Youth Engagement: Building trust, hope and resilience

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Youth engagement is now, more than ever, of critical importance. The extent to which youth are engaged will determine the strength of both our democracy and our economy for many years to come. The Institute for Emerging Issues at NC State University decided to tackle this issue head-on by doing what they do best: catalyzing solutions. With the one-year anniversary of the Institute's #YouthEngageNC Summit upon us, **this paper reflects on**

Wendy Alvarado, a student at UNC-Chapel Hill from Thomasville, NC. She came to the United States undocumented, but did not want to return to her home country because of gang violence. Wendy faced this challenge with a tenacious determination to succeed, an ever-present quality that Wendy has always coupled with a strong spirit of gratitude—one that she describes as a pervasive feeling of hope. Wendy is also

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>
> *— Wendy Alvarado*

that gathering and offers a brief, practical guide to improving youth engagement, particularly with youth who often slip through the cracks of engagement efforts and opportunities.

The Summit brought key leaders together to frame the opportunities and challenges of building youth engagement. The event began with

full of ideas. She sought to do something to make a difference, so she joined the NC Community Development Initiative's internship program. Wendy noted one issue in particular: Youth often don't know what volunteering is and why they might do it. They need ideas and inspiration to understand why they ought to do something without being paid. To her, volunteering is

where success begins; it brings opportunities and meaning. She explains how other youth don't understand this and need chances to learn it.

Wendy's story left me inspired, and with more questions than answers. What, I wondered, drives her determination and desire to make the world better? The research on the outcomes of engagement confirms her understanding, but how did Wendy gain this insight, while others do not? Was it some inherent personality or capacity of Wendy's? Was it her family culture? Or was it some broader social context and opportunity that catalyzed her experience and understanding?

Some youth have strong protective elements that originate from their own character, family, community, or broader social context. These youth are able to find belonging, social support, and a clear developmental path forward (Benson, Scales and Syvertsen, 2011; Godsay, et al., 2012). These youth are much more likely to be civically engaged. Engaged youth are more likely to experience a myriad of positive social and economic outcomes (Institute for Emerging Issues, 2015; Opportunity Nation, 2014a). Other youth, who do not exhibit these same qualities, are labeled "disengaged youth," or sometimes "opportunity youth," because they represent a huge resource that can be mobilized in our communities. With an estimated 5.8 million such youth in America today, "reducing this number of disconnected youth, then, is an urgent national priority, both to help millions of young Americans get ahead,

and to boost our nation's overall productivity and prosperity" (Opportunity Nation, 2014a, p. 4).

In the following brief overview, we will go deeper into understanding untapped opportunities to engage youth and discuss several promising strategies through an exploration of the following:

1. What does it mean to be engaged, and are "disengaged youth" engaged in ways we do not see? These issues are not black and white, and we know that youth engage in culturally, technically, or situationally relevant ways that may not be detected by our current measurement practices.

2. Why might some youth engage less, and inversely, why are some similar youth actively engaged? To understand this we must identify some important characteristics of places that support engagement, which organizations often miss, in recruiting and retaining disconnected youth: cultural relevance and inclusion, power, equitable engagement opportunities, and purpose.

3. Lastly, we will look at what youth-serving organizations can do to create places for all youth to grow, develop, and generate positive pathways to live into their own power and strength.

Are "disengaged" youth actually engaged?

In order to increase youth engagement, we first need to understand in what ways youth are engaged. Some youth

may be engaged in ways that differ from our traditional measurement, but they still demonstrate engagement behaviors that can serve as scaffolding for building further engagement. First, we explore what we mean by the formal types of engagement that the research has shown to be linked to social and economic impacts. Then, we will discuss ways other youth may be more informally engaged, and some real barriers to engagement which we can seek to mitigate by developing strategies described in the next section.

