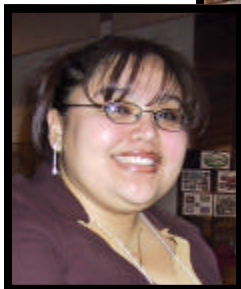
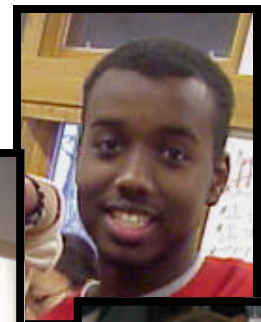
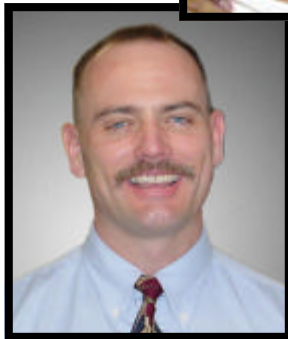




Five Key Elements
for Successful
Public Engagement



Evaluation of the
Youth Leadership for
Vital Communities Initiative



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" If we're not
involved and we
feel like we don't
have a voice,
then we're not
going to care."

YLVC youth

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Five Key Elements for Successful Public Engagement

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Evaluation of the Youth Leadership for Vital Communities Initiative

Mary Marczak, Gwen Willems, and David Moen

INTRODUCTION

It happened in Winona and Worthington, small communities in southern Minnesota experiencing natural struggles that arise with a rapid influx of new and diverse community members. It happened in Grand Rapids, a small city in the northern corner of the state, facing loss of its younger members and challenges to major industries. And it happened in Frogtown, a highly diverse neighborhood in the midst of a major metropolitan city. What happened was that young people and adults worked together to change their communities. In doing such, teens engaged in community work and discovered the power of having a voice. In the process, both young people and adults learned much about themselves, each other, and their communities. By increasing the social ties needed to produce change, they also made noticeable strides in building their communities' social capital—the goodwill, fellowship, and social intercourse first described in 1916 (Hanifan) and more recently defined by Robert Putnam (1995) as the networks, norms and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit.

Many similar youth development programs attempt to reach these goals. What is it about this program that has led to such exceptional success? Interviews with participants in four of the YLVC sites, multiple conversations with the project director, and review of the project history and documentation helped us understand what critical factors produced the positive impact of YLVC. In sharing, we hope others can use these insights to



Social Capital — the networks, norms and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit.

replicate successful public engagement in their communities.

When asked, “What strikes you the most when thinking about your experiences in YLVC?” young people responded:

“ I think for me it’s how much the adults seek out our opinions and we never really noticed that unless I was in this group (YLVC), and I don’t know, like, how much of a voice we do have and how much the adults seek out to hear what we have to say. I think it has made an impact on me because we are getting so involved with the community and you can just see the difference that you are making in people.”

“... you have a voice in the community and how much it impacts the community and people really do care what kids think.”

Story after story told similarly of how youth who felt disengaged from their communities came together with other youth through YLVC, built relationships with peers and adults around shared goals for improving the community, felt motivated and empowered, and came to know themselves and their communities better.

YLVC teams were building social capital, in contrast to the decline of social capital in the United States that Putnam reported on in his popular book, *Bowling Alone* (1995, 2000). Evidence of the development and impact of social capital’s individual and collective features are seen in YLVC youth and adults. Their new found networks and relationships facilitated the attainment of mutual project goals that benefited the community.

The Program Model

In 2000, three youth organizations—the Amherst H. Wilder Foundation, the National Youth Leadership Council, and the University of Minnesota Center for 4-H Youth Development—collaborated to create and test a new youth leadership program model called Youth Leadership for Vital Communities (YLVC). This four-year initiative, supported by a lead grant from the Blandin Foundation, was crafted to “enlarge and engage the citizen leadership capacity of cohorts of young people” in Minnesota’s rural and urban communities. The program used methodologies grounded in experiential education, youth/adult partnerships, and service-learning experiences. The theme of valuing diversity and

Evidence of the development and impact of social capital’s individual and collective features are seen in YLVC youth and adults.

inclusion was intentionally embedded in the model.

