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Youth Representation on County Government Committees: Youth in Governance in Kenosha County, Wisconsin

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Youth Representation on County Government Committees: Youth in Governance in Kenosha County, Wisconsin

Abstract

The Kenosha County Youth In Governance program was created to build leadership skills and civic engagement opportunities for high school-aged students by placing two youth representatives on each of the Kenosha County Board of Supervisors standing committees. In reviewing data from 3 years of youth participants, the program was effective in increasing civic engagement and leadership skills of young people. Respondents reported specific increases in knowledge of county government, connection to community, empowerment, communication skills, and confidence. Effective program practices were also identified from reviewing statements made from youth participants.

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Situation

A healthy democracy requires young people to become part of an active civic culture, but they are often excluded from authentic community decision-making opportunities (Zeldin, Camino, & Calvert, 2003). Nationally, Extension has supported numerous models of youth representation in traditionally adult community leadership environments, including workforce development boards (Campbell et al, 2008) and community needs assessments (Israel & Ilvento, 1995). The National League of Cities (2010) recognizes authentic youth civic engagement in local government via several pathways, such as involvement in projects, ongoing consultation with youth councils, and representation on boards and commissions. Local government in Wisconsin has partnered with Extension in several cities and counties to create opportunities for youth representation and learning via appointment to boards, committees, and commissions.

The evaluation study reported here recounts the effects of one youth representation program on youth participants' civic engagement and leadership skills. The Kenosha County Youth In Governance program involves high school youth at an opportune stage for increasing their engagement in civic life. Participation in organizations develops social networks that connect members to community and political activities and promotes their involvement as adults (Flanagan, 2004), and youth in advising roles build understanding of group dynamics and habits of contributing

to public decisions (Diaz, McGlaughlin, Oberle, & Stocker, 2015). Adolescents are also engaged in identity formation, including developing ideological and moral positions (Erickson, 1968) and are entering into a relationship with society that includes positive civic action (Youniss, McLellan, & Yates, 1997).

Program Implementation and Objectives

The Kenosha County Youth In Governance (YIG) program was started by the Kenosha County Board of Supervisors and UW-Extension in 2007 to model youth empowerment while providing an opportunity for youth to develop leadership skills through direct participation in local government. The board resolution allowed for two youth to serve on every standing committee that meets in the evening (Executive, Finance/Administration, Human Services Committee, Judiciary & Law Committee, Planning, Development & Extension Education, Public Works/Facilities, Joint Services Committees). The youth serve 1-year terms alongside county board supervisors as active members and cast advisory votes that are recorded in the official minutes of the meetings. Program objectives are the following.

Short Term

- Create environments that are conducive to the positive development of youth voice and youth engagement.
- Provide youth with skills, knowledge, and experiences that prepare them to be effective partners for positive change in Kenosha County.

Medium Term

- Through experiential learning, youth have the opportunity to effectively understand and apply several leadership skills.

Long Term

- Youth become active community partners and leaders.

All high schools throughout Kenosha County are asked to nominate youth for the program in January. During the 3 years (2010-13) covered by this evaluation, 488 youth were nominated from 11 high schools, and 114 youth completed applications. A committee of county board supervisors interviews approximately 24 youth for 14 positions on the seven board committees.

In May of each year, selected Youth In Governance members participate in an orientation, including an all-day tour of county government. Newly elected adult board members often participate in the tour as well.

Kenosha County Board Supervisors or key Kenosha County staff are selected by the Planning, Development & Extension Education Committee Chairperson to serve as mentors to YIG members on each committee. Mentors are the liaison between the youth committee members and the county board supervisors and staff, and ensure that the youth receive the full benefits from participation

(Zeldin & Collura, 2009).

Youth who are selected to participate in Youth In Governance come from a variety of backgrounds (Table 1). Many youth bring leadership experience from athletic teams, school clubs, community organizations (e.g., 4-H, Scouting, church), and student government. Although the minimum requirement for program participation is a 2.5 grade point average, the average GPA for Youth In Governance members is 3.78 on a 4-point scale. With a large pool of interested candidates, the selection process for the Kenosha County YIG program has become competitive and exclusive.

