

Knowledge Synthesis

INCREASING YOUTH INVOLVEMENT AND ENGAGEMENT

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INTRODUCTION

This knowledge synthesis is part of The Monieson Centre's Knowledge Impact in Society (KIS) Project, a three-year endeavour to connect academic knowledge with economic development needs in Eastern Ontario. The synthesis is an accessible presentation of the latest research on issues affecting rural Eastern Ontario. The knowledge synthesis topics were determined through information gathered at 15 community workshops run in partnership with the Eastern Ontario Community Futures Development Corporation network. The KIS Project is funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. For more information, visit www.easternontarioknowledge.ca.

Developing strategies that promote youth involvement and engagement is an important objective of leaders in rural communities. Through involvement and engagement, youth establish a stake in their communities. Research has shown that youth who are involved and engaged in community activities are most likely to stay in or return to their communities to take on rural careers.¹ This will increase the labour pool of skilled workers in the community, and as a result, members of the business community will benefit; they can draw on this pool for employment needs which will help their businesses grow and flourish. In addition, youth participation in community activities also reduces the likelihood that they will engage in risk-associated behaviours which are harmful to the community and drain community resources.² Furthermore, youth who get involved in volunteer activities provide unpaid labour which helps to boost a community's economic growth.

STRATEGIES TO PROMOTE YOUTH INVOLVEMENT AND ENGAGEMENT

Three strategies community leaders in rural areas can use to promote youth involvement and engagement are:

- Facilitating the development of community programs
- Promoting youth leadership
- Communicating opportunities

Facilitating the Development of Community Programs

¹The Ontario Rural Council, *Rural Youth: Leading Today, Tomorrow and Beyond* (Guelph: The Ontario Rural Council, 2007), www.torc.on.ca/documents/TheTORCReport-RuralYouth2007_000.pdf (Accessed Apr. 1, 2009).

²"Youth Engagement," Centres of Excellence for Children's Well-Being, 2008, <http://www.engagementcentre.ca> (Accessed Mar. 19, 2009).

Community programs provide the means for youth to participate in positive, constructive activities outside of school and family life. Community programs include afterschool programs, youth activities, youth clubs, extracurricular activities, and youth development programs (See Appendix A for examples of community programs offered in Eastern Ontario).

As evident in this list, there is a wide variety of activities that community programs can offer. Typically, community programs are associated with sports or arts-related initiatives; however, many other programming possibilities exist including skills-based programs, academic-support programs, and leadership development programs. Diversity in community programs is advantageous because it reaches out to a wider range of individual interests and needs. Put simply, it gets more youth involved.

Furthermore, there is also a great deal of diversity in the kinds of organizations that can offer community programs. These organizations include faith-based institutions, schools, libraries, hospitals, community centres, youth sports organizations, arts and cultural organizations, and national youth-serving agencies such as Boys and Girls Clubs, 4H, and Scouts Canada. Also, individuals such as community, spiritual, or youth leaders may also initiate such programs.³

Accordingly, community leaders need to recognize:

- The diversity in the types of programs that a community can offer
- The value in offering a diverse set of community programs
- The diversity in the kinds of organizations and individuals that can coordinate community programs

To facilitate the development of community programs, community leaders need to be proactive by going into the community and identifying organizations and individuals who might be willing to organize programs. Recognizing diversity (as mentioned above) is key, because it allows community leaders to be creative; community leaders can approach a multitude of different kinds of organizations and individuals, and suggest a wide variety of activities. This type of broad approach spurs the creation of more community programs, thus increasing overall reach.

Furthermore, community programs need to be supported financially. Communities can do this by directly sponsoring programs (if the funds are available), or by making program organizers aware of organizations that fund community projects for youth through grants (see Appendix B for a list of youth funding organizations). Community leaders should encourage program organizers to apply for these grants. Moreover, community leaders could offer to work with program organizers to develop a high quality grant application. If possible, they should identify someone in the community who is skilled in writing grants (i.e. an academic or professional writer) to help program organizers apply for funding.

³ Jacquelynne S. Eccles and Jennifer Appleton Gootman, *Community Programs to Promote Youth Development* (Washington D. C.: National Academies Press, 2002): 9-10.