Implementation of YLVC began in 2001 with four demonstration communities—three rural and one urban—that had or were experiencing a rapid change in diversity of their population. Four similar sites were added during the next two years.

At each site, cross-sector community stakeholders were convened to be introduced to the model and were invited to create a demonstration site. Participants at each site identified a lead organization to host the program. Hosts varied from a chamber of commerce to a county branch of the University of Minnesota Extension Service, to a community education department. Each community received start-up funds, including money to hire a .25FTE coordinator, with the agreement that communities would create strategies for local sustainability.

Each community developed and implemented its own recruitment strategy to involve approximately five adults and 15 youth in 9th -11th grades. The program sought youth participants who had interest in and potential for building leadership capacity. Previous formal or positional leadership experience was not required, and in some cases discouraged. The program also placed a priority on selecting participants who reflected the ethnic diversity in the community. Site coordinators sought adult participants who had a commitment to developing community leaders, had networks across sectors in the community, and had community leadership experience. Participants were asked to make an 18-month commitment.

During three years of challenges, changes, and accomplishments, YLVC evolved into a program model that became especially successful in expanding youth voice in community decision making and increasing cross-generational and cross-cultural understanding. Early in this pilot it was evident that the projects and issues that motivated teams to action moved them into positions where they had authentic input and voice. They added a missing youth perspective to larger community issues. That awareness moved YLVC to clarify and reshape its mission from an original emphasis on community and economic vitality. The focus shifted to **“increase the voice of youth in community dialogue and decision-making.”** Formal teaching about leadership gave way to an emphasis on learning leadership through application in communities. Early program evaluation captured changes in young people’s development of specific skills such as leadership,

YLVC evolved into a program model that became especially successful in expanding youth voice in community decision making and increasing cross-generational and cross-cultural understanding.

communication, and decision making. Current data, collected by external researchers in the later stages of the pilot, reveal that the richness of participants' experiences went far beyond increases in specific skills. The authors found in this unique and adaptable initiative, complex and multi-dimensional gains that were extremely powerful in their impact on the participants and their communities. Participants report that this project has changed them as individuals and changed their relationships with others and their community.

The data also showed that the overarching objective – to increase the voice of youth in community dialogue and decision making – was indeed being achieved. The researchers also found that YLVC teams achieved the following three program goals:

- **To build leadership skills through meaningful engagement and application in real community issues**
- **To form youth-adult partnerships that demonstrate shared power, energy, and common vision**
- **To apply inclusive leadership by broadening understanding of diversity and establishing relationships that produce mutual respect across age, gender, and ethnicity**

Data Collection

Researchers conducted interviews with the original intention of collecting success stories through case study methodology. Individual and group interviews were conducted in four different communities with 17 individuals, including 11 youth, five adult partners, and one local program coordinator.

The interviews were open-ended and asked about programs and participants' experiences within the programs. All interviews were completed by an evaluator with extensive experience conducting interviews and analyzing qualitative data, were tape recorded and tapes then transcribed for analysis. Three people independently analyzed the interview data for common emergent themes and shared their recognition of dramatically consistent key elements of success.



Participants report that this project has changed them as individuals and changed their relationships with others and their community.

KEY ELEMENTS OF SUCCESS

Five critical factors or promising practices for achieving successful individual outcomes and building community social capital for change emerged from the data analysis process. These factors include:

1. **quality relationships within and outside the teams;**
2. **engagement in changes for the public good;**
3. **acquired skills and competence leading to a sense of social agency;**
4. **well-designed training; and**
5. **opportunities to better understand the community.**

Building Quality Relationships

Arguably one of the most critical factors in its success is the heavy focus on building quality relationships within and outside the YLVC team. The participants noted how differently they relate to others because of YLVC. They not only are more likely to seek out people with whom they haven't connected before, but they have also discovered new ways of relating to each other (e.g., young people with adults and vice versa). Youth participants had a greater understanding of people in positions of power, and adults in general. YLVC also helped participants understand how to bridge potential relational barriers including socioeconomic, friendship groups, age, power, and ethnicity. They also learned that being "relational" doesn't mean friendship only, and even learned that the most effective teams for work and public life are those that form relationships around a common sense of purpose and mission and not around friendship. This finding is supported by Mark Granovetter's (1973) theory on the strength of "weak" vs. "strong" relationships, or ties. The theory implies that weak ties create bridges between groups having strong ties within a group and that weak ties are more likely to link members of different small groups than are strong ones.

