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BUILDING SUSTAINED CIVIC ENGAGEMENT AMONG YOUNG ADULT MINORITIES: HOW ORGANIZED GROUP MENTORING AND KINSHIP COMMUNITIES MAKE A DIFFERENCE

Survey data suggest that young minorities are less likely to vote, volunteer, and feel that they can make a difference in their communities¹. However, few studies have been able to provide concrete way to eliminate this disparity. A new exploratory study by Diann Cameron Kelly of Adelphi University, begins to fill in this research gap by asking a group of economically disadvantaged, high achieving persons of color about their interpretation of “civic engagement.”

The study suggests that when families and caregivers—or kinship communities— fail to provide examples of civic and political participation, youth mentoring organizations can serve as an additional critical resource for helping young people meet the cognitive, affective, and behavioral benchmarks that seem to result in sustained civic engagement. According to Dr. Cameron Kelly, “Being engaged in civil society is an ideal goal for every citizen. The dif-

tion, how do you define it” to “how would you characterize your level of commitment to serving others.”

Analysis of the online journals revealed that respondents held three different notions of civic engagement. First, they had a cognitive notion of civic engagement. Cognitive concepts include things such as commitment to service, feeling that you can make a difference in the community or through the political system, and beliefs surrounding parents’ involvement in youth program activities. Interestingly, only three respondents felt that their parents actively participated in the activities that shaped their education

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and lives during their adolescence. Another concept, affective notions, included things such as satisfaction with service or one’s political affiliation. Finally, behavioral notions included things such as performance of service, philanthropy and voting.

BUILDING BLOCKS OF CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

While the study is exploratory in nature, some findings have interesting implications for programs trying to encourage civic engagement and for future research. For one, the study suggests that caregivers and mentors play a key role in the developmental process in which the three notions of civic engagement are developed. According to Dr. Cameron Kelly, “respondents who were educated to pro-social civic behaviors with caregivers and mentors who modeled civic behaviors and commitments were more likely to exhibit strong civic identity, positive feelings toward service and politics, and a sustained desire to remain involved in service.”

Additionally, the study finds that civic knowledge can be gained through a variety of venues. For the young people in the study, civic knowledge was not only learned in the classroom, but was also imparted through interactions with caregivers, youth mentoring programs, and school programs. Dr. Cameron Kelly concludes that, “Civic engagement is a reciprocal relationship between the individual member of a social group and society. Caregiving environments and youth organizations and community groups must see themselves as schools for democracy where the maturing youths have increased opportunities to enjoy participatory equality

ficulty arises when maturing youths have little or no viable examples of civic and political participation. When a parent or caregiver is not fully engaged in traditional civic systems in society, their children will not be as well. Thus, youth organizations and mentoring programs become additional critical resources to ensuring a generation is fully engaged in all aspects of our society.”

VIEWS OF CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

The qualitative study included 13 young adults between the ages of 20 and 27 who had participated in a group mentoring program during their childhood and shown high levels of civic engagement in their early adult lives. The participants were asked to keep a detailed online reflective journal of their civic experiences from adolescence to young adulthood. The journals included 32 open-ended questions such as “what do you think of political participa-

2. See CIRCLE Fact Sheet “Civic Engagement Among Minority Youth.” The Fact Sheet can be downloaded from http://www.civicyouth.org/research/products/fact_sheets.htm#9

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in our nation.”

Finally, the report stresses that to the young people in the study, civic engagement is more than political knowledge, political efficacy, a high level of altruism, and so on. It is about young people seeing themselves as valuable members of the community and the community in turn seeing the importance of young people to the community. The author concludes, “[Civic engagement] is also a formal, consistent statement by the young citizen to society-at-large saying ‘I am a valuable member of my environment, and society, in turn, agrees.’”

The full report, “CIRCLE Working Paper 25: Civic Views of Young Adult Minorities” can be downloaded from CIRCLE’s Web site at http://www.civicyouth.org/research/areas/race_gender.htm ■

The American Youth Policy Forum (AYPF) announces the release of *Restoring the Balance between Academics and Civic Engagement in Public Schools*.

The report questions the No Child Left Behind Act’s focus on core academic subjects at the expense of the public school’s equally important role: preparing students to be engaged and effective citizens. The report is the product of a year of discussion with policymakers, education practitioners, community groups, parents, and youth from across the nation.

To order the report, *Restoring the Balance between Academics and Civic Engagement in Public Schools* (56 pp.), please send \$5 per copy (includes shipping/handling) to AYPF, 1836 Jefferson Place, NW, Washington, DC 20036. An online version of the report will be available soon at www.aypf.org.

DEFINING THE CIVIC OUTCOMES OF YOUTH ORGANIZATIONS

New research suggests that youth development programs designed to encourage civic activism can help otherwise marginalized youth become active participants in institutions and decisions that affect their lives. The research looked at two types of programs that encourage civic activism and suggests that when compared to traditional youth development programs (e.g., those focused on arts, community garden projects, youth leadership development, community service, etc.), these programs produce important differences in the way young people develop civically.

The research was conducted the Social Policy Research Associates. According to the authors, “While much existing research documents youths’ marginalization from civic participation and society because of their race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexual orientation, and immigrant status, we wanted to draw attention to ways that youth organizing and identity support programs enable young people to act upon their desire to change the forces that relegate them to the margins.”

YOUTH PROGRAMMING MODELS

The study is based on findings from nine Youth Leadership Development Initiative (YLDI) programs. Eight “traditional” youth development organizations served as a comparison group. The YLDI programs utilized one to two key programming strategies—identity support and youth organizing.

These YLDI program models are unique in several ways. The first program model, identity support, is built around specific identity groups (usually related to either racial, ethnic, gender, or sexual identity) and focuses broadly on civic awareness and connectedness. The second model, youth organizing, encourages young people to assert their political voices on issues that most affect them; this model focuses more on social action. Additionally, YLDI programs strive to put young people, as opposed to adults, in the leadership positions.

DIFFERENCES IN PROGRAM OUTCOMES

Data was collected using both quantitative and qualitative methods and analyzed using a non-traditional method in which the youths’ experiences in the programs were measured against a scale that ranged from insufficient to optimal. Dr. Cao Yu notes that, “This method of analysis allowed us to see what proportion of the youth in a program are having experiences that reach the highest ‘optimal’ standard and what proportion might be having experiences that do not meet the standard of being developmentally rich or in other words are ‘insufficient.’” The researchers looked at two types of outcomes: (1) developmental outcomes like civic activism and (2) support and opportunity outcomes such as having a supportive relationship and physical and emotional safety.

Looking at the developmental outcomes, the researchers found significant differences between the three different types of programs. For example, higher proportions of youth in both identity support and youth organizing programs reported optimal levels