In an age where we understand our world through measurement, we will frame our engagement conversation with consideration to how the research has defined engagement. In the research, formal engagement is often measured as volunteering, participation in any organization (including sports, school, recreational, and religious), participation in civic/service organizations (including charitable and fraternal), working with neighbors to solve a problem, and doing favors for neighbors (Opportunity Nation, 2014a). The NC Civic Health Index has similar indicators and includes questions about trust in neighbors and confidence in institutions (Institute for Emerging Issues, 2015). Others have suggested that it is important to measure more informal means of sporadic volunteering that are often not connected with a formal organization. This often occurs without the volunteer having a formal tie to the cause or organization and is best categorized as informal helping, often at the request or invitation of a friend (DoSomething.org, 2012). This final measure of engagement confirms

much higher rates of millennial volunteering across the income distribution. (This is an online survey methodology, so it may potentially fail to reach the lowest income youth.) More research is needed to establish whether these informal volunteering behaviors are linked to the positive developmental outcomes found with more formal engagement, but recognizing these practices and building them into more formal engagement behaviors could be a promising strategy. This informal volunteering might mobilize or inspire more formal associations.

Youth who attend college volunteer at twice the rate of non-college youth.

A 2012 report, *That's Not Democracy (Godsay* et al.*, 2012),* provides a nuanced analysis of engagement by non-college youth. The authors discovered that college attendance through age 25 was an important distinguishing factor in engagement rates, with youth who attend college volunteering at twice the rate of non-college youth (26.7% versus 13.5%). The analysis goes beyond formal engagement practices and breaks down the rates for certain behaviors and attitudes, such as the civically alienated, political specialists, under-mobilized, talkers, and donors (p. 12-13). This expands our understanding beyond measurable engagement behaviors to include those who may be considering engagement (for example, the under-

mobilized were registered, but did not vote); those who were talking about issues but not taking action; and those who may be engaged in a limited capacity, such as only politically or only through giving donations.

What are these "civically disengaged" youth doing? We know engagement is strongly linked to resources—having money—and that family and community support may remove some barriers to engagement (Opportunity Nation, 2014a, p. 8). Under-resourced youth who are not participating in formal engagement activities may be simply trying to survive by working or taking care of family or community members. What is preventing a youth from being engaged may be predictive of future engagement trajectories. Is the lack of engagement behaviors due to a delay in positive developmental stages (such as educational or workforce advancement) or due to a loss of hope, perceived power, and a clear developmental pathway? Understanding both the real barriers for youth, and methods by which they engage in positive manners within their context will be a powerful springboard for bridging to practices that have positive developmental outcomes.

What are some important characteristics of places that support engagement?

One of my favorite places in Durham, the Reality Center, has a huge banner on the back wall that reads "I am for you!" For many youth, the exclamation might be met with certainty and confidence, as they live in a world that is clearly "for them." For many other youth, this could not be further from their experience—they live in a world that ignores, or worse yet, blocks them at every turn. Per the literature, engagement is linked to several factors. As Juntos Program Director Juana Hernández-Urquiza notes, "The issue for Latino youth is they will engage with a group in which they feel a part." Creating this space where youth find belonging, connection, and meaning is essential and requires work in cultural relevancy and inclusion, power, equitable engagement opportunity, and purpose.

First is the issue of cultural relevancy. Do the formal organizations in a youth's life reflect their culture, values, needs and aspirations? When a youth walks into a place, do the messages say, "this is what people like you do," or do youth instead get the message, "this is what other people do"? This can be as simple as using images associated with the organization and language that communicates social norms and values.

Second is the issue of power and equity. Casey Barr-Rios, a panelist at the #YouthEngageNC Summit, offers a good introduction to this idea. Casey is a student who works for Student U, a college-access organization in Durham. She began participating in the program as a sixth grader and is grateful for its support and its emphasis on empowering students to own their education, teaching them that if they are not actively involved in making decisions about their education, others will make their decisions for them. As Casey explained, Student U is all about young people's voices. They are invited