For YLVC members, relationship building was intentional. It occurred over time with training, continuous development of key relationship-building skills (i.e., listening, validating, respecting, and

They learned that the most effective teams for work and public life are those that form relationships around a common sense of purpose and mission and not around friendship.

trusting) and practicing of the skills in community settings. Built into YLVC processes, including cross-site trainings, were generous time, resources, and opportunities to build relationships. One young Latino male, who lived in a small, rural community most of his life, was especially impacted by meeting others of different ethnic backgrounds living in a major metropolitan area:

“I mean you can learn so much about so many other people. Before, I never thought I’d have friends in (other communities) but once we came together for training experiences, it was cool, we all came together as a team.... I think these relationships are really cool because you actually take the time to get to know people, you take the time to listen to their ideas, to listen to what they think, to just be part of their lives as much as they’re going to be a part of yours.”

Young people also gained insights from connecting with people outside of their typical social circles. Unlike adults, young people are predominantly engaged within their own small friendship networks on a day-to-day basis. One critical insight gained in terms of building relationships specifically for public engagement and community change was that while pre-existing social and friendship groups could bring about instant cohesion, they limited the capability of the team to move forward. Among the barriers posed by friendship groups were an unwillingness by some to voice opinions contradicting their friends, a lack of diverse perspectives about key issues, and formation of cliques that did not foster larger group cohesion. One adult coordinator summarized:

“The first group went to one training and then were to come back and do more recruitment. And that was when they recruited their friends. There were some young people who were very involved but when friends got involved, some didn’t feel a part of that group any more. Because all of a sudden, it was more a peer group. And so these other people that weren’t part of that just sort of fell by the wayside. ... And so the second time around ... none of them were friends.... even now, (the kids) don’t necessarily hang out with each other during their school day or on the weekends, but when they come to our meetings, or when they’re working in subgroups, they work very well together.”

Young people also echoed the value of not having pre-existing friendship groups become teams:



“So we all came from different groups of friends pretty much.... I think this is probably a good thing, just cause you get more voice, like on different issues, like how other groups think about it.”
YLVC youth

“... it’s not just the same people (friendship groups), everybody gets involved. It’s not just this little group over here and this little group over there ... everyone gets involved. So it’s really nice.”

“So we all came from different groups of friends pretty much.... I think this is probably a good thing, just cause you get more voice, like on different issues, like how other groups think about it..”

When Richard Murnane from the Harvard Graduate School of Education and Frank Levy from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology reported their research on the “new basic skills” to succeed in the 21st century economy, a key skill discussed was the ability of young adults to work in groups with people from diverse backgrounds (Murnane & Levy, 1996). This ability to build relationships with diverse groups of people to accomplish mutual goals was a key impact of YLVC. Understanding and working through issues from different perspectives not only occurred across diverse groups of young people, but also between youth and adults. Not surprisingly, the strength of the relationships between youth and their adult partners were also seen as critical to successful public engagement. Interestingly, the young people believed strongly that it takes a unique group of adults to work with them for successful community change efforts. Young people across the communities were somewhat surprised by the adults who worked with them, saying that they were not like other adults with whom they come into contact in their day-to-day lives, usually authority figures. As the following quotes exemplify, for young people, the most common praises for the adults who were part of the program were, “*They’re cool,*” “*They’re fun,*” and “*They’re like one of us.*”

“(The adults) they were just normal people, or like people our age, and just sitting down and talking with them, we just feel more or less comfortable. ”

“I think everybody that’s in YLVC, all the adults, not to say they’re not serious people, but they’re light-hearted people who can just enjoy and have fun.... I think that (they) are just willing to step out of their shell.... that’s what makes YLVC work.”

Adults also echoed young people’s beliefs about the characteristics they need to work with kids for community change:

“You know ... a lot of people miss an opportunity like this...