Promoting Youth Leadership

Youth become more engaged in the community when they have the opportunities to take on leadership roles. Youth are more likely to take on such roles when:

- Opportunities exist for youth to participate in community decisions
- Role models in the community exist and are visible

To promote youth leadership, youth need to be given the opportunities to participate in decisions made by community members about policies and programs. Having voice empowers youth, gives them a sense of responsibility, and develops them to be the leaders of the future.⁴ Communities benefit as well; youth are enthusiastic, energetic, and bring fresh and unique perspectives to the table.

One way youth can be included in the decision-making process is through the establishment of youth cabinets. Youth cabinets draw together young leaders so that they can discuss community issues and organize community initiatives. For example, Toronto has a Youth Cabinet to advise City Council⁵, the City of Vaughan has a Youth Cabinet⁶, and in a rural setting, several hospital foundations on Prince Edward Island have established youth boards.⁷

When initiating a youth cabinet, there first needs to be a community leader who takes ownership of the project. This individual must then find interested youth to be members. A good place to start is to approach local high schools and network with teachers and students. Membership should be open to anybody interested in joining. Once members have joined, the cabinet should designate executives of the cabinet, usually youth, who chair the discussion in meetings, coordinate meeting times, and lead any proposed initiatives.

It is important to note that it is not simply enough for youth to meet and discuss issues. For youth to feel empowered their voice needs to be heard; this necessitates a link between the youth cabinet and community leaders (i.e. city/town committees, councillors). As such, community leaders need to be open to meetings with youth so that ideas and opinions can be discussed. City Councils can even establish policy that includes youth as a part of the consultative project.

Furthermore, for this collaboration between adults and youth to be successful, adult community leaders need to demonstrate they take youth seriously.⁸ For example, it is not enough for adults to simply nod their heads when communicating with youth. They must listen actively and validate their ideas. Providing validation does not mean automatically agreeing with what is said. It is important for adults to

⁴ Melvin Delgado and Lee Staples, *Youth-led Community Organizing* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008): 107.

⁵ "Roundtable on Children, Youth and Education," City of Toronto, 2006, http://www.toronto.ca/committees/rt_children.htm (Accessed Mar. 19, 2009).

⁶ Vaughan Youth Cabinet, 2009, <http://www.vyc.ca> (Accessed Mar. 19, 2009).

⁷ Jennifer Corriero and Luke Walker, *Engaging Rural Youth: Survey Results and Recommendations* (Toronto: TakingITGlobal, 2004), <http://research.takingitglobal.org/ruralyouth/ruralyouth.pdf>. (Accessed Apr. 1, 2009)

⁸ Adam Fletcher and Joseph Vavrus, *The Guide to Social Change Led by and With Young People* (Olympia: CommonAction, 2006), <http://www.commonaction.org/socialchangeuide.pdf>. (Accessed Apr. 1, 2009)

offer sincere comments, constructive criticism, and feedback. Moreover, adult leaders can encourage and authorize youth to take action through implementing finalized plans.

Another way that community leaders can promote youth leadership is to recognize youth leaders for their achievements and to make them visible in the community. Recognizing the accomplishments of rural youth leaders can motivate other youth to become involved and engaged in community initiatives. Awards can be established for youth who have demonstrated outstanding leadership and community involvement. For example, some rural communities offer not only a citizen of the year award, but also a youth citizen of the year award.⁹ Other types of awards can be given to youth who initiate and lead community programs. It is essential for awards to be made public so that other youth can become aware of what their peers are doing. To do so, community leaders could create events such as awards ceremonies and contact local newspapers to be present.

Last, youth who are interested in entrepreneurship can be mentored by members of the business community. Mentorship helps to provide youth with the skills and experience necessary to become business leaders of the future. Getting youth engaged in business activities in a community increases the chances that they may stay in that community to work in the business sector. For instance, engaged youth might choose to work for a business where they received a mentorship opportunity in the past, or they might even start their own business in the community. In either case, economic activity in the community has the potential to increase as a result of youth mentorship from business leaders in the community. As such, community leaders should make an effort to find members of the business community to volunteer their time as mentors.