to be active partners, not passive recipients. She added that certain youth voices are elevated and encouraged more than others, but youth voices are often not understood or are discounted by adults. Disengaged youth voices may make adults uncomfortable. Hart (1994) builds on Arnstein's 1969 classic work *A Ladder of Citizen Participation,* which suggests degrees to which organizations incorporated true citizen participation, to create *A Ladder of Youth Participation.* Hart's Ladder has eight rungs from the floor of manipulation to the top rung of youth-adult shared decision-making. This speaks to the importance of youth having power in decision-making. Adult, initiated, shared decision-making (rung six) is lower than youth-initiated decisions, which takes into account these power dynamics and gives youth the power and voice they need to be truly equitable. Student U supports students in gaining their voice as they move up levels of youth power over their own lives (studentudurham.org).

A next step to youth taking power and ownership over their future may be teaching them about social power structures. Does the organization, group, or institution communicate the importance of understanding social power structures and create a space that promotes critical analysis of those structures? For youth that do not readily fit into socially constructed norms of "leaders" and "youth who make a difference," some of these cultural narratives may need to be dismantled so that youth may begin to construct their own and collective ways to create change. The Center for Environmental

Farming Systems is doing this work through the NC Food Youth Initiative (NCFYI). Tes Thraves, coordinator of FYI, explains that they work with youth organizations doing good justice work in their own communities, and support their increased analysis of how food systems intersect with farm labor, immigrant and refugee rights, juvenile justice, and poverty issues, particularly in rural communities. They craft their own power analyses around their shared knowledge and then build ways to bring collective action. The intergenerational aspect is key, as these youth rely on dedicated organizers and elders to facilitate their local work, as well as cross-organization connections. The importance of justice work and this type of analysis in youth engagement is supported by the work of Watts and Flanagan (2007), which found that "[traditional positive youth development] has paid little attention to structural barriers to youth participation. Because community institutions mediate the relationship between individuals and the state (i.e. schools, the police, etc.), those institutions can empower some youth while marginalizing or even oppressing others" (pg. 781). They suggest a reframing of youth engagement that includes the "justice-oriented citizen who, like the participatory citizen, emphasizes collective work towards community betterment while maintaining a more critical stance on social, political, and economic issues. It is clear that a thoughtful interrogation of authority is essential to good citizenship" (p. 782).

A fourth element in understanding youth engagement is having equal

opportunities for youth engagement across neighborhoods or communities. Watts and Flanagan explain that a "young person's potential for societal involvement is strongly influenced by the availability of meaningful and desirable opportunities for action in their community. It is important to remember that opportunity structure includes more than settings and roles—it includes people in an organization that recruit and mentor those who might not otherwise become involved"(p.787). Do these positive youth development and youth action organizations exist in your community? Do your communities offer support through mentorship opportunities for neighborhood youth? Watts and Flanagan go on to explain that along with youth's sense of personal power (they call it "agency"), the opportunities for engagement might mean the difference between social analysis (Godsay et al.'s "talkers") and actual involvement. Availability of engagement organizations and activities may make the difference in high-poverty neighborhoods.

Finally, a youth engagement opportunity must build a sense of purpose. Watts and Flanagan suggest that "more proactive approaches, such as youth organizing, which focus on the roots of social problems, empowerment, and the capacity to identify, analyze, and act on issues relevant to youth" (p. 782) are important for engaging youth. However, volunteering for simple helping activities can also be a powerful way to develop a sense of purpose. A #YouthEngageNC Summit panelist said, "Volunteering gave me an opportunity to discover what I am passionate about."

What are some Promising Practices that promote engagement with under-engaged youth (and with all youth)?