Understanding and working through issues from different perspectives not only occurred across diverse groups of young people, but also between youth and adults.

that not everyone appreciates working with kids this age, and their imagination and their spontaneity, their honesty, and just plain old 'give it to me and let me try it', and these kids are not afraid to do that, and it's so refreshing... I love hanging around with youth, they're great. And not every adult does, has the ability to step out of that shell and just let them function... It's a rush, it's just a blast."

According to the project director, the characteristics of the adults that mattered were that they showed genuine interest in young people and they were open to understand and listen to youth. The results were dramatic, not only changing the nature of the youth-adult partnerships within YLVC, but also changing young people's relationships with other adults in the community:

"I had never even thought about it, working with adults in partnerships, until I came to the YLVC meetings and then I'm like 'Wow, this can really work!' My relationships with adults are really different now. When I talk to my teachers at school, I don't feel like I have to look up to them. When I'm sitting in the classroom and I don't understand something, I actually raise my hand and ask. I'm not afraid to ask the question anymore."

"YLVC is different (than other programs I've belonged to), I guess it's just the fact that like you get to work with adults, and like they're not higher than you.... You get a whole different view. I think a lot of kids think of adults as grumpy old people. I guess a lot of us think they don't want to listen to us so I think it's just a good way for us to kind of feel comfortable, you know? Now I feel more comfortable talking to teachers at school; it's easier for me to talk to them."

Public Engagement

YLVC offered youth a range of opportunities to intentionally work with other youth and adults on public issues in a way that had both public worth and private worth. Multiple, action-oriented, short-term activities helped communities move toward attainment of long-term goals. The following examples demonstrate how YLVC activities provided opportunities to practice public engagement and improve Minnesota communities in important and meaningful ways:



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YLVC youth

- In cooperation with Willmar public schools, YLVC youth organized a “Celebrate Diversity” poster contest for elementary students that attracted more than 50 entries; enlargements were displayed on prominent billboards in the city.
- YLVC youth in Grand Rapids advocated for their peers and worked with city officials to develop a youth survey. The input of 368 high school students became part of the city’s comprehensive plan.
- YLVC members in Worthington teamed with county public health services to conduct a “Not Me, Not Now” campaign providing information to ninth-grade students about the risks of teen sexual activity.
- In St. Paul, YLVC youth who were asked to help organize children’s activities at a neighborhood event went a step further. Concerned about neighborhood violence and gang activity, they reviewed the day’s agenda and made a successful case to the planning committee that a boxing exhibition should not be included.
- Waseca YLVC team members organized a rally of more than 100 people in support of the local school levy referendum, which passed.

By working on public issues, YLVC youth contributed to the public good in the way described by active citizenship advocates such as Harry Boyte and Nancy Kari, Craig Rimmerman, and Robert Putnam. As Boyte and Kari put it, this is public work “by ordinary people that builds and sustains our basic public good and resources—what used to be called ‘our commonwealth’ ” (Boyte & Kari, 1996, p. 16).

One Latino youth—whose YLVC group worked with organizations to put up an end-racism billboard on the most-trafficked road through their town and produced a video to help people better understand diversity in their community—told us how YLVC brought different groups together in his community. He said,

“... there’s so many different groups that want to do something for the community but yet they never sit down and come to an accord to see ... maybe we can compromise and do this, and make this all work.... And that’s why we’re doing the video project, too, to let everybody know that there’s like different people in our community, and we can all come together and work together as a team and make it better”



“We just want to make a difference in the community and break a barrier of youth not being involved.”
YLVC youth

Youth involved in YLVC also discovered the private good and the personal power of their activities. As the same youth said,

“... now since you have these connections with authority people and people that are, like, very important for our community, now it’s easier to let them know what’s going on, to give them, like, an insight, as a member of the community.... you can be a part of this.”

The intrinsic rewards of belief in what they’re doing, connecting with team members, and connecting to their community was what kept them involved. As one youth mentioned,

“We just want to make a difference in the community and break a barrier of youth not being involved.”

As one adult partner summarized, “*People don’t realize how much power they have in a democracy*”. Youth in his community also learned that power can be magnified; for example, when collective decisions were made in partnership with the chamber board, they carried a lot of weight in the community.

Through engagement in these types of YLVC experiences, youth practiced what Rimmerman (1997) calls the “New -,” which has participatory democratic values—civic engagement, political equality, solidarity, trust, tolerance for diverse views and people, and encouragement of civic organizations and associations.

