

YouthConnect!

A Youth-Led Community Service Initiative

Youth Councils

As a supplemental resource to PASE's YouthConnect! Manual for Youth-Led Community Service, we offer a series of Profiles on Youth-Led Community Service Projects. The local projects profiled were planned, executed and documented by the staff and young people involved with the YouthConnect! Initiative in 2003-2004. The MONY Foundation and the AOL-Time Warner Foundation supported this collaborative initiative.

The PASE Profiles of Youth-Led Community Service Series provides concrete examples of youth-led projects in seven different categories: Intergenerational Service, Youth Councils, Environmental Stewardship, Peer Education, Arts- and Media-Based Service, Advocacy, and Service Learning. Of course, there are other categories of community service but these have been selected to illustrate to the reader the breadth and scope of this youth development modality.

project profiles



P A S E PARTNERSHIP FOR AFTER SCHOOL EDUCATION

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“Young people tend to be looked upon as nuisances rather than resources. Gathering young people and providing them with the power to do well [through Youth Council] is an amazing thing. Young people really do have wonderful qualities that need to be displayed to their communities.”

*--Jennifer Saladis, Unity Youth Council Coordinator,
New York Center for Interpersonal Development*

WHAT IS A YOUTH COUNCIL?

Youth Councils are defined as youth-led leadership groups designed to assist young people develop skills in organization, presentation, and decision making. They also give youth the opportunity to voice their opinions and make a difference in their communities. Youth Councils are often organized as a formal governance body, with elected youth representing the viewpoints of their peers within their organization and communities.

Youth Councils use youth-led community service as a way to promote young people’s voices in the community and to foster ongoing relationships with community members. Youth research community needs and create workable solutions to community problems.

WHY CHOOSE YOUTH COUNCILS AS A COMMUNITY SERVICE MODALITY?

Youth Councils are a wonderful tool for developing young people’s leadership abilities. Simultaneously, because Youth Councils can choose and lead their own projects, they offer youth a forum for making an impact on the community in a way that matters most to them. Young people involved with Youth Councils of neighborhood youth organizations often live in the communities they serve, resulting in a strong desire to see change occur and project plans that directly relate to the community. “Young people become vested in projects that will help the lives of those they share their community with,” Saladis explains.

In order to make a noticeable change and significant impact on a chosen community, youth need to feel like they have the power to make that change. Youth Councils take the power and resources of adults (and the sponsoring organization) and place them in the hands of talented, creative, and energetic young people.

THE FOLLOWING PROJECT PROFILES OFFER CONCRETE ILLUSTRATIONS FOR HOW YOUTH COUNCILS CAN HELP DEVELOP THESE PARTICULAR DEVELOPMENTAL ASSETS* AND SKILLS IN YOUTH:

Positive Peer Influence: The structure of Youth Council promotes working together toward successful outcomes.

Peaceful Conflict Resolution: Collaboration can sometimes be frustrating; however, Youth Council work helps youth learn to skillfully handle disagreements and debate.

Youth as Resources and Service to Others: Youth Councils create their own service projects, giving youth opportunities to make a difference and position themselves as assets to the larger community.

Decision Making: Event planning through Youth Council encourages young people to practice making real-world decisions.

PROJECT PROFILE

JACOB RIIS NEIGHBORHOOD SETTLEMENT'S YOUTH COUNCIL'S "TEEN SUMMIT 2003"

DESCRIPTION:

Youth Council planned Teen Summit 2003, a Career Day focused on the creative arts that included interactive workshops in singing, dancing, acting, writing, drawing, and fashion.

GOALS:

1. To help enhance Jacob Riis' youth program's community building efforts by engaging teens in a community service activity that will develop participants' leadership and communication skills as well as their abilities to plan and organize events that address the needs of their peers
2. To unite teens throughout the Queens environment and expose them to the world of the creative arts

ACTIVITIES:

Jacob Riis' Youth Council had eight officers and over 40 active members participate during the past year. The first phase of programming for the Youth Council involved electing officers. Participants ran for office against their peers and were voted on by the entire council. In preparing for the main community service project—Teen Summit 2003—several Council meetings were held to form committees and make decisions. Youth Council members kept notes of all meetings in order to chart the progress of the project.