- **Go where the young people are.** Our organizations often have great opportunities, but they may need to bring them to youth. Eric Rowles, a speaker at the #YouthEngageNC Summit, described three levels of access: physical, emotional and cultural. It is important to consider whether the engagement opportunity is relevant, meaningful and accessible; if it sparks a sense of belonging; and if youth will see themselves and history represented in the venue. Dr. Felicia Sullivan, also a Summit speaker, cited the 2015 North Carolina Civic Health Index finding that young people are more involved in schools and places of faith, and less so in sports and associations. It's even tougher to find involved youth in these more formal settings, but it is important that youth-serving organizations go where youth naturally are.
- **Ensure authenticity and relevance to youth culture.** Participants in the youth engagement panel emphasized the importance of authenticity. Youth can tell which adults, when reaching out, are genuine. A related issue raised by the panelists was that the messages must resonate with youth in both platform and language. Youth are continually changing communication platforms, and as soon as they feel adults have caught up, they find a new platform. To engage with youth audiences, the messages must

meet the youth where they are, including in language, style and format. Leading to Change offers training on how to implement youth culture into your organizational programs. For free music and video, see Youth Culture Resources (leadingtochange.com).

- **Provide logistical support.** Engagement opportunities must be logistically feasible for youth, be linked via transportation, be scheduled at a time that works, etc. For hard-to-reach youth, with potentially more logistical barriers, creativity and multiple pathways to engage must be used.

- **Be inclusive.** Engagement opportunities must include the often marginalized. For more information, see Teaching Tolerance resources from the Southern Poverty Law Center (splcenter.org/teaching-tolerance).

- **Teach about power.** Engagement opportunities should model engaging with power and may include social-political development. See Youth Empowered Solutions for a nationally recognized model for youth empowerment; see Watts and Flanagan (2007) for a discussion of socio-political development (youthempoweredsolutions.org).

- **Ask and invite.** Non-college youth report never being asked to participate (Godsay et al., 2012, p. 18). We know that people often say yes when directly asked, but this takes social capital and boundary-spanning connections. We must ask and personally invite youth to give voice, participate and contribute.

Requests are best when they are authentic and made through personal connections — not through flashy or non-personal media (p. 18).

- **Create developmental pathways.** Civic skills are deep learning skills, and may be built on current engagement. Dr. Felicia Sullivan gave the example that "disengaged youth" are often very involved with helping their families. How does your organization build on ways these youth already engage? The Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) at Tufts University has many resources for understanding and creating positive pathways for youth engagement. For example, see CIRCLE (2013) (civicyouth.org).

- **Build personal interaction and accountability.** Initial engagement may be sporadic or anonymous, but should build to personal interactions that expand relationships, and should build connections that go beyond current peer networks. Eric Rowles encourages organizations to have an elevator pitch about why youth should engage with you that explains the real value the involvement will bring to the youth. Note: With many youth, organizations may need to recruit and directly teach the value of volunteering; it may not be obviously beneficial or a cultural norm for many youth.

- **Maximize the community's role.** In addition to local nonprofits and service organizations, local businesses have a role in creating opportunities for engagement.

Innovative partnerships are particularly promising. See Opportunity Nation's *Connecting Youth and Business* (2014b) for a helpful toolkit.

- **Youth-led participatory research is a promising practice.** Youth can better understand their community's support for engagement and collaborate with leaders and policy setters to work on key factors in expanding it. Opportunity Nation's *Civic Engagement Report* (2014a) is a key resource.

they are more likely to occur when we all work to create spaces that are positive places for youth to engage, grow, and develop. Hopefully, these strategies can help your organization reach more youth and invite them into the transformative power of youth engagement.

Conclusion

As I ask my colleagues if they have met anyone like Wendy, they tell stories of youth in similar situations who are also highly engaged. When I probe for reasons, they share stories of incredible

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> *— Eric Rowles*

self-determination and a strong belief in oneself. But this internal narrative is only part of the story. There is almost always an awakening of a spirit that is triggered by a relationship. Eric Rowles explained, "Somebody like *you* cared for somebody like *me* and turned my life around." For Eric, it was gratitude that inspired transformation in his life. Sometimes these transformative relationships are happenstance, but

Resources

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Youth Culture Resources:

djearworm.com (free mash-up and radio-edited music) www.wingclips.com (free downloadable movie clips around themes/topics) hiddenbeach.com (old school hip hop website)

Youth Empowered Solutions. Retrieved from: http://www.youthempoweredsolutions. org