Those values are all present in YLVC activities. YLVC youth and adults engaged in a public process: they examined their community, identified needs, selected goals and solutions, planned, acted, recognized, and celebrated accomplishments. YLVC teams either initiated an action, such as creating a teen drop-in center, or added youth involvement to an existing action, such as conducting a youth-specific survey as part of a larger community planning process.

Participants expanded their interactions with other cultures through YLVC. One young female told us she used to feel that she should stay with her fellow Hmong people, but now wants to be friends with whomever she’s comfortable and can work. As she said,

“I used to be really conscious of who I’m with, but now it doesn’t matter, who I can work with, who works best with me, who actually wants to be my friend and who doesn’t want to be



“... now since you have these connections with authority people and people that are, like, very important for our community, now it’s easier to let them know what’s going on, to give them, like, an insight, as a member of the community.”
YLVC youth

my friend. Things have changed.”

Because diversity was such a core value throughout YLVC, the whole YLVC approach could be considered “multicultural and social reconstructionist,” as Carl Grant and Christine Sleeter term it (1989, pp. 211-63). They say, “when people organize interest groups, coalesce with other existing advocacy groups, and mobilize other individuals with similar concerns, they *can* make a significant difference.”

Solidarity and trust between groups of people and with communities emerged. As one St. Paul youth said, since he’s been active in YLVC, *“I’ve felt safe. I feel closer to the neighborhood . . . now it’s easier to walk down the street. You’re not afraid of anything, you just kind of know the neighborhood.”* Based on the reputation that YLVC teams built, other organizations and individuals even came to seek out YLVC members for an authentic youth voice, input, and action. As two youth told us:

“That’s the good thing about YLVC, that you get just connected to so many other places. . . .”

“That’s pretty much why the city council came to us, they know we’re a youth-oriented type group that works with adults and we can reach the youth and so we’re pretty much the gateway to youth.”

Social Agency

A key impact of YLVC was a change in young people’s sense of efficacy and motivation to improve their communities. Human agency has long been documented by social cognitive psychologists such as Albert Bandura as a construct that entails a sense of personal efficacy (belief about one’s capabilities to execute a behavior) and the awareness that one has control over change processes or increased locus of control (Bandura, 1989, 1997). This sense of social agency was clearly heightened by young people’s experiences in YLVC. The interview data indicated that this sense of agency was attributed primarily to the confidence that came with knowing and successfully experiencing the specific processes needed to make change happen.

Those studying human agency have made a clear link



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YLVC youth

between young people's sense of agency and the need for a supportive environment where young people can gain a sense of efficacy (Bandura, 1997). The interview data from the young people indicated that several factors had to be in place for young people to gain a sense of agency. These included: (1) YLVC's shift from a statewide expectation of community change around diversity and economic issues to focus on youth voice and local actions, (2) multiple opportunities in small projects where young people could practice skills, learn what works and what doesn't in making community change, and continue to experience success, (3) adult team members in positions that increased networking and with insights about how systemic change happens (e.g., who makes the decisions, what is the line of authority, and who needs to be informed), (4) balance of power within the youth-adult partnership, and (5) recruitment of young people with the time and the openness to learn new skills and take healthy risks.

The shift to increased youth voice and local action opened much-needed opportunities for young people and their adult partners to jointly create a framework for youth input and action on wider community issues, not just those targeted by the initiative or youth-related issues. Identifying and working on multiple small and large efforts on behalf of their community provided the teams with opportunities to practice their skills and to learn what works and what doesn't in bringing about change in their communities.

"In the YLVC program, when we voice something, it actually shows, you know, it's not like other programs where you just go 'I think we could' and then you never get around to doing it."

Young people noted one of the key lessons learned was how things "really work" in their communities. Who do they need to know? Who needs the information? If you want specific changes to happen in the community, what are the steps to make it happen? One adult partner summarized these key lessons for young people:

"I think they just didn't know the system. I think they thought the system is always an adult system, where it really isn't. If you have enough youth and they thought it was a big enough issue, they could always take it to a county commissioner or a city council meeting and be heard. But they didn't think they could be heard, and a lot of the time, it's just a lack of knowledge about the system. I think it's something that has to be



"... when we voice something, it actually shows, you know, it's not like other programs where you just go 'I think we could' and then you never get around to doing it."

