

INCLUDING ALL VOICES

Achieving opportunity youth collaboration success through youth and adult engagement

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The Aspen Forum for Community Solutions (“Aspen Forum”), a program established in 2012, seeks to spotlight and support communities successfully engaging leaders and advocates across all sectors — business, education, non-profit, philanthropy, and government — to collectively solve seemingly intractable social and economic challenges. Using a collective impact and/or community collaboration approach, the Aspen Forum supports community collaboratives and backbone organizations to address their communities’ most urgent needs. These collaboratives are most successful when those who stand to be most impacted by their efforts are placed at the center as experts and valuable members of the collaborative.

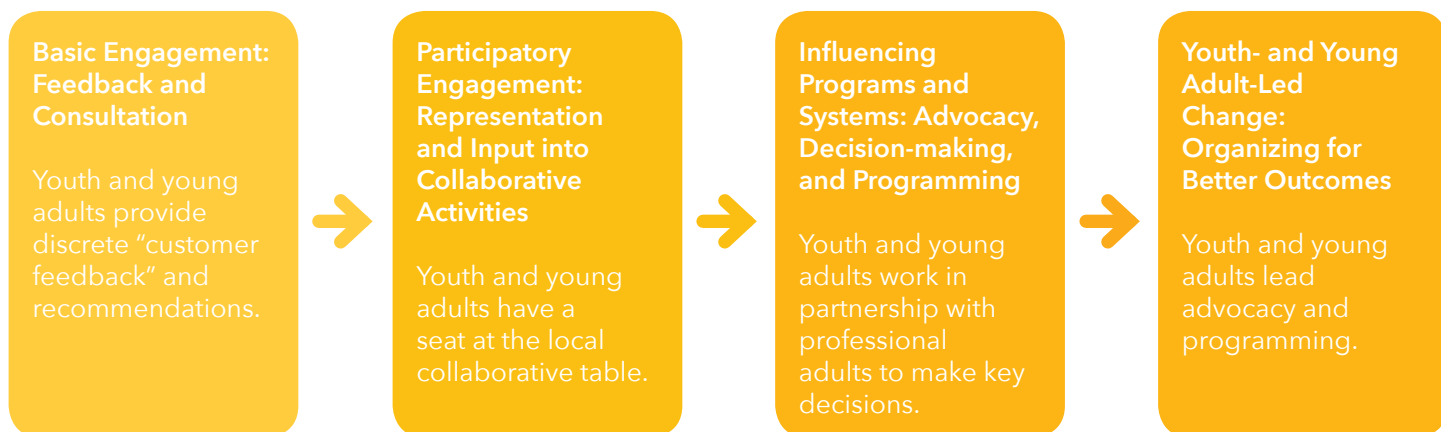
The concept of youth and young adult engagement is central to the youth development field and involves young people as active agents in their own growth and development, rather than passive

recipients of programs or services provided by others. Increasingly, youth-serving programs and systems are recognizing that they cannot effectively develop and implement programming without youth engagement in the work. The Aspen Institute’s Forum for Community Solutions’ 21 Opportunity Youth Incentive Fund (OYIF) communities have made youth engagement a central pillar of their work with a strong commitment to the concept of “nothing about us without us” and an abiding belief that young people have the right to represent their own interests, identify their challenges and design their own solutions. Authentic youth engagement offers youth-serving organizations and systems important expertise and partnership, providing adults with information about effective programming and supports for youth. At the same time, youth engagement provides youth and young adults with critical youth development opportunities to refine leadership and other important skills, including public speaking

facilitation, community organizing, etc.

Across the OYIF communities, collaboratives are challenging themselves to facilitate opportunities for youth and young adults to develop as leaders so that they are equipped with the tools necessary to effectively share their knowledge and lead their communities to better outcomes for themselves, their families and their peers. The Aspen Forum has observed a continuum of youth engagement in OYIF communities, with four distinct types, ranging from youth and young adults serving solely as sources of information and recipients of services to youth and young adults serving as decision-makers, leaders, and organizers in their communities. While OYIF collaboratives have started at various points along this continuum and all types of youth engagement are necessary, most collaboratives have attempted to cultivate more authentic youth and young adult decision making over the course of three years of implementation.

Continuum of Youth and Young Adult Engagement



OYIF collaboratives are engaged in a range of youth engagement activities representing each of the four stages of the youth engagement continuum:

1. Basic Engagement: Feedback and Consultation

Across the OYIF, collaboratives are consulting youth to obtain their suggestions and feedback to improve programming for opportunity youth and young adults. This consultation helps collaboratives identify problems and consider possible solutions and is often obtained through interviews, focus groups, or surveys with young people.

2. Participatory Engagement: Representation and Input into Collaborative Activities

OYIF collaboratives have fashioned a variety of ways to invite youth and young adult participation and representation in their work. From creating youth positions on collaborative boards to hiring youth and young adults to co-design and conduct surveys with their peers and in the community, collaboratives are finding ways to make sure youth and young adults are providing input into collaborative efforts.