Training was a key component to the event-planning process—especially for the Council's officers. They attended special workshops to help them develop leadership, communication, and organizational skills.

A significant portion of the Council's time was spent coordinating Teen Summit 2003. First, youth met with staff for ideas on how to find professionals to conduct the writing, acting, singing, dancing, drawing, and fashion workshops they wanted offered at Teen Summit. Then, they sent letters to colleges inquiring whether professors or upcoming graduates could conduct interactive workshops; spoke with art teachers who were already a part of Riis about volunteering their time; and contacted professionals whom staff knew. Next, to get the word out, they posted flyers throughout the community, schools, and community centers and used "word of mouth" to generate interest for Teen Summit among their friends.

Teen Summit 2003 opened with a welcome dinner. During the dinnertime, there was an ice-breaker, which gave the young people a chance to meet and interact. The participating youth also used this introductory time to choose and sign up for workshops. Following the workshops, a teen group called Helping Adolescents Reach their Peers (HARP) performed skits about peer pressure, abstinence, and judgment. To conclude this exciting event, the teens had an after-party with a DJ.

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After the event, the Youth Council members attended follow-up meetings. Surveys were distributed asking them to evaluate their experiences as a member of the Youth Council. Youth also had the opportunity to verbally express their views regarding the Summit and record their opinions about what should or should not change for future summits.

In celebrating the success of Teen Summit 2003, the staff organized a recognition ceremony that rewarded Council members on their hard work and gave everyone an opportunity to discuss the likes and the dislikes of the project.

CHALLENGES AND SUCCESSES:

Building motivation and commitment were the primary challenges for this project. Because of the extensive amount of work, it was necessary for the officers to meet outside the hours of the teen program. Positive reinforcement helped develop youths' dedication to and motivation for the project. During meetings outside of scheduled program time, staff ordered food and refreshments for the group or brought in home-cooked meals. During the bi-weekly council meetings, the officers received recognition in front of their peers for their hard work and dedication.

The dedication and commitment of the Youth Council increased tremendously throughout the course of the Teen Summit 2003 project. The teens showed increased motivation and excitement and the officers improved their communication skills by leading meetings and speaking in front of their peers.

OUTCOMES:

One hundred and twenty-two teens from the Queens community attended Teen Summit 2003. Surveys, which guests filled out after every workshop, revealed that over 70% rated the event from good to excellent and 78% reported they would attend another Teen Summit.

Many new young people indicated interest in joining Youth Council in the fall.

Youth Council members developed important skills in decision making and event planning.

PROJECT PROFILE

NEW YORK CENTER FOR INTERPERSONAL DEVELOPMENT (NYCID) UNITY YOUTH COUNCIL'S "PREPARE AND SHARE PROJECT"

DESCRIPTION:

Youth Council created the Prepare and Share Project to explore ethnic diversity. Youth learned to cook food from various cultures and then used their new knowledge as a tool to educate community members about specific ethnic groups found on Staten Island.

GOALS:

1. To build cultural awareness
2. To improve the research, outreach, and public speaking skills of Youth Council members
3. To bring together different Staten Island teen groups to celebrate diversity

ACTIVITIES:

The project began with the twenty-five young people who were already involved in NYCID's Unity Youth Council. Out of these twenty-five, four members were selected through an application process to be on the Prepare and Share Task Force. The purpose of the Task Force was to oversee the implementation of the Prepare and Share Project. There was also an adult staff member--the Unity Youth Council Coordinator--who was responsible for the administration of the project.

To begin, the Task Force determined their meeting schedule and decided on their official duties and responsibilities. Because one of the goals of the project was to celebrate diversity within the community, they began by examining their own backgrounds and ethnicities. This pre-service work took approximately 1 _ months. Youth created a cultural survey and administered it to Council members to determine their cultural backgrounds (this included language proficiency, family traditions, knowledge of their country of origin, and interest in learning more about their cultural backgrounds). A preliminary review of the surveys indicated that "there was a strong feeling of ethnic pride among Youth Council members," Saladis says, "but that the young people were eager to know more about the cultures present on Staten Island, and in their communities."