Table 1.
Demographics of Youth In Governance Participants

	Race					Ethnicity		Gender		GPA
	White	African American	Alaskan / Am. Ind.	Asian	Pac. Islander	Hispanic	Non Hispanic	Male	Female	Average GPA
2010-2011	16	0	0	2	0	0	18	7	11	3.79
2011-2012	11	1	0	2	0	0	14	5	9	3.82
2012-2013	12	1	0	1	0	0	14	7	7	3.72
Total	39	2	0	5	0	0	46	19	27	3.78

Evaluation Methodology

Data Collection

Surveys were collected annually for 3 years from 82% of program participants (38 of 46 participants) after a year of participation. IRB-approved survey questions included retrospective post-then-pre items with a Likert scale to measure program objectives to increase civic engagement and leadership skill development. A retrospective design was selected because of the likelihood of response shift (Howard, 1980) as respondents' understanding of and attitude toward the indicators was likely to be affected by the program experience.

Open-ended questions invited participants to write about the two primary program objectives (building an opportunity for youth voice and engagement, and developing leadership skills) and a third question asking what they have gained in general from the program.

Analysis

Numerical data were analyzed by calculating means and by counting the number and percentage of participants who reported change over the year of the program. The qualitative data were analyzed

using an iterative process beginning with a content analysis of narrative data followed by a comparison of results to theoretically derived program objectives based on civic education (e.g., Levine, 2007) and life skills (Hendricks, 1996) models that ground leadership education in Extension (Arnold, 2003). This iterative process led to a grouping of data into several areas. A content analysis of data in each category led to key findings that provide rich context to the quantitative results.

Results

Civic Engagement Outcomes

Evaluation items focused specifically on three elements of civic engagement: knowledge, connection and empowerment. Prior to participating in the Kenosha County Youth In Governance program, participants as a whole reported that they would "disagree" with the statement "I am knowledgeable about Kenosha County government" as compared to after participating in the program, when these same participants self-reported that they would "agree" with the same statement. An increase in knowledge about Kenosha County Government was reported by 92% of participants who completed the evaluation. The average change of +2.13 (Table 2) was the largest of the items measured. After reviewing written responses, two themes emerged: (1) knowledge of how government functions and (2) knowledge of how decisions are made.

Table 2.
Average Response to Each Indicator

N = 38 of 46 Civic Engagement	Average "Before" Program	Average "After" Program	Net Change
Scale: (1) Strongly Disagree (2) Disagree (3) Uncertain (4) Agree (5) Strongly Agree			
I am knowledgeable about Kenosha County government	2.21	4.34	+2.13* *
I am aware of local issues that affect Kenosha County	3.15	4.52	+1.37* *
My opinion can make a difference in the community	3.18	4.21	+1.03* *
I am interested in politics	3.65	4.36	+0.71* *
I have a useful role in the community	3.68	4.44	+0.76* *
I feel a strong connection to Kenosha County	3.21	4.58	+1.37* *
Leadership Skills	Average	Average	Net

	"Before" Program	"After" Program	Change
Scale: (1) Unsure* (2) No Ability (3) Some Ability (4) Good Ability (5) Excellent Ability			
I can participate in group discussions with adults	3.61	4.47	+0.86* *
I can speak confidently before a group of adults	3.51	4.32	+0.81* *
I can see issues from multiple perspectives	3.89	4.70	+0.81* *
I can share new ideas with others	3.71	4.21	+0.50* *
I can talk knowledgeably with others about local issues	2.86	4.34	+1.48* *
I can be a resource to people in Kenosha County	2.83	4.13	+1.30* *
*Responses marked "unsure" were dropped from the results. **Significant at p<.001			

Table 3.

Percentage of Participants Reporting Change

N = 38 of 46 Civic Engagement	%Reporting No Change	%Reporting Positive Change
I am knowledgeable about Kenosha County government	8%	92%
I am aware of local issues that affect Kenosha County	18%	82%
My opinion can make a difference in the community	34%	66%
I am interested in politics	42%	58%
I have a useful role in the community	32%	68%
I feel a strong connection to Kenosha County	26%	74%
Leadership Skills	%Reporting No Change	%Reporting Positive Change

I can participate in group discussions with adults	34%	66%
I can speak confidently before a group of adults *	34%	63%
I can see issues from multiple perspectives	47%	53%
I can share new ideas with others	53%	47%
I can talk knowledgeably with others about local issues*	16%	81%
I can be a resource to people in Kenosha County*	26%	68%
*Some items do not add to 100 because some respondents marked "unsure."		