Communicating Opportunities

Community programs and leadership opportunities may be in place, but youth cannot participate if they are not aware that opportunities exist. It is therefore essential that community leaders effectively communicate opportunities to youth. Community leaders should communicate:

- Community programs that are available to youth
- Volunteer opportunities
- Awards for youth leadership

The new generation of youth is increasingly using technology to communicate and to learn about what is going on around them. Specifically, online social networking tools, such as Facebook, have become extremely popular. On Facebook, people can create personal profiles which contain information about themselves (i.e. personal information, their interests, their opinions, what they are doing, events they are attending). These profiles can be viewed by friends. Thus, Facebook gives people a great deal of information. People learn about what is going on in the lives of their friends, what their friends are interested in, and what events are going on in the community.

Communication using social networking technologies like Facebook is the way of the future.¹⁰ Community leaders can take advantage of this communication medium to advertise opportunities,

⁹ Corriero and Walker. *Engaging Rural Youth*.

¹⁰ Lev Grossman, "Why Facebook is the Future," *Time*, Aug. 23, 2007, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1655722,00.html> (Accessed Feb. 20, 2009).

events, and programs that are going on in the community. For example, an organization that collects data on volunteer opportunities could create a Facebook profile of what they do. On this profile, a list of all volunteer opportunities could be posted. Then, an invitation could be sent to youth in the community to view this profile. To do this effectively, community leaders should be trained on how to create and regularly update a Facebook profile.¹¹

Besides using social networking technology, opportunities should also be posted on a community website. A community leader should take ownership of keeping the website comprehensive and up-to-date. As an example, Volunteer & Information Kingston is an organization in Kingston that coordinates volunteer work and has a website with a volunteer database.¹²

It is important to note that not all rural communities will have access to broadband internet services. In such cases, community leaders have to use more traditional methods to communicate opportunities to youth. Community leaders can visit places where youth frequent and advertise using posters on bulletin boards. They can also talk to leaders in the community (i.e. teachers, coaches, spiritual leaders, parents) and spread the word about available opportunities. Word-of-mouth advertising can be very effective, especially in rural communities that are tight-knit. In addition, high school students in Ontario are required to complete a minimum of 40 hours of community service.¹³ As such, it would be worthwhile for community leaders to communicate volunteer opportunities in high schools. Teachers and guidance counselors are invaluable resources in making students aware of these opportunities.

¹¹ "How to Use Facebook," Expert Village, http://www.expertvillage.com/video-series/1261_facebook-use.htm (Accessed Feb. 20, 2009).

¹² Volunteer & Information Kingston. <http://kingston.cioc.ca/volunteer> (Accessed Feb. 20, 2009).

¹³ Ontario Ministry of Education. *Policy/Program Memorandum No. 124A: Ontario Secondary School Diploma Requirement: Community Involvement Activities in English-Language Schools*, <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/extra/eng/ppm/124a.html> (Accessed Feb. 20, 2009).

APPENDIX A – COMMUNITY PROGRAMS IN EASTERN ONTARIO

The following is a list of a number of example community programs:

- **Sports Programs**
The Boys and Girls Club of Ontario offers a variety of sports-related programs to youth.
<http://www.boysandgirlsontario.ca/programs.htm>
- **Art and Music Programs (i.e. dance, visual arts, photography)**
Kingston Youth Arts Co-operative is a volunteer organization that delivers free arts programming to youth from ages 5 to 16 in Kingston.
<http://130.15.23.21/~kyac>
- **Clubs (i.e. book clubs, board game clubs, cooking clubs, outdoors clubs)**
4H, a rural youth development program, maintains a listing of clubs that are offered in rural areas in Ontario.
<http://www.4-hontario.ca/map.htm>
- **Academic-support Programs (i.e. tutoring programs)**
Frontier College in Peterborough offers volunteer tutoring services to youth in the area of literacy.
<http://www.frontiercollege.ca/english/literacy/peterborough.html>
- **Entrepreneurship and Business Programs**
Junior Achievement is a Canada-wide business program that promotes entrepreneurship and business.
<http://www.jacan.org>
- **Leadership Development Programs (i.e. youth councils, mentorship programs)**
The YMCA has a youth development program that provides training in social skills and leadership.
<http://fourinfo.cioc.ca/details.asp?RSN=26859>
- **Skills-based Programs (i.e. nutrition and lifestyle counseling, life skills training and street safety, conflict resolution training, toastmasters)**
The Boys and Girls Club of Ontario offers a variety of skills-based programs to youth.
<http://www.boysandgirlsontario.ca/programs.htm>

APPENDIX B –COMMUNITY PROGRAM FUNDING ORGANIZATIONS

- **Ontario Trillium Foundation**
http://www.trilliumfoundation.org/cms/en/app_materials.aspx?menuid=15
- **RBC 4-H Rural-Urban Youth Outreach Program**
Canadian 4-H Council
<http://www.4-h-canada.ca/outreach>
- **Play Works**
The “Do it Yourself” Project
<http://www.playworkspartnership.ca/pdf/DIYreport2007.pdf>
- **YouthScape**
<http://www.youthscape.ca/AboutYS.html>
- **Youth Engagement Funding Program**
Government of New Brunswick
<http://www.gnb.ca/3100/PDF/NBYouth-e.pdf>

APPENDIX C – ONLINE RESOURCES

1. Engaging Rural Youth (TakingITGlobal): Survey Results and Recommendations (PDF)

TakingITGlobal is an organization whose mission is to develop youth who are actively inspired, informed, and involved in shaping the world. This report presents the result of TakingITGlobal's recent Rural Youth Opinions survey of members from rural Ontario. The survey consisted of thirteen questions regarding youths' views on the status of their rural communities and what can be done to strengthen them through youth engagement.

<http://research.takingitglobal.org/ruralyouth/ruralyouth.pdf>

2. YouthScape

YouthScape is a Canada-wide initiative to engage young people in creating long term change. YouthScape creates the environment for young people to safely participate and contribute to decision-making and planning in partnership with adults and key decision makers. YouthScape has initiatives in Calgary, Victoria, Halifax, Thunder Bay, and Rivière des Prairies. The website provides learning resources to help youth contribute to their communities, and describes success stories of initiatives undertaken by YouthScape to engage youth in events and activities.

<http://www.youthscape.ca>

3. HeartWood Centre for Community Youth Development: The Youth Engagement in Rural Communities Project - Final Report (PDF)

Heartwood is an organization based in Nova Scotia and works with youth in order to develop their skills and confidence as community builders. This report describes the Youth Engagement Project that was developed by the Heartwood Centre for Community development. The report contains research findings, case studies, and an emerging model for youth engagement.

http://www.heartwood.ns.ca/yerc/FINAL_YERC.pdf

4. Ontario Trillium Foundation

The Ontario Trillium Foundation recognizes youth engagement as a best practice and has been developing a framework to support youth engagement in its grant making and encourage applications that include a youth engagement approach.

<http://www.trilliumfoundation.org>

5. Ontario Trillium Foundation: Meeting the Needs of Ontario Youth (PDF)

This report describes a study that was conducted by the Ontario Trillium Foundation. The goal of the study was to better understand the needs of youth in Ontario and identify opportunities to strengthen the impact of Ontario Trillium Foundation granting in this area.

http://www.trilliumfoundation.org/User/Docs/PDFs/research/Youth_Research.pdf

6. The Centre of Excellence for Youth Engagement

The Centre of Excellence for Youth Engagement develops and implements models of effective practice for meaningfully engaging youth and documents the results. To do this, the Centre brings together the expertise of youth, academic researchers, youth service providers and policy makers. This website is a collection of the work that the centre has done for organizations interested in youth engagement.

<http://www.engagementcentre.ca>

7. Technical Assistance Partnership for Child and Family Mental Health – Youth Involvement Resources

This website contains a list of online resources which are related to youth involvement.

<http://www.tapartnership.org/youth/resources.asp>

8. Research-Based Youth Engagement Strategies (PDF)

This resource report contains youth engagement strategies to help communities identify specific strategies for building effective partnerships between youth and adults. The resource kit includes exercises and sample documents to help prepare for, support, and maintain youth involvement.

<http://agexted.cas.psu.edu/cyfar/PDFs/yesbookweb.pdf>

9. The Free Child Project

This website describes the FreeChild Project, an initiative that provides tools and training to young people and adults that engage children and youth in social change. The website has a large number of online resources related to social change.

<http://www.freechild.org>

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