young talent to live and raise families in even the most rural of places.

*Who are young people?*

Youth

Recent research identifies two developmentally separate groups of young people. The first group who we refer to as traditional “youth” are aged 11-18. This age group typically attends middle and high schools (6th-12th grades). Many in this age group are afforded multiple opportunities to participate in community life through school and community based organizations. However, many of the opportunities for this group to develop a sense of place and a sense of civic commitment may be absent, depending on the intent and duration of the program and content of school curricula. Participation in such programs may not be equal across socio-economic groups as costs associated with programs can deter interest. Nevertheless, school-aged young people have more opportunities to participate in community life than other categories of young people.

Young Adults

The second category of young people extends many people’s conception of “young.” Commonly referred to as emerging or young adults, the group is aged 19-29 or even older. Emerging adulthood is recognized as the time when individuals form lasting civic identities, join the workforce, and start families. (Zaff et al, 2009; Flanagan and Levine, 2010). It is also a time when individuals become aware of how local issues and social climate affect personal well-being (Zaff et al, 2009).

Emergent research delineates a third category of youth that is characterized by level of formal educational attainment. Referred to as “non-college bound,” individuals in this group do not hold college degrees or intend to attend college. The group represents 50 percent of the entire young adult population. Unlike their college-attending peers, this group is afforded fewer opportunities to be involved in community and civic life (Zaff et al, 2009; Flanagan and Levine, 2010).

Young Families

Parents of young children frequently overlap in age with those we have grouped as young adults, but they have a distinct set of social and developmental needs.

Researchers concerned with community sustainability suggest that vibrant communities engage each of these distinct groups of young in ways that are developmentally appropriate, using interventions that build on the assets of each group. (Carr and Kefalas, 2009; Brennan et al, 2007, 2009). Likewise, scholars concerned with developing civic competencies, sense of place, and career preparation find that interventions yield the best results when they are implemented in developmentally (age-appropriate) ways (Flanagan, 2013; Zaff et al, 2009). Robust community-wide engagement of young people, therefore, requires a variety of approaches and may involve different sets of local institutions working together. This implies that a holistic community-wide approach may result in better outcomes as any intervention will reach all residents.

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| **Category** | **Key Outcomes** | **Typical engagement and potential opportunities** |
| Youth (11-18)  (multiple sub-categories) | Sense of community, social trust, civic and democratic competencies, political beliefs, many others | School-based and out-of-school time activities including participation in clubs, sports, service-learning etc. |
| Young Adults  (college educated) | Civic and democratic competencies, sense of community, economic opportunity, leadership | Many opportunities via social networking, job-based and career development, inclusion on local decision-making bodies, etc. |
| Young Adults  (non-college bound/educated) | Family formation, social needs, establishing primary attachments, adult identity | Few and declining, Institutional lag |
| Families with Young Children | Social Support, Support for economic well-being, Opportunities for engagement with schools and other educational environments | Networking among families, School engagement programs |

*What are the key strategies for engaging young people?*

There are many competing strategies for engaging young people, and they may differ depending on disciplinary perspective. Most successful strategies share five common elements: they promote active civic participation, they are intergenerational, they involve shared work, they are place-based and asset-driven, and they are deliberately planned. (Zeldin, 2004; Nitzberg, 2005; Barnett and Brennan, 2006).

From a developmental perspective, the effectiveness of any intervention aimed at engaging a person is dependent on age. Meaningful participation in community life will look different for a 15-year old compared with that of a 24-year old college graduate (Flanagan and Levine, 2010; Zaff et al, 2014). The strategies for engaging young people vary by age-group, familial status, and continually change as a person ages. Strategic efforts to attract and retain young people in rural and urban communities will also differ depending on place-based factors. Nonetheless, it is worth mentioning some of the research-based approaches for engaging each category of young people. We begin with discussing strategies for engaging traditional youth (11-18), then discuss approaches for young adults, and examine intergenerational approaches.

***Engaging Youth (11-18)***

Youth development theories are highly interdisciplinary and quickly changing. Approaches to youth participation and theory of youth development has moved from problem-focused prevention strategies to asset-based positive youth development practices, and more recently to social justice-oriented youth development and youth organizing (Ross, 2010; Dennis, 2006; Pittman et al, 2001). Embedded in these emerging practices, is the concept of Youth-Adult Partnerships, which can be viewed as a core element necessary for effective programming generally (Zeldin et al, 2005, 2008, 2013).

***Positive Youth Development***

Positive Youth Development (PYD) emerged as a response to public health-oriented youth programs of the 1970s and 1980s that addressed the “youth problem” and tended to focus on preventing problem behaviors such as drug use, sexual activity, and violence (Ross, 2012; Dennis, 2006). Recognizing that prevention, problem-focused programs were having limited or no impact on “problem behaviors” and were contributing to negative perceptions of youth, a paradigm shift occurred in the 1990s, rooted in Karen Pittman’s often quoted phrase that “problem free is not fully prepared” (Pittman et al, 2001; McLaughlin, 2000). PYD is rooted in the idea that the “key task of adolescence is for young people to develop skills, values, attitude, and competency to be successful adults and to avoid making risky decisions that could have a negative impact on their future” (Eccles and Gootman, 2002). Positive Youth Development focuses on building youth assets (Catalano et al, 2002) and offering opportunities for meaningful youth participation in and out of school (Eccles and Gootman, 2002; Pittman et al, 2001; Gambone et al, 2002). Positive Youth Development programs have been the attention of much empirical research finding positive outcomes for identity formation, civic attributes, self-esteem, academic performance and decreased “risky” behaviors (Ross, 2006).

