

Profiles of Student Life: Attitudes and Behaviors – Empowerment of Youth Alger County Youth 2002 Focus Group Report

Introduction

Great Lakes Center for Youth Development (GLCYD) conducted focus groups with Alger County youth in 2002 to gain a better understanding about youth engagement and involvement in the community. The Search Institute has identified four assets based on youth empowerment: Community Values Youth, Youth as Resources, Service to Others, and Safety. The focus groups were designed to:

- 1) discuss and reflect on the survey results with youth
- 2) investigate youth perceptions around the empowerment assets
- 3) provide information to Alger County leaders about perceptions of youth regarding their community and the importance of youth development

Two University of Michigan internship students and one GLCYD staff person conducted 11 focus group discussions with a total of 101 youth in the summer and fall of 2002 in Alger County.

Background

GLCYD implemented the *Profiles of Student Life: Attitudes and Behaviors (PSL: AB)* survey in 1997, 2000, and 2002. The survey provided current youth information and helped focus the community on positive youth development. The *PSL: AB* survey has become a primary source of youth development data in Marquette and Alger Counties.

To supplement the *PSL: AB* survey results, focus group discussions were held to investigate youth's perceptions regarding the empowerment asset category – particularly community values youth and youth as resources.

Summary

The following summarizes what was learned from the youth:

- The majority of youth define how they are valued in a community by the number/quality/accessibility of activities and opportunities offered
- Youth do feel valued in communities as a whole, but may not feel valued as an individual depending on the amount of personal attention or support they receive
- Youth perceive value in simple actions such as a “friendly” hello, being asked their opinion and implementing their ideas, and adult attendance at their special activities and school events
- Youth would like to be given the opportunity to participate in activities to help make their communities a better place

- Youth feel that adults in their community have a difficult time supporting their involvement in the community because most adults, just like the youth, are not aware of either the options available to youth or of how they can create them
- Youth feel that they do contribute to their communities through smaller projects such as helping neighbors, fundraising for events, and participating in special community events
- Youth would like to become more involved in the leadership of their community, but feel that they are not offered opportunities that truly empower them
- Youth feel very safe within their communities

Overview

Great Lakes Center for Youth Development (GLCYD) believes that communities can create positive, sustainable development of healthy youth. Critical to success is the alignment of the underlying values, plans, and activities of business, organization, and community leaders. Through information, measurement, and sharing promising practices, GLCYD works to understand the factors in a community that make the most difference and influence positive change.

Utilized in over 1,000 communities across the country, GLCYD uses the *PSL: AB* survey designed by the Search Institute to gather information about the youth environment. The survey was implemented locally in 1997, 2000 and 2002 and the results were reported back to the community through public forum meetings in Marquette and Alger Counties.

The 2000 survey revealed alarmingly low numbers in the “empowerment” asset category. This category includes the following assets: Community Values Youth, Youth as Resources, Service to Others, and Safety. “Tapping youth resources not only strengthens young people’s asset base but deepens the resources available for rebuilding community” (Benson, 1997). These assets are among the least common for young people to experience.

It was particularly concerning that only 18% of youth reported that they felt the community values them, and only 24% reported they felt that young people are given useful roles in the community. The power of youth to systematically make a difference is not typically understood or imagined even within the institutions or organizations where they spend most of their time such as in school, recreation programs, and place of work. The contributions of young people are not always sought or welcomed even in the communities where change is desperately needed. Youth can and are working to make a difference in their communities, but they are often only given opportunities to work as “relatively uninformed volunteers, providing labor but not leadership” (Tolman & Pittman, 2001).

“Youth empowerment” may conjure up images of involvement such as leadership training, service projects, and volunteer hours. However, we believe that understanding how youth define “Community Values Youth” is more complex. We explored the following questions in the focus groups:

- Is the availability and accessibility of such opportunities how youth gauge the amount of value a community places on young people? Or, does their definition of value go deeper?
- Does it require the kind of participation in their community where opportunities and partnerships with adults are intentionally aimed at making a difference by empowering youth to make decisions and lead action?
- Are we as adults over complicating how youth define value? Or, Is their definition and perception of value more basic than that?

The conversation that Great Lakes Center for Youth Development (GLCYD) wanted to have with youth revolved around how young people define their value in the community and how they, as young people, would recommend that adults convey that message. *“Every day, in local arena’s all the way to the White House, adults sit around and decide what problems youth have and what youth need, without ever consulting us”* – a 17-year-old youth (Irby, Ferber, & Pittman, 2001). GLCYD felt it was important to talk with local youth to find out why their perceptions about how the community values them were so low and to share this information with the leadership and change agents of Alger County.

The following narrative highlights the focus group methodology, questions, summarized responses, and lessons learned.