YLVC youth

learned... They needed to better understand the process first, then build the skills to attain access to the system. That's where YLVC has really come in. These kids wouldn't think about calling the chief of police and asking him questions, but they know now through YLVC that they can contact him. It's amazing. "

Interestingly, one key expectation that young people had of adult partners was to connect the team to key positions, individuals, and organizations in the community. Though in interviews adults often down-played their positions and their abilities to connect to others in the community, it did not go unnoticed by the young people that several of their adult program partners held positions of importance in the community:

"Yeah, it was like at first, 'Ooooh, it's the chief of police,' but now it's like, 'Oh, it's the chief of police, hi,' you know and my friends are just, like, 'You talk to him?' 'Yeah!'"

"... I feel like, now I can just talk to adults a lot easier... like talking to (local adult partner), he's really important in our town and we did this one thing together and we went to the city council ... and they liked it a lot."

An adult's reflection also illustrates the importance of an adult partner's ability to make key connections:

"... They think I am connected because I am in city government. So I think that helps. But I think I, well, not necessarily pull strings but know some of the people, and we have two others in YLVC who are both very connected to the community and together, we would know who to talk to and plus one of the fellas on YLVC works for the state I think those things have helped us a great deal. "

The development and nature of the relationships between youth and adults were central to the newly created social capital generated through YLVC. To young people, having adult members with applied knowledge of what it takes to make systemic change in the community along with their capacity to share that power and knowledge was critical. According to research, program strategies that facilitate shared power between youth and adults are critical for both reducing youth-adult isolation and increasing positive risk-taking when engaging in important community functions (Zeldin, Camino, Calvert, & Ivey, 2002).

The development and nature of the relationships between youth and adults were central to the newly created social capital generated through YLVC.

Not only did YLVC youth become comfortable with the adults, but very early in the relationship building process, power differences were equalized:

“Cause like in other (programs), I think it’s still, like, the adults are the ones that are in charge and you’re just there to follow what their insights are, but in YLVC, we work on the same level. They take our ideas and we take their ideas so it’s a equal share of the work.”

Two key factors promoted this power balance, including the ability of adults in traditional positions of power to engage young people and YLVC’s strategy of having more young people than adults on the team. Young people experienced a side to the adults that was open and accepting and, according to one young person, this “...went a long way to reducing the age and power differential.” As another young person put it, “In the end, they care about what we care about.” Another important lesson for the initiative was that balance does not mean equal numbers of adults and youth. The young people indicated that including more youth than adults on the team helped to equalize the potential power differential. As one young person noted,

“... cause I would be very scared if I walked into the meeting and there were a whole bunch of adults and a few kids. I would be scared, I would panic. But then, at the meeting I went to, there was like a few adults and the rest were kids, so I kind of like thought... oh, you know... we choose as a group and pick the things we want to do. Everybody’s at the same level.”

An adult echoed this view:

“I think the best thing that it had going for it is that when they came up with the program they originally had youth outnumber the adults. I think that was one of the key things. You could have said everything that you wanted to do with YLVC, but if you had that number equal at the beginning, I don’t think the adults would have got it.... I don’t think it would have been as productive... I think if you would have had them even numbered, I think the adults would have been telling them what to do.”

Interestingly, how young people were recruited to join the YLVC team also played a role in the extent to which they gained a sense of social agency. For example, two of the three communities experienced more difficulty earlier on in the process because the



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YLVC adult

young people were most often recruited through a teacher nomination process. Not surprisingly, teachers typically nominated students who were very involved in leadership opportunities. These students not only were extremely busy, thus not able to give the necessary time to YLVC, but also came in with specific expectations about what the program should do for them and what their experiences should entail. Changing the recruitment practices for subsequent years helped to bring in members who were more open-minded about learning and developing skills and also had time to participate in the project. One young person talks about how she was recruited:

"I just walked into it. Someone, I didn't really know, except we kinda grew up in the same town, asked me to go to one of their meetings...."