***Youth-Adult Partnerships***

Today, Youth-Adult Partnership (Y-AP) is considered to be a core component of any youth development program concerned with community change. The positive outcomes associated with the shift from prevention to positive youth development are subject of much empirical research and highly regarded in the field. The field continues to shift with contributions regarding strategies to achieve better outcomes. Youth-Adult Partnerships are becoming widely recognized as a necessary core practice for organizations/programs working with youth. Y-AP is defined as the “practice of multiple youth and multiple adults deliberating and acting together in a collective (democratic) fashion over a sustained period of time through shared work intended to promote social justice, strengthen an organization and/or to affirmatively address a community issue” (Zeldin et al, 2013). High quality Y-AP includes opportunities for authentic decision-making, natural mentors, reciprocal activity, and community connectedness. High quality Y-AP is shown to have beneficial outcomes for positive youth development indicators, and potential to contribute to broader recognition and institutionalization of youth participation in community decisions (Zeldin et al, 2004, 2005, 2008, 2013).

***Social Justice Youth Development***

With Y-AP as a central component, there is also increased attention to the importance of civic skills for sustaining strong communities and democracy (Flanagan and Levine, 2010), as well as youth social justice oriented approaches and youth organizing models. The general thought is that youth can and should be active participants in society, that civic skills are developed through practicing those skills, that social change occurs through partnership between youth and adults, and that youth can be agents of community and social change (Gambone et al, 2006; Ross, 2010). Social justice oriented approaches, focused on addressing underlying power relations and conditions that affect youth and on transforming community conditions, have shown strong outcomes for the traditional PYD indicators and also for increasing participants’ sense of belonging, political awareness, and civic skills (Gambone et al, 2006; Checkoway and Gutierrez, 2006).

Youth Organizing is an emerging approach that includes Y-AP and social justice frameworks, and is growing as a model for youth community engagement and positive youth development (Christens and Dolan, 2011). Youth Organizing, with roots in community organizing models of the 1930s and more recent faith-based organizing initiatives, can be distinguished from other youth engagement models by its concentration on underlying social conditions and power relationships, focus on youth learning skills to influence power, youth choice in defining the issue, and youth leadership (Christens and Dolan, 2011). Although evidence is limited, the Youth Organizing model has been shown to be more effective than other approaches at achieving PYD more effectively and at promoting leadership, community involvement, and decision-making (Gambone et al, 2006; Ross, 2010; Christens and Dolan, 2011).

These recently developing strategies for engaging youth in communities demonstrate promise for incorporating youth voice and action to neighborhood and community development. Because these strategies emphasize a role of youth as agents of positive social change, they are potentially valuable in enhancing neighborhood and community development initiatives. These strategies certainly have a positive impact on the organizations that work with youth – resulting in higher levels of youth participation in community based organization programs, and changes in adult perceptions of youth (Zeldin et al, 2008; Checkoway and Gutierrez, 2006). Workforce development and post-secondary preparation activities are important considerations for communities as well as local employers as they work to encourage a sense of place for young people. Such efforts will benefit young people most likely to stay in communities and those who often receive fewer educational resources (Carr and Kefalas, 2009). Evidence suggests that youth, especially youth disconnected from work or school, can benefit from programs that combine education, support services, and occupational skills development (U.S. Department of Labor, 2014).

***Engaging Young Adults (19-29)***

While their younger cohorts are the subject of much research and provided with various approaches to engagement, young adults are typically not the focus of youth engagement or community development practitioners. The majority of young adult engagement occurs within university settings. In the past few decades, the practice of higher education civic engagement grows and grows. Civic engagement, sometimes called community engagement, includes a wide variety of practices: student volunteerism, service learning, community-based research, and others (Furco, 1996; Mooney and Edwards, 2001). The Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education even created a special category recognizing higher education institutions that promote community service among their student body. Universities and colleges devote vast resources for getting college students involved in the institution’s local community. The University of Wisconsin-Madison, the Morgridge Center for Public Service has a staff person dedicated solely to promoting student volunteerism in and around Madison.

Beyond student volunteerism, service learning is an increasingly popular method of engaging college youth in community work. Typical service learning involves students putting in hours working with non-profit groups and in turn receiving academic credit. While primarily designed to serve the students’ learning needs, and generally less productive for community groups than it could be, the practice holds great potential for not just the youth but for the community (Stoecker and Tryon, 2009). Like student volunteerism, however, the focus is on students serving the institution’s local community, not the student’s home community.