Methodology

Focus group participants were identified by youth-serving organizations in Alger County: Alger Parks & Recreation Department in Munising (included AuTrain youth participants), the Youth Center in Grand Marais, and Superior Central High School. These youth service organizations convened groups of 8-10 youth between 8th-10th and 11th-12th grades. In total, 11 focus groups were conducted with 101 students. The focus groups were held at Munising High School, the Burt Township Youth Center, and Superior Central School. Three of the 11 focus group discussions were conducted during summer 2002, and 8 focus groups discussions were conducted at the beginning of the school year in the fall of 2002.

The summer focus group facilitators included a Great Lakes Center for Youth Development (GLCYD) Program Director and two University of Michigan interns. The eight focus groups conducted in the fall of 2002 were facilitated by the GLCYD Program Director. Prior to the focus group discussions, all three facilitators participated in “Focus Group Training” conducted by a GLCYD Evaluation Consultant, Karen S. Dubow, Ph.D.

Focus group questions were designed to reflect responses from the *Profiles of Student Life: Attitudes and Behaviors* regarding the empowerment assets: Community Values

Youth, Youth as Resources, Service to Others, and Safety. GLCYD wanted to learn why only 18% of youth in Alger and Marquette Counties perceived that adults in the community valued them and why only 24% reported they felt that young people are given useful roles in the community.

Questions and Summarized Responses:

1. *Less than ¼ of the youth who took the Search survey perceived that adults in the community value them. What made the youth think that?*

- Participants thought that youth as a “population” of the community might be valued, but unless individual youth had their own support systems, they may not personally feel valued
- Youth involved in programs intentionally designed to target youth empowerment issues such as leadership and teamwork (i.e. YMCA “Teen Leaders” program, Alger Parks & Recreation Department “Check In” program, sports, Boy Scouts, etc.) probably feel more valued than other kids might
- “Favoritism” is a big issue - both involved and uninvolved youth reported that they think that kids who are involved in activities such as athletics get more attention, get to bend the rules, and are actually encouraged or taught by adults that it is “ok” for them to break the rules

An example given by numerous youth was the case of a star athlete breaking a team or school rule. The punishment for breaking the rule is usually school suspension and loss of ability to participate in sports during the suspension. But, because the adults in the community want a “winning team” and parents/teachers don’t want to damage the student’s academic record/file, the star player’s negative behavior is overlooked and no punishment is given.

- Youth felt that some adults “place their own misguided values into the youth arena” and negatively influence their environment. Youth stated that although no one likes to get into trouble, they feel that adults who “bend” the rules for “special” kids are giving youth a bad message and cultivating a negative atmosphere. Youth also said that they do not feel valued in this sense because they feel “used” by their community and “know that there is a double standard about who is important and who isn’t”.

2. *What are some examples of how the community listens to youth?*

- The community implement activities that kids ask for
- Community leaders ask for kids’ opinions and they actually follow through with some of their ideas
- The leaders go out of their way to ask your opinion

Examples of how the community doesn’t listen to youth:

- Adults don’t recognize youth as members of the community – just “people we have to tolerate”

- The leaders take away activities that youth value
- They trivialize youth values by letting “special kids get away with everything, even if the rest (of the youth) think they shouldn’t”
- Community members don’t remember or know their names

3. *How do you know that the community does or does not care about you at your age?*

- Communities care by providing youth with things to do
- Adults don’t have the same value on recreation; they forget it is a high priority for youth
- Youth know communities really care when they ask about the youth’s values/needs and don’t judge them according to their own
- Adults yell at kids too much – “we’re young, not deaf”

4. *What could adults in my town do to make youth (you and your friends) feel important?*

- Say “hello”
- Don’t move to the other side of the street when you see a youth coming down the sidewalk
- Go to youth events, even if they don’t have kids who are participating
- Let youth be kids
- Get to know the kids in the neighborhood or small town
- Let more than three kids in a store at a time
- Ask youth for opinions and act on them
- Give youth stuff to do

5. *Not too many kids think they are given useful roles in the community. What do you think about that?*

- Some adults think youth are only good for menial labor, and adults give youth the stuff to do that they don’t want to do
- It was said, “Kids never get to do the cool stuff like planning...we just blow up balloons”
- Youth perceived that programs specifically designed to encourage leadership and personal values gave them more of a chance to be useful (i.e. youth church groups, student council, YMCA Teen Leaders Club)
- Youth felt that they contribute to their community more than they are given credit for and that the roles they play are useful (i.e. fundraising for school/activities, helping neighbors, involvement in local causes/events, community service, etc.)
- Youth also felt that they rarely turn down a request or chance to help out; they just need more opportunities to get involved

6. *Do you think you and your friends are given lots of chances to help make your community a better place to live?*

- “Maybe a cleaner place to live...”