Another young person tells a similar story:

"I was outside riding my bike and me and my friend, we met (the coordinator) who asked, how old are you guys? And told us about the meeting and he told us it was at 5-6:30. I figure we'd just check it out...."

Learning this lesson, one young person urged:

"... go ask (young people) in unexpected places, ask people you may not think would want to be involved. (They may say) 'I am not that type—to join anything.' Lots of kids just like to hang out, unless you confront them and tell them kind of what group you are in..."

For these young people, their new sense of agency permeated to other aspects of their lives in school and in their communities. A self-professed, one-time shy Hmong girl added:

"Through YLVC, I've gotten involved, I'm involved more than I used to be.... I first joined YLVC, and then there was this diversity retreat and the PRISM, our diversity club at the school was formed, and so I joined that, and then from those two things I started doing other things, I tried a fiddlers group.... Then just recently, I was really surprised, a school curriculum committee was just developed, and they were asking for students, a junior and a senior from the high school ... and so I signed up... cause I was, like, 'Oh, curriculum, maybe I could change something for the students' "

Including more youth than adults on the team helped to equalize the potential power differential.

Well-Designed Training

YLVC participants were introduced to the program and expectations in a cross-site, three-day training session. The core values of the program model – leadership concept and skills, youth-adult partnerships, and inclusion/diversity – were woven into all of the training’s interactive activities. However, training emphases on team development and social networking were most instrumental to achieving social capital outcomes, both within teams and among teams.

Because community teams were comprised of participants who hadn’t previously worked together or developed significant connections, a primary purpose of the training was team development. In addition, because the training was cross-site, participants interacted with more diverse people and ideas and they built a network of connections with others undertaking the YLVC experience. This built a common bond of support and also served to establish a peer base on which to share and test ideas and experiences.

Rather than a prescribed curriculum, the training content offered a mix of strategies and tools that teams could use as they made decisions about how to structure their team and what actions to undertake in their community. Workshop sessions offered training on skills necessary for team start-up (e.g., meeting facilitation and public presentation). Teams were also exposed to several strategies for group decision making and assessing youth voice and community need. Participants were challenged in large-group sessions that examined diversity/inclusion, youth/adult relationships, and leadership concepts.

Because YLVC allowed communities to shape the structure and work of their team, some training needs arose in the midst of doing their work in the community. A three-day training was not sufficient to prepare participants for all aspects of working as a team within a community context. As with all grass-roots public engagement, much of the skill development occurred within the context of “doing” community work:

“I think a lot of it is learning by doing it and just experiencing it. I know like now we’re more experienced than a year ago and we’re more comfortable.... and going to talk to people, it’s just doing it, just having to be in charge of yourself.”

Training emphases on team development and social networking were most instrumental to achieving social capital outcomes.

In this case, it was also supported by ongoing coaching from local site coordinators and periodic topic-specific cross-site trainings. Appropriate time for reflection on the experience is critical in order to recognize and reinforce the development that occurs through learning in the context of doing.

Understanding Community and Your Role in It

Through YLVC, youth simultaneously learned about their local and state communities as they came to know themselves and their roles and capabilities as community members better, with newly built knowledge, skills, and confidence.

As YLVC groups formed, members used structured exercises to map and analyze their communities. At the time that the St. Paul YLVC group did a community assessment to get to know the Frogtown area, one youth who we later interviewed didn't know any of the businesses on a major street in the area, University Avenue. Bolstered by his friends, he ultimately had fun going door to door to these businesses to sign them up for a job fair the team developed and seeing all the different personalities. As he describes the experience:

"We had flyers and we walked down University and just kind of asked them if they wanted to participate in a job fair, and some of them would say, 'Yes' ... It was very scary at first, walking into a store and asking, 'Can I speak to your store manager?'"

He said that ultimately, "*It was a great experience.*" He also told us how, after building confidence through his outreach experiences with businesses and new people, he got to know his neighbors on a personal level:

"We have a neighbor (of different age and ethnicity) across from our house. I'd never talked to him, and then one time I walked across and said, 'Hi,' and then they actually came over, and I had to go over and invite them to one of our celebrations, and they came, and I got to go inside their house, and it was cool."

Participating in statewide workshops, YLVC youth also learned about different types of communities and their challenges and become friends with others in a diverse rural and urban mix.