In some colleges and universities, faculty and students have engaged in community-based research—a form of research that starts with a research question defined by a community group or organization. The students and professor then do the research, sometimes with community members, and the community group or organization then uses the results in some community improvement activity. In the best practice, an entire course does a single research project (Hidayat, Stoecker, and Gates, 2013), and it is consequently unlikely that the project will be in any particular student’s home town.

The exceptions to the lack of connectedness between the students’ communities and their civic engagement are few, but important. Some community colleges draw primarily local students, and also involve them in service in their own communities, though this is not without complications since students could also be recipients of local service providers that other students are partnering with (Tullier, n.d.), In one innovative practice, the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire allows students to complete the university’s 30-hour service requirement in the hometown during the summer. We know of no research on the effects of this option, but it seems that summer service could better connect the student and their home community, perhaps increasing the chances that the student may return home at some point in their lives. And in general, the research attempting to measure the effects of these practices on overall student civic engagement are not encouraging. Students seem to experience some slight academic improvements, and perhaps some attitude change (Warren, 2012; Parker-Gwin and Mabry, 1998), but little to no change in their political engagement (Koliba, 2004; Byrne, 2012).

The other challenge facing higher education community engagement is its lack of impact on the community. Service learning in particular seems to be most useful for the students, rather than the community groups and organizations with which they work (Stoecker and Tryon, 2009, Sandy and Holland, 2006; Blouin and Perry, 2009), but even community-based research is perceived in at least some community settings as exploitive rather than beneficial for the community (Ross, 2014).

Some of this lack of impact, especially in rural areas further from higher education institutions, might be improved upon through greater involvement by Cooperative Extension. In Wisconsin, county-level Extension has very little contact with college and university students, and what contact it has is generally not very productive. But, as the local anchor for the University of Wisconsin system, with a community problem-solving mission, it seems that Extension may be able to both better connect college students to their home towns and get better service from higher education community engagement programs like service learning (Stoecker, 2014).

There are four types of roles Cooperative Extension can play in improving the community outcomes of higher education community engagement. All of these models begin with the premise that higher education community engagement is led by Extension and/or community-based leaders, not higher education students or faculty. The first model is “direct service support,” where Extension helps to coordinate community-based projects so that service learners can be fit into those projects in the most useful ways. Second is “Extension as client” where students work directly for Extension on Extension-defined projects. Third is “Extension as broker” where local Extension helps match up students with particular skills with community groups wanting those skills for particular projects. Finally, there is the “community development service learning” model where community groups, Extension, and higher education actors collaborate as a team on large goal-oriented community projects, fitting in higher education resources in various places where they can be most useful. These model are practiced by Extension in other areas to some success (Stoecker, 2014).

***Non-College Bound Youth***

Opportunities for young adults to participate in community life outside of academia, especially in decision-making, are scarce. This reality is particularly pronounced for non-college bound young people (NCBY) who comprise approximately 50% of the whole youth population (Zaff et al, 2009). NCBY are more likely than their college educated counterparts to stay in or near the communities they grew up in, and consequently have a great understanding of those communities, its members, and cultures (Carr and Kefalas, 2010). Even so, they are rarely sought out for their knowledge and experiences in community development.

NCBY are a marginalized group in American society and approaches to engagement must take into consideration the challenges they frequently face. The majority of these challenges are related to poverty and include (but are not limited to) navigating the justice, foster, and health care systems, unplanned pregnancy, a lack of access to technology, and a weakened sense of place associated with limited property and land ownership (Zaff et al, 2009). As youth, NCBY in low income environments often have few educated, politically active mentors and role models or democratic education and activities in schools (Zaff et al, 2009). As young adults, NCBY have few opportunities for professional development and adult education. Employment opportunities are often limited to part time jobs without benefits, and many NCBY hold multiple jobs in order to make ends meet (Zaff et al, 2009). Such economic demands leave little time for structured community engagement and education.

Nonetheless, engaging NCBY is possible and meaningful. As previously stated, this group of young people has a wealth of knowledge and experience in their communities, and engagement can simultaneously serve their development and that of society (Institute of Medicine, 2014). Successful strategies shift perspectives of deficiency to those of assets, and help foster a new image for NCBY (Minor, 2012). This is the philosophy of Public Allies, a nonprofit organization that asserts it “is changing the face and practice of leadership in communities across the country by demonstrating our conviction that everyone *can* lead, and that lasting social change results when citizens of all backgrounds step up, take responsibility, and work together.” (Public Allies, n.d.)

Effective practices to engage NCBY include creating opportunities and incentives for professional development through community leadership and service. The military has historically been a popular option among NCBY because of benefits like education funding and travel opportunities while in service. Many military programs include a civic lessons component, and veterans demonstrate higher rates of voter turnout than non-veterans (Zaff et al, 2009). Civic education can also be provided through youth in-governance initiatives, which engage young people in authentic decision-making that directly impacts their communities. Programs like YouthBuild AmeriCorps develop professional skills through service projects. For NCBY working low-paying jobs and who have little time to volunteer, businesses can create volunteer opportunities in the community and reward employees for their time (Zaff et al, 2009). Lastly, community colleges have been and remain vital partners in providing outreach, education, and training to NCBY.