3. Influencing Programs and Systems: Advocacy, Decision-making, and Programming

Some OYIF communities are preparing and supporting youth and young adults to engage in advocacy for improved programming and policies, often

beginning with participation as a member of a youth advisory council or subcommittee of the collaborative. Where there is strong youth-adult partnership, youth and young adult input and decision-making can lead to ideas for important new programming.

4. Youth- and Young Adult-led Change: Organizing for Better Outcomes

The OYIF and several OYIF collaboratives are supporting a network of young leaders committed to creating a more equitable world through actions and campaigns across a wide-range of issues, but especially related to public investment in opportunity youth. Opportunity Youth United (OYU) is a youth-led organizing strategy with a goal of building a movement of current and former opportunity youth to drive change and expand public investment at the local, state and national levels in opportunity youth and in combatting structural barriers, such as the school to prison pipeline or policies that marginalize immigrants. OYU partners with the Aspen Forum to support youth leaders in OYIF communities.

OYIF collaboratives face challenges to youth and young adult engagement, including:

- **Adulthood** – A system of beliefs that adults are smarter, more prepared, and better leaders than youth (and even young adults), or adulthood, is one of

the most serious challenges to authentic youth engagement. Combined with the inherent power imbalance between adult professionals and opportunity youth and young adults, adulthood frequently serves to limit youth and young adult engagement.

- **Lack of Adult Preparation** – Often youth and young adults are the only ones expected to prepare for engagement, even though adult professionals may lack the skills and abilities necessary for working in partnership with youth. Oftentimes youth enter a confusing world of jargon and patronizing assumptions with adults unprepared to see them as important contributors.

- **Youth and Young Adult Skill Development and Support Needs** – Everyone needs professional development and supports to properly prepare them to sit at decision-making tables. Likewise, everyone deserves to be paid for their time and expertise.

- **Strategic Story Sharing** – Individual young people's stories can be very powerful in building a movement placing youth voice front and center; however, it can be difficult for young people to navigate sharing their stories strategically so that they are not reliving trauma. Equally as important, youth should have control of their message in ways that highlight resiliency, agency and self-determination.

- **Tokenism** – Youth and young adults are often tokenized, placed individually on committees or panels to “check the box” of youth engagement.

While youth and young adult engagement is challenging work, the potential rewards are tremendous. OYIF collaborative leaders report the following benefits of youth and young adult engagement in their opportunity youth-focused work:

- Young people gain knowledge, skills, confidence, and opportunities for connection, networking and building social capital — experiences that young adult leaders need in order to build professional experience and expertise that will enable them to take ownership of this work in the future.
- Adults gain the ability to better understand and value young people’s experiences and leadership.
- With youth and young adults helping to co-design programming, organizations improve their offerings and are better able to attract youth and young adult participants and funders.
- Communities and collaboratives are better able to coordinate services for youth and young adults and direct resources where they are most needed,

ultimately leading to improved outcomes for opportunity youth.

- Engaging youth and young adults provides a sustainable pipeline of leadership.
- The field is strengthened by policy/advocacy co-led by youth and young adult experts, such as the Opportunity Youth United *Policy Recommendations to Increase Opportunity and Decrease Poverty In America*.¹
- Community and stakeholder engagement in the initiative are increased.

OYIF collaborative leaders suggest communities getting started in youth and young adult engagement work consider the following:

- Support the well-being of youth and young adults above all else. Make sure those working with young people learn to recognize signs of trauma and seek to avoid experiences that might cause young people to relive trauma through their involvement.
- Because many collaborative backbone organizations are not service-oriented youth agencies and lack expertise in youth development, it can be helpful to identify an organization that has already been doing youth development work to help recruit young people already doing the work and bring them into all phases of your work as you would with anyone else.

- Adults need to change their approaches and practices. They need to trust the power of relationships and be patient. Building relationships takes time, commitment, showing up, and listening.
- Start by listening and be open to learning from what young people are telling you.
- Be proactive about positioning youth and young adults as experts in the community. We need to be intentional about creating spaces for youth and young adults to share their ideas and be supported and positioned to implement those ideas.
- Just as you would on-board any colleague, you have to prepare young people.
- Likewise, you need to prepare board and staff members to work with youth and young adults.
- Effectively supporting youth and young adults as employees takes a lot of time and resources.
- Respect youth and young adults as peers, not resources, representatives, or customers.
- Whenever possible, pay youth and young adult members for their time on collaborative work to ensure a demonstrated respect for a young person’s time and a commitment to the professionalism and career trajectory of young people.

Footnote

¹ Opportunity Youth United, <http://oyunited.org/policy-solutions>

For digital copies of this executive summary, or to download the full report, please visit:

<http://aspencommunitysolutions.org/resources/>

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