Next, the Task Force chose different ethnic and religious service groups and agencies from throughout Staten Island, including both the north and south shores, to visit as part of the Prepare and Share Project. "We created the survey to distribute so we could find out information about them before we visited. This helped us to create the right type of presentation for each group and get to know their feelings about culture and diversity," explains Equisha Newsome, Youth Connect Project Associate.

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Within a month, the surveys were reviewed and the data was analyzed by the Task Force. The data served as the basis for selecting Kenya, the Dominican Republic, and Cherokee (Native American) as the countries/cultures to present to community groups. Youth Council members researched the history, culture, and traditions of these specific countries and cultures and created posters for their Prepare and Share presentations. Because the members planned to use food as a way to educate community groups, they were also responsible for finding recipes associated with their assigned country/culture.

To prepare for the presentations, the Youth Council members secured participation from local groups, determined the number of group members who would be attending, and identified any special dietary needs of participants. Youth Council members also planned visits to the organizations/centers prior to the project to determine the room set-up and possible space restrictions.

After deciding who would be the “chefs” for each group visit, select Council members planned a menu to be prepared at each community group’s location. Participants created a list of items needed from the grocery store. Prior to each “dinner party,” the recipes were typed and copied for distribution to participants. In addition, agendas were created for each visit (including preparation and cooking time, eating, and discussion) and transportation was arranged. Due to the limited resources of NYCID and the other agencies, it was often necessary to use another cooking facility (at a member or staff person’s house). Task Force members kept activity logs when completing tasks off-site or at home as a way to demonstrate and chart their work on the project.

The Unity Youth Council members were ready to give their Prepare and Share presentations four months into the project. The history, traditions, and food of the Dominican culture were presented to: 1) Roza Promotions, a Liberian community organization, which includes both youth and adults, male and female, most of whom are Liberian immigrants who moved to America within the past five years; and 2) The Staten Island AIDS Task Force summer interns, which includes high school-aged youth of mixed backgrounds, including Nigerian, Eastern European, Hispanic, and Jewish. In addition, the group includes both hetero and homosexual young men and women, creating an interesting dynamic when discussing stereotypes and discrimination. The youth participants gained a great deal of knowledge and said they would be interested in working with the Youth Council in the future.

Due to lack of response from the groups initially contacted, the Task Force presented both Kenyan and Cherokee Indian culture to NYCID, which includes staff aged 21-50 with varying ethnicities, including Irish, Italian, Hungarian, Jewish, and African American. Youth Council members and other youth also attended, creating a dynamic discussion regarding affirmative action and stereotypes.

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CHALLENGES AND SUCCESSES:

One unforeseen challenge was the fact that some of the youth at Roza Promotions were not proficient in English. Survey questions needed to be read and explained to participants who experienced difficulty understanding the written text, resulting in extra time dedicated to the survey completion. The “success” imbedded in the “challenge” was that because of the language barriers, Task Force members had the opportunity to interact with group participants on a more personal level.

OUTCOMES:

Prepare and Share served 75 youth and adults, ranging in age from 11 to 50 years, including Youth Council members, participants at each site, and staff.

Community members felt they received education on various cultures and attained a better understanding of different traditions, practices, and ideas.

Youth in the community recognized contributions other cultures make to society (food, history, dress) through presentations made by Youth Council members.

The Youth Council formed new partnerships with the community organizations involved who, in turn, can volunteer in future Youth Council special projects.

Task Force members gained extensive experience in project planning and community organizing.

Task Force members began to openly discuss issues of race and diversity and came to see it as an important part of everyday life.

Youth workers gained valuable experience in how to guide youth by providing questions for youth to reflect on and suggesting agenda items for meetings and “to-do” lists.

***Narrative contributions for the above profiles were made by the following youth practitioners:
Jennifer Saladis (NYCID), Shawana Coates, Shanelle Barnes & Steviann Crawford (Jacob Riis)***