***Engaging Families of Young Children***

Children and families are frequently the target of progressive school-reform programs that recognize the important role of parental involvement in early academic achievement. The most widely implemented school reform efforts emphasize parental engagement as an essential element of positive school climate, and academic success of students (Schutz, 2006; Comer, 1991; Epstein, 1992, 2001). Federally funded efforts such as the “promise neighborhoods” seek to forge strong bonds among community members, parents, school-aged youth and other community resources as a strategy for building safe neighborhoods and schools that are the focal point of the community. By engaging children and young families, a community has the opportunity to bring efforts to sustain their community full-circle. Building strong support networks, effective and inclusive schools, and other factors that tend to be desirable works to mitigate the brain-drain causes listed above.

*Toward interdisciplinary and systems models*

A multitude of models and resources exist for those concerned with understanding approaches for a particular/targeted piece of youth engagement for community sustainability. For those interested in holistic/community-based/and youth inclusive approaches, options are limited. Practitioners know what works in a variety of different contexts. For example, Michigan’s “cool cities” modeled after the work of Richard Florida (2002) is an approach for attracting young people to communities has received much attention and varying positive results depending on the location and the characteristics of community (Andresen, 2012; Carr and Kefelas, 2010).

The intended outcomes of engaging young people differ depending on one’s professional perspective and personal values. Success may be defined differently depending on one’s discipline. Youth development practitioners, for example, may focus on creating programs and an environment that will lead young people to maximize their individual potential, which often means sending them abroad to seek new and challenging situations and perspectives. Community development practitioners may be more interested in generating a sense of place and creating the conditions that make it attractive for young people to remain in a community and to contribute to community well-being (Andresen, Dallapiazza and Calvert, 2013). Recent scholarly and public policy attention recognizes that these two fields influence one another (Brennan and Barnett, 2007, 2009). Increasingly, the intersection of youth engagement and community development is viewed as an area of opportunity for building strong sustainable communities. Bridging these two perspectives may give rise to more effective and systematic responses to community decline (Brennan and Barnett, 2009). Being more synergistic calls for interdisciplinarity.

What would a holistic approach look like? Several emerging frameworks take a more holistic stance. Community Youth Development (CYD) frameworks, for example, diverge from youth-development oriented approaches that focus on developing individual groups of youth; strategic implementation that applies a Community Youth Development framework extends the above-mentioned benefits to the entire community (Outley, Bocarro, Boleman 2011). In the CYD approach, all community members, regardless of age, are included in the process. Such approaches break down the isolation between the generations, which may challenge traditional social roles. An especially effective practice that is foundational to CYD is youth-adult partnership (previously described.) The approach bolsters the individual capacities of youth and adults while simultaneously building trust and a sense of community (Zeldin, 2013). Similar strategies also foster a sense of community (Krauss et al, 2013) and sense of place (Ross 2006, Dennis 2006).

Although some communities are moving toward holistic approaches (young person inclusive community change), we are unaware of any model that includes all of the following necessary elements:

1. Strategies to engage all groups across generations;

2. Intentional work aimed at improving sense of place;

3. Opportunities to authentically participate in decision-making;

4. Strategic efforts that include young people in planning and building physical community assets.

**SECTION 2: A Framework for Engaging Young People to Sustain Communities**

The previous sections have examined the scholarly and theoretical literature that supports the necessity of and promising approaches to engaging young people to sustain communities. Several key elements guide our recommended response:

1. Sustainable Communities invest in multiple types of capital (Flora and Flora, 2008).
2. Sustainable Communities are characterized by high levels of social capital; engaged young people enhance social capital and are beneficiaries of living in communities with strong social networks.
3. Strong civic engagement among all age groups promotes a sense of community and increases community capacity to address issues.
4. Place-based approaches are critical for addressing local complexities. Efforts that intentionally focus on promoting a sense of place may be particularly effective for retaining young people already in communities and for attracting new residents.
5. Young people are diverse and some groups are doubly excluded by age and by other characteristics such as educational level, race and ethnicity, and family status. Effective efforts to create leadership, economic and community-building opportunities are often targeted, rather than universal.
6. Effective engagement strategies are strategic, intentional, and well-coordinated with opportunities for young people to participate at multiple levels and in multiple settings.

Based on these key elements, we propose the following framework for engaging young people to implement place-based community development strategies. The left side focuses on building social capital among young people and on the specific development needs of each life stage. The right side includes key approaches to promoting and building community assets. We emphasize the arrow that connects the two sides, which represents a call to develop young-person-oriented community development strategies.

Families of Young Children

Young Adults

Youth

Asset-Based / Perception and Pride

Empower Diverse Community Leadership

Micro and Macro / Skills and Employment

Connect Young People

Implement Place-based Community Development Approaches

**Framework for Engaging Young People to Sustain Communities**

Our holistic framework for young person-oriented community development emphasizes 1) engaging all categories of youth; 2) using developmentally appropriate approaches; 3) providing opportunities for all residents to contribute to the human, financial, and built components of community development; and 4) focusing on generating a sense of place among existing residents while promoting place-based assets that are attractive to visitors and new residents. The model merges the fields of youth development, community development and career preparation/professional development with the intention of retaining young people already living in a place and making communities more attractive to all.