Kenosha County Youth In Governance program participants as a whole reported an increased connection to Kenosha County. This increased connection was reported by 74% (Table 3) of participants who completed the evaluation. The average score in this category increased from 3.21 to 4.58, which was a net change of +1.37. (Table 2) These results were supported through statements made by participants and focused on two themes: (1) connections to Kenosha County and (2) connections to Kenosha County Board Supervisors. One youth participant wrote: "The Youth In Governance program allowed me to become more positively engaged with the community and succeeded in making me more civically aware. I now feel more connected and involved with the issues of Kenosha County and my community."

When responding to the statement "I have a useful role in the community," 68% of program participants reported an increase of at least one unit (Table 3); however, the overall average score only increased +0.76 (Table 2), one of the lowest recorded net changes in the evaluation. Analysis of open-ended statements supports these findings, but also identifies a limitation of the program. Having a seat at the table was a positive step, but several youth felt they lacked background information or experience to express an opinion when there were opportunities to make contributions.

YIG provides the perfect environment to allow the youth of Kenosha to have a voice. However, in my personal experiences, I do not have enough knowledge about regulations, programs, grants, equipment, licenses, etc. to actively participate in the majority of the conversations.

Although most youth reported learning a great deal about local government, some also acknowledged that they needed a deeper command of issues to develop a viewpoint.

Skills and Confidence Outcomes

Youth indicated that they have improved their ability to communicate about local issues as a result

of Youth In Governance. The largest change, with the average score increasing from 2.86 to 4.34 (Table 2), was in their ability to talk knowledgeably with others about local issues.

They also gained leadership skills such as participating in group discussions, speaking confidently before a group of adults, and seeing issues from multiple perspectives. They believe that the YIG experience helped develop their capacity to feel more confident in their leadership abilities and provided a real world experience to interact with adults. Youth In Governance members shared the following reflections from their experience: One wrote: "As a result of my participation in the YIG program I have acquired a greater mastery of the skills associated with civil involvement and awareness. I have a greater knowledge about local issues and how local government works." Another observed:

The most important thing I have gained from my participation in the Kenosha County YIG program is the skill of seeing issues from multiple perspectives. I am now able to respectfully voice my opinion while still listening to and taking others into consideration.

Program Implications

Participants used the open-ended evaluation questions to address program practices and structures that affected their learning and experience. Key program practices included the following.

Welcome from Adult Board Members

The quality of personal interactions was significant to youth participants' experiences. Many respondents observed that the adult board members created an environment that promoted their engagement by encouraging them to take an active role in discussions. A small number did not experience this support, feeling that some adults were not interested in their opinions, which was a barrier to their full participation.

Information Support

Youth participants received the same board packets as elected adult members, which respondents said helped them to be effective representatives and to feel a sense of equal treatment. Several also noted that board members took the time to answer questions and explain issues. However, some participants struggled to keep up with the pace of the meetings and the complexity of information needed to participate meaningfully. The majority, though, felt able to participate in discussions and cast informed advisory votes.

Additional Learning Activities for Youth Members

Participants valued the opportunity to learn and connect outside of the committee meetings. Group sessions for all of the youth members and the county government tour developed a more comprehensive view of local government and engaged members.

Authenticity

Respondents were divided on whether they were able to authentically participate and represent the voice of youth. Some saw it as an opportunity to be a participant in the decision-making process rather than just an observer, while others said they were more silent observers. However, participants overwhelmingly valued the learning experience as an opportunity to see how classroom learning plays out in the real world.

Conclusion

Extension professionals are well positioned because of their educational role and connection to local decision makers to engage youth in meaningful leadership opportunities. Youth engagement is strongest when youth are provided opportunities to become actively involved and feel valued. Youth In Governance members have benefitted from the opportunity to serve on county board committees and contribute in a meaningful way. They are participating in the local legislative policymaking process firsthand. Exposing youth to elements of civic engagement at a young age will likely deepen their appreciation and understanding of our democratic process as they become adults. One YIG member summed up the experience nicely,

YIG has taught me to be a more active member of the Kenosha community. It has opened my eyes to the decisions being made that affect the daily life of members of the community, including myself. I feel less apathetic and more involved in my own life and in my future. I have the power to make a difference, and try to stay updated on current events.

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