As youth teamed with community organizations to accom-

Important aspects of YLVC that increased social capital were:

- promoting a sense of agency among participants;
- creating networking opportunities; and,
- positioning teams to make change.

plish mutual goals, they got to know their communities and formed new relationships with other adults. One youth told us about his enlarged perspective:

“... now that I’ve grown older and a little more mature, I stop and think of different things. I still think of things that could make students or younger kids happy or more involved in our community, but I also think of the other half, like how would the adults take it, or how would that work. ... I think it’s (YLVC) helped me see things in different perspective in the community.”

YLVC teams added value or capital to their communities by their existence and through the actions of the team. In each community, participants talked about greater awareness of positive contributions of young people—that people in power positions (e.g., mayor, police chief, chamber of commerce members) recognized the voice of young people as both legitimate and contributing to the overall understanding of community issues, not just youth issues. Important aspects of YLVC that increased social capital were: promoting a sense of agency among participants; creating networking opportunities, and positioning teams to make change.

The connections were strengthened between youth, communities, and key elders, with a sharing of influence, social capital, position, and power. One student described the change in his relationship with an adult in YLVC, saying,

“I just joke around with him, instead of looking at him as an authority figure. I mean he is, but that’s not what I know him as. I know him as a friend, so that’s what kind of breaks up those barriers.”

Through YLVC experiences, youth got to know themselves and their relationship to their communities as they contributed, and were validated in their contributions and saw that they improved their communities. The words of one youth sum it up:

“It’s felt like you belong somewhere,” one youth said. “It’s just kind of like a family. You just kind of feel welcome.”



*“It’s felt like you
belong somewhere. It’s
just kind of like a family.
You just kind of feel
welcome.”
YLVC youth*

DISCUSSION

As demonstrated by examples in this article, youth and adult YLVC participants were working together in authentic and intentional ways to build community leadership capacity and youth voice in decision making. In the process, a great amount of social capital was generated to improve their communities. Examples abound—a young Hmong girl went from being uninvolved to becoming part of multiple efforts and organizations and began to connect those pieces; a police chief in the program inspired a Latino male to go into law enforcement as a career; and chamber of commerce members began to work with youth as allies. The social capital was coming in the form of new ties connecting diverse sectors of the community to accomplish community improvements through public engagement. One adult member discussed why we should think about impact of programs like YLVC differently and why these social ties are critical to a community's social capital,

“You got 35,000 people living in this community. I mean a handful of kids aren't going to make a huge impact any given day.... The real impact is in the process. And the influencing on some things that happen in the community.... If you're going to see a long-range impact, it's going to those kids that we end up running through the program each year, and the relationships that they have and the relationships that they have with adults like me. To be able to come back and work on my committees when they move back with their families, or influence somebody in the community that they go to from here as an adult, and say, ... I was active and I'm going to be active... it's a ripple thing. You drop a pebble in the middle of a bucket and it goes all over.”

Another adult discusses how the changing relationships can impact both youth and adults,

“I have always been involved with youth as a police officer, because that's where we have a lot of our problems. (YLVC has) helped me a lot in that a lot of the kids I've been involved with before had criminal problems.... I think it's just opened the door a little bit more because if you have a couple of youth that will talk to you (youth from YLVC), it's a good icebreaker for them and it's a good icebreaker for me if I can joke around with them if I see them at school, or they'll say hi to me in public. It helps me being able to talk with other kids, too. Other than

The social capital was coming in the form of new ties connecting diverse sectors of the community to accomplish community improvements through public engagement.

YLVC, I would have no connection besides my children with what's going on in that age range right now (other than with kids in trouble) and to see things from a broader group helps. So it helps in my work and it helps open up my perspective with what I think of younger people."

In YLVC, five key elements contributed to the success, including quality relationships within and outside the teams; engagement in changes for the public good; acquired skills and competence leading to a sense of social agency; well-designed training; and opportunities to understand their communities and their roles in it. By increasing the use of these five critical factors in public engagement programs across the nation, we trust that more communities will be able to increase their social capital, what Robert Putnam described as, "the involvement of individuals in social organizations with networks, norms, and social trust for mutual benefit."



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