**SECTION 3 – Applications and Opportunities for Further Research**

*A Role for UW-Extension*

UW-Extension is well positioned to engage young people in an interdisciplinary, place-based way. The basis for such collaborative programming is embedded within the [Purpose, Vision, and Values](http://www.uwex.edu/ces/about/documents/PVVFinal.pdf) of Cooperative Extension, with its commitments to community, discovery, inclusiveness, relationships, and respect. Within the context of the Engaging Young People (EYP) Initiative, that translates to programming in which UW-Extension Educators learn with and from each other to discover innovative ways to include young people in building community relationships. The EYP Initiative also aligns with UW-Extension’s [Vision for Diversity](http://www.uwex.edu/ces/about/vision.cfm) by intentionally seeking participation from young people who have previously been unengaged. Additionally, the Educational Priorities for which Cooperative Extension is collecting indicators of success include *Thriving Youth, Families, Communities and Organizations*, as measured by new individuals taking leadership and providing social support, organizations engaging with diverse populations and promoting positive youth development, and communities experiencing inclusive civic engagement to address issues. Essentially, the EYP Initiative honors the mission of UW-Extension and aims to improve outcomes by using interdisciplinary strategies, current data on Wisconsin’s young people, and the latest advancements in youth engagement theory.

UW-Extension’s ability to engage young people in an interdisciplinary, place-based way is furthermore supported by the organizational structure of Cooperative Extension, specifically the county-based offices and statewide specialists. The county-based structure allows Extension Educators to become exceptionally knowledgeable about local communities and effective place-based engagement strategies, and having several UW-Extension Educators from different program areas in each county can readily foster cross-collaboration and multi-county projects. Statewide specialists are poised to locate and, if necessary develop, resources into applicable tools for county educators. As a brief example Matt Calvert, 4-H Youth Development Specialist, coordinates the annual Youth as Partners in Civic Leadership Conference, an event that any county-based 4-H Educator may bring young people to. During the YPCL 2013 conference, a group of Iron County young people brainstormed a mentoring program for their K-12 school after engaging with other young people who attended the conference, and with the help of their 4-H and Family Living Educators were able to implement the program. Thus the state specialist offered an educational opportunity that the county-based educators utilized together to engage young people in creating positive programming unique to their local community.

One of UW-Extension’s greatest challenges in engaging young people in an interdisciplinary, place-based way is the organizational legacy of each Extension Educator working solely within their program area. Interdisciplinary programming requires educators to find a common goal and language which parallels the type of skills educators already utilize in their individual work translating university resources to meet community goals. The EYP Initiative is a safe, professional space where UW-Extension colleagues can consider and participate in interdisciplinary programming through shared learning and resource development, and ultimately contribute to this growing trend within UW-Extension.

*Opportunities for Research*

Evidence of brain drain, which we define as the loss of young people from certain places, is mostly found through analysis of census and other demographic sources of data. With these data, units of analysis come into question. For example, should we focus on the neighborhood, county, or municipal level? This data is also problematic in its timeliness. There may be more timely local surveys of local demographic trends that could inform our thinking on the topic. For example, in Marathon County, Extension Educators, in partnership with the city of Wausau have been engaging young people in focus group conversations about their pathway to residency and long term commitment to the area. We should begin identifying and analyzing other quantitative sources of data that might illuminate places where the brain drain is particularly pronounced. Despite the limitations of this data, these are the best, and most widely accepted evidence currently available to *quantitatively* identify areas that suffer more than others from this phenomenon. Qualitative evidence may support those data by clarifying the human dimensions associated with the decision to live in a particular geographic location. We suspect that social networks and jobs play a critical role, but this is certainly an area for further research and development of measures. This is not the only major gap in our knowledge of this important issue. Other gaps in our knowledge, that we hope will inform the framework for change presented here, include:

1) Regardless of discipline (community development, youth development, family living), sense of place is a critical aspect of community engagement. Promoting and understanding sense of place should be included as a core component of research and evaluation of a community-based program regarding young people.

2) Evidence supporting the idea that engaged youth (K-12) tend to be more civically active and dedicated to helping with issues of critical community concern are well documented (Flanagan and Levine, 2010; Mclaughlin, 2000; and many others). Despite this body of academic evidence, we still know little about the association of that engagement with sense of place. For example, which types of civic engagement result in stronger feelings of a sense of place? Do these help to keep people in place?

3) Public schools are frequently cited as playing a critical role in community and civic development (Schutz, 2006). Increasingly, community-school partnerships are viewed as an avenue toward school reform that will build a sense of place. We need to learn more about the role of schools in communities of different sizes, racial compositions, and socio-economic conditions. Specifically, what is missing? Who is being left out? What happens to those who are participants compared with non-participants?

Other areas of research and Extension learning include:

4) Out of School time

5) Social Networking for young adults

6) Supporting career readiness and professional development for young adults (institutional supports)

7) Youth in governance

Engaging young people in community is a relevant but often ignored concept. There have, of course, been moments when the idea made significant progress. As we already mentioned, philosophies about engaging young people are continually evolving. As Extension Educators, we are positioned to bridge scholarship with community-based change. As we begin to implement this framework in part, or in whole, we should be intentional about evaluating the work and sharing it through scholarly journals and other outlets.

*Conclusion – Applying the Framework*

The intersection of youth action and community development represents an area of opportunity for building strong sustainable communities. Young people can be instrumental in transforming neighborhoods, and entire cities. For many years, it has been acknowledged that teenagers, as the most frequent users of public space, “shape, and are shaped by the neighborhoods where they live” (Dennis, 2006; Ross, 1999). As Armistead and Wexler (1997) point out, the health of a neighborhood is closely tied with the health (civic competencies) of the youth living there. Youth can and do participate in actions that positively affect their communities and their personal development, but their general participation remains limited and the effectiveness of their actions varies greatly depending on the strategies employed, the context of the program/action, and the scope of action. (Mclaughlin, 2000; Sutton and Kemp, 2006). Although scholars and community-based organizations realize that the capacity of youth are closely intertwined with the democratic, economic, and social health of our society, authentic youth voice in decision-making remains limited.

The opportunity to implement youth-inclusive community development strategies may be particularly salient in rural and urban places struggling with issues of brain drain. Without a reversal of demographic trends, the long-term survival of these places is highly questionable. Indeed, communities change over time. Their decline may be inevitable due to multitude concerns of globalization and economic ebbs and flows. However, research tells us that many of these struggling communities are unknowing collaborators in their own decline (Carr and Kefalas, 2010). Some of the problem of this stems from local traditions and culture. Some has to do with the decline of institutional support for non-college bound and educated young adults such as involvement in labor unions. Whatever the source of the problem, much evidence supports the idea that places characterized as youth-friendly – those that have multiple pathways for families to be involved in their children’s education, that have many opportunities for school aged youth to participate different kinds of recreation and public service activities, that offer social networking and fun recreational opportunities for young adults, and career and other support for all residents are generally more attractive places to live and work, regardless of one’s age. Emergent evidence (described briefly in Section 1) identifies youth-adult partnership and youth organizing (inter-related) as best practices. These are not the only starting points for young person-oriented community change to begin, but they do provide any community with a model that can be adapted depending on place based conditions. We do not offer a blueprint. However we do strongly encourage asset driven approaches that are inclusive of all.

Our position encourages communities to make the engagement of young people a priority in community and economic development efforts. By engage, we mean finding ways and building structures for young people to act as citizens, valued for their knowledge and skills that enhance community life. Engagement, both episodic and sustained, employing a variety of approaches, promotes the development of civic competencies, a sense of place, and an array of positive psycho-social outcomes associated with good citizens (Krauss et al, 2013). More grounded, practical perspectives demonstrate that engaged young people help create the distinctiveness of each place (neighborhood, town, community…) (Checkoway and Gutierrez, 2006; Dennis, 2006).

Across the globe, communities have demonstrated positive outcomes resulting from implementing programs that fit this framework in part or in whole. Wisconsin towns are no exception. The following three examples represent just a few of the promising outcomes that emerge from the planned, collaborative, intentional engagement of young people. We share these examples with the hope that readers of this paper will share their stories in a similar format. Youth Development and Community Development are two inter-related fields that, until recently, have (usually) only collaborated when convenient opportunities arise. Deliberately merging the two fields may hold great promise for plugging (or at least slowing) brain drain from any community. Place-based strategies rooted in this framework may also result in building communities attractive to new residents, former residents, and current residents alike. By recognizing young people as one of the many important place-based assets, communities immediately expand their base of knowledge and expertise to solve important community problems. When a community deliberately fosters institutional supports that promote engagement of young people, a community expands opportunities for young people of all ages to develop civic skills, job skills, expand social networks. Coupled with community development, that engagement allows and encourages young people’s participation in community decisions regarding planning and other potentially place-changing decisions, the young people involved generally develop a sense of pride in their effort, their town, and a long term commitment to its success. UW Extension’s place-based expertise is especially well-positioned to encourage young-person driven community development change.

***CASE EXAMPLES***

We hope the following case examples may spark similar place-based youth engagement in other places.

**Case Example #1:** *Promoting Community Assets through Y-AP*

***Abstract:*** *This Case Example Highlights ways that youth and adults can work together to promote community assets. Young people and adults have different perspectives and talents. When they work together, great things happen. This example from Oconto, Wisconsin, demonstrates Y-AP’s potential to improve community infrastructure and relationships.*

**Location:** Oconto, Wisconsin

**Project Title:** Oconto’s Promise – Multiple Projects

**Background:**

**Oconto Wisconsin – Preserving Community Assets through Youth-Adult Partnership**

Oconto’s Promise is a community-based organization dedicated to preserving and promoting the natural and historic assets of Oconto, Wisconsin. The organization relies on youth and adults working together to accomplish its many community projects. Two of the Promise’s recent projects exemplify elements of high quality Youth-Adult Partnership as a community improvement strategy.

**Oconto’s Marsh Project**

In 2012 youth and community adults partnered to protect marshlands surrounding the community. The Marshlands are home to birds and other wildlife and is known for the recreational activities it offers. Oconto is designated as a “Bird City Wisconsin” for meeting strict criteria in areas of habitat improvement, protection, and public education. For many years, community adults had discussed the value that boardwalks and observation decks would add to the property but the project never came to life.

*“With the marsh, for twenty years had been talking about projects but nobody could get anything done. So, I had one school board member who said if you want anything done you need to talk to Oconto’s Promise because those kids can get things done.” – Oconto Resident*

Promise recruited youth from local schools and 4-H Youth Development programs to identify a site for the observation platform, create educational materials, and plan the design of the platform. Youth led the effort with assistance from local, state, and federal government agency representatives, local bird enthusiasts, and other community adults. The platform was built and opened in 2013.

Project participants expressed pride in the project and mentioned that their participation resulted in heightened connection to the community, improved knowledge about the local area, and changed perspective on what youth and adults can accomplish. Youth and adults continue to work together on several local environmental projects.

**Oconto on the Bay MobileApp**

Visitors entering Oconto will be welcomed by a sign inscribed with the city motto “History on the Bay.” Adding to the natural history found at the marsh and bay, the city also boasts several museums and unique historical attractions. History has become a tourist attraction and a central to community pride and identity. Recently, youth and adults have partnered to preserve and promote this history. The school-based project works with Oconto’s Promise and 4H Youth Development programs to document the history (places and faces) with film, web-based educational materials, and applications for mobile technology. Funded primarily by a state education grant, the project brings generations together. Youth and adult partners steer the project planning and make programmatic decisions together. Youth are responsible for major creative decisions and lead on most technology decisions. The project requires youth to engage in discussion with multiple community adults and partner with historical experts to produce a high quality educational product. Youth film interviews with local historians and develop applications to bring the history to community visitors.

*“Youth are typically impressed with these individuals. Part of it has to do with enthusiasm and expertise on the part of the adults (about their work and about sharing.) Adults who don’t treat youth differently than adults are more respected. He doesn’t talk down to them.” – Adult Participant*

The History on the Bay project is ongoing. Program participants have been inspired by the dialogue and discussion between generations. Several adult participants noted having learned a great deal about youth culture and respect for the high quality work that young people can accomplish. Youth mentioned that they had a stronger understanding and respect for the town’s history. Participants also expressed a high degree of dedication to project success.

**Keys to Success**

*“Long term commitment to the community (by youth) and participation in community life comes from/is related to youth seeing support from the greater community…when youth get positive feelings from the community. With the Marsh, kids have really felt connected to the community.” – Adult Participant*

Oconto’s projects are unique in that they employ youth-adult partnership as a strategy for building community pride. One important element of high-quality youth adult partnership is a focus on social change. While participants mention that the efforts are not perfect, they continue to search for ways to improve the ways that community youth and adults work together.

* **Focus on community change:** Community members and participants expressed commitment to the project because the work was relevant and meaningful to them and their pride in the city they live.
* **Teach people how to work together:** The programs teach youth and adults how to work together through discussion and ongoing reflection. Generational differences and exposure to multiple community adults brings perspective to all involved.
* **Promote the project – Celebrate:** All project participants and community members mentioned that the projects included celebrations, and events that helped promote the project to the greater community. This kept them interested and involved. The success of these projects has community members seeking new work from the Promise.

**Case Example #2:** *Youth-Adult Partnership on Community Coalitions*

***Abstract:*** *This case example highlights Y-AP in a community coalition setting. The example from Buffalo County, Wisconsin, demonstrates foundational aspects of Y-AP, including best practices for decision-making procedures, and making sure that young people have opportunities to work with a variety of adults. This case is especially useful for organizations looking to develop formalized partnerships.*

**Location:** Buffalo County, Wisconsin

**Project Title:** Buffalo County Partnership Council

**Background:**

*“I really value the young people on the coalition. I think of them as partners, leaders, and colleagues. I also value their opinion and their perspective. They are at the heart of what is happening in our community and they see things that we don’t as adults and I value that they are able to share that information.” – Adult Council Member*

The mission of the Buffalo County Partnership Council is to find ways to enhance positive youth and family development in Buffalo County communities. Created in 1992, the Council seeks to address community health issues related to alcohol and drug use, bullying, and domestic violence through prevention efforts, community education and outreach, and resource sharing. The council is comprised of 12 youth and 14 adults representing 15 community agencies. Youth serve for terms of three years. Youth serving on the Council are nominated by their schools.

*“Adults don’t really have a clue about what happens outside of schools. We have different looks and interests and are able to share that with them.” – Youth Council Member*

*“Teachers and parents don’t really see what’s going on, so we have youth input on those things” – Youth Council Member*

The Council is deeply committed to Youth-Adult Partnership because the prevention issues they address are community issues that affect youth and adults. Council members consistently reported that the work would not be effective without young people at the table. Youth are able to provide a unique perspective on community issues that affect them.

*“We’re pretty much involved in every aspect, we have equal voting rights as adults” – Youth Council Member*

*“I feel like I’m an equal member, because they actually have set aside time in the meeting for us to talk about issues happening at our school.” – Youth Council Member*

All Council decisions are made democratically. The Sheriff’s vote, for example, counts as much as any youth’s vote. Youth often chair sub-committees and are represented in all aspects of the Council’s work. Youth also have an active role in gathering and sharing community data, organizing community events, and working directly with schools and youth-serving community organizations. Adults work directly with these youth as equal partners on all projects.

*“It teaches us how to work with kids your own age from different places, but also people of older generations with different opinions.” – Youth Council Member*

*“It is a true partnership from every perspective. Votes are equal and decision making is shared. There are not decisions that adults make on their own, or youth make on their own” – Adult Council Member*

While the Council has had a notable personal impact on the individual participants, the work also benefits the community in visible ways. Each year the Council sponsors youth days to actively engage youth in conversations regarding risk issues. Council youth are particularly proud of organizing bullying prevention events for local youth. By working directly with younger people, the Council youth members feel they are giving a voice to all young people in the county.

Recently, the council has created new ways of reaching out to families using research-based self-evaluation tools, educational materials, and special events. The council continues to assess and improve on their 20 years of positive youth development in Buffalo County.

Keys to Success:

* **Genuine Dialogue:** Youth and Adult members commented that they were able to have meaningful dialogue about any issue. Youth were not left out of important decisions, such as the budget. The experience of collaborating between generations was new and exciting for most members.
* **Authentic Voice in Decision-Making:** Youth participants frequently mentioned their role in voicing opinions and taking leadership on important council issues. They found this to be a strength that helped produce good outcomes for the community. Youth also said this was a factor that kept them motivated to do the work of the organization. In other words, youth felt empowered by their work on the council.
* **Addressing Real Issues with Real Consequences:** The Council takes on serious community issues. Youth commented that they liked the fact that the work was “real.” Adults mentioned that this work could not be done successfully without youth participation and perspective.
* **Comprehensive Training and Orientation:** The council orientation and training for new members was mentioned as a strength by all members. It taught participants the basics of working together
* **Matching talent and interest with committee assignments:** Youth were especially impressed by the freedom they have in selecting the type and level of participation on the council. They are able to build on their existing talents, and challenged to take on important tasks that have benefited their school work and future plans.
* **Broad Impact:** The council reaches the community in many highly visible ways. The work has aspects that have policy implications as well as direct (personal) impact on community members through special events.

**Case Example #3:** *Planning for Sustained Youth Engagement*

***Abstract:*** *This case example describes key elements necessary to prepare for sustained Youth-Adult partnerships. The example from Iron County, Wisconsin, highlights a large-scale effort to make the County a youth-friendly place to live. The county has been working for several years to identify ways to include youth and young adults in community decision making – with a focus on community planning and development. This case is useful for anyone interested in how Y-AP can benefit large-scale community change initiatives. Y-AP is commonly viewed as a strategy for engaging younger (8-18 year olds). This case is a great example of Y-AP as a strategy to engage a spectrum of age groups in the process.*

**Location:** Iron County, Wisconsin

**Project Title:** Gogebic Range Next Generation Initiative

**Background:**

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

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

***Understanding Youth Perceptions – Data Gathering***

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

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

***Inclusive Action Planning:***

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

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

***Intentional Coordination and Partnership:***

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

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

***Raising Awareness – Visibility, Communication, and Public Outreach***

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

Keys to Success

* **Learn what you don’t know:** Next Generation Initiative recognized a “brain drain” of youth, but didn’t assume that a few adults knew why and how to address the issue. Rather, they understood that workable solutions required input from youth about youth and about their community.
* **Identify Key Issues**: Next Generation Initiative (NGI) plan rested on rigorous data collection that centered on understanding youth perceptions. This youth-generated data resulted in creation of a plan relevant to community youth.
* **Initiate an Inclusive Planning Process**: A diverse group of private and public institutions and broad representation from the community in the planning process fosters a sense of community ownership of the project, and is useful in developing and strengthening partnerships.
* **Include young people in the planning process in authentic ways:** Youth voice in issue identification/ data gathering is not enough. Authentic roles for young people in the ongoing project planning are essential for transforming communities that value contributions of youth and adults. As Next Generation Initiative evolves, it is identifying and creating opportunities for youth in decision making.
* **Build partnerships, coordinate activities**: strong, well coordinated partnerships maximize resources,
* **Write it down**: Written plans that are created with multiple adults and youth are essential to ensuring that a project moves forward with activities that can be sustained. Strong, written plans convey a clear mission and message that can serve as a rallying point for the project.
* **Build a framework to learn, adapt, and grow**: Logic models provide a mechanism for understanding progress in the short, intermediate, and long term. Clearly defined frameworks delineate duties, identify participants, and
* **Create Outreach Strategies**: Communication and public outreach raise awareness of the initiative, are effective recruitment tools, and enhance overall project support and legitimacy.
* **Identify Youth and Adult roles**: While not fully developed, NGI’s logic model identifies roles of participants in each program activity. Role identification is useful in ensuring that activities deliberately include youth and adults, and can serve as a check on the degree the initiative is invested in core elements of Youth-Adult Partnerships.

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