

RESEARCH TO PRACTICE

From Research to Practice, a column dedicated to recognizing successful "bridges" between researchers and practitioners, reports on research with practical implications for youth civic engagement. Additionally, it presents concrete examples of how practitioners have applied this research to encourage the participation of young people in civic and political life.

INTEGRATING YOUTH VOICE INTO CITY GOVERNMENT: YOUNG PEOPLE AS COMMUNITY RESOURCES

The purpose of youth civic engagement is not only to develop leaders and effective citizens for tomorrow; it is also to tap the knowledge, energy, and passion of young people today—for their benefit and the benefit of their communities. This is a challenge that the city government and community members have taken up in Hampton, VA. Hampton's efforts "provide the most ambitious case to date to institutionalize youth civic engagement across the city", as Carmen Sirianni discusses in the recent "CIRCLE Working Paper 31: Youth Civic Engagement: Systems Changes and Culture Change in Hampton, Virginia". Since the early 1990's, the community of Hampton, VA, has focused on re-envisioning its underlying values and structure to appreciate and involve youth as resources in their community. These long-term efforts are now being coordinated out of the Hampton Coalition for Youth, a department in city government.

Dr. Sirianni suggests that three principles underlie efforts to incorporate youth voice in city government: Building Infrastructure, Training Staff and Citizens, and Federal Policy Support.

HOW OTHER CITIES CAN BEGIN: BUILDING INTENTIONAL INFRASTRUCTURE

While young people, government officials, and community leaders have been engaged in this cultural change process for over a decade, other cities should not be intimidated by the length of time that members of the Hampton community have put into their work or the fact that they started with a series of major grants. Creating an important role for youth is certainly a long-term process, but according to Cindy Carlson, Director of the Hampton Coalition for Youth, "what makes our system work is that we invest in honoring all types of engagement of young people...and you don't need a grant to do this." Carlson suggests that cities that are interested in looking at the role that young people play in the life of their community start by asking themselves two questions: What's our community's response to young people? And, what are the opportunities open to them? Answers to these questions will help to determine where gaps, challenges and resources exist that will play a role in constructing a distinct path for moving forward.

Hampton's long-term vision of youth engagement began by engaging a broad group of young people in activities within clubs, churches, community organizations, and classrooms. A common

approach to incorporating youth voice in public life is to identify one or two, usually high achieving youth to serve on a committee with adults. As an alternative, Hampton involved a wider range of young people, and this played an important role in the process of changing perceptions of young people.

According to Dr. Sirianni, this initial stage of involving a broad group of youth serves as an "entry portal to community engagement and the development of a civic ethic", while "more complex tasks can be intentionally designed as "pathways" to develop progressively higher civic skill sets..."

Cindy Carlson credits the city's relationship with Alternatives, Inc., a non-profit youth development agency, for the success of this strategy. The staff of Alternatives, Inc., is present in neighborhoods and schools, working directly with young people. As a result, they were able to attract "a wide range of young people and help to place [these] young people in the various opportunities that [the city] had."

SHIFTING ATTITUDES BY TRAINING STAFF AND COMMUNITY MEMBERS

Dr. Sirianni writes that "participation that does not progressively change institutional practices and cultures will not fundamentally empower youth." Training played a central role in Hampton's efforts as a vehicle to challenge people's mindsets towards youth. Both city officials as well as community leaders attended various trainings at early and intermediate stages of the city-wide effort. This training was done by Alternatives, Inc., which operates as a site for the BEST Initiative, an effort supported by the National Training Institute at the Academy for Educational Development.

The training helped participants put into perspective the goals and values underlying the efforts in Hampton that focus on seeing young people as resources. Carlson suggests that this was hard for most people to understand at first. "The reason we're doing this is to make our community better, not because it's only good for Johnny. It's so he can bring something back and make a difference in his neighborhood. It's good for us." In addition to training for more active youth, the trainings for staff and community members have changed the context in which the young people are involved by creating an atmosphere that seeks and supports youth voice.

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SUPPORT FOR CITY-WIDE EFFORTS

While Dr. Sirianni suggests exploring “federal policy designs that provide incentives for city governments to innovate,” at this time there are no such federal policies or programs planned.

Those interested do, however, have resources in colleagues around the country doing similar work. The Institute for Youth, Education, and Families at the National League of Cities has compiled an action kit for municipal leaders on promoting youth participation. This action kit gives an overview of efforts in several cities across the country.

In early 2005, Hampton was awarded the prestigious Innovations in American Government Award, which requires the city to disseminate information and act as a resource to those interested in working to facilitate similar changes to the perceptions and role of youth in their communities.

SUSTAINING THE MOMENTUM

Now that the efforts in Hampton are coordinated out of an office in city government, Carlson and her colleagues are aware of the opportunities and changes that come with institutionalization.

As a means to sustain the energy and organic nature of their efforts, they have deliberately tried to support non-institutional opportunities. They’ve done this through a focus on neighborhood work and continued support for a wide range of youth activities.

For example, the Coalition for Youth advised Alternatives, Inc., is writing a grant proposal focused on supporting youth community-based activism and organizing. The grant, from the W.K. Kellogg Youth Innovation Fund, was not sponsored by local government but it is now playing an important role in the overall youth engagement strategy in Hampton by supporting a new coalition of youth groups.

While Hampton has not emphasized evaluation of its efforts, Carlson was happy to point out that Hampton’s young adult voting rates are above the national average and may suggest that youth have developed a habit of participation.¹ That said, she stressed her reliance on the feedback the Coalition gets on their results and the knowledge that if an outcome is better and if young people are engaged in that effort, two important goals are being met. ■

¹ According to Cindy Carlson young people in Hampton, VA, voted in 2004 at rates of 55% (18-19 year olds), 71% (19-21 year olds), and 56% (22-25 year olds). CIRCLE data show that nationally 47% of 18-24 year old citizens voted in 2004.

LINKS AND RESOURCES

Hampton Coalition for Youth
www.hampton.gov/for youth

Hampton Youth Commission
www.areyouinthegame.com

National Training Institute (NTI)
www.nti.aed.org

NTI BEST Initiative
www.nti.aed.org/NationalBEST.html

National League of Cities
www.nlc.org/IYEF/

W.K. Kellogg Youth Innovation Fund
www.theyouthfund.org

NEW DATASETS AVAILABLE ON CIRCLE'S WEBSITE

Datasets associated with the “The Civic and Political Health of the Nation: A Generational Portrait” report are now available on CIRCLE’s web site. The newly available datasets include three data collections from 2002:

- ≡ National Civic Engagement Survey I (NCES I)
- ≡ National Civic Engagement Survey II (NCES II)
- ≡ National Youth Survey of Civic Engagement

These datasets can be found in SPSS, SAS Transport, STATA Version 6, and SDA versions. All supporting documentation is also available at www.civicyouth.org/research/products/data.htm.

Questions about the datasets can be directed to Mark Hugo Lopez at mhlopez@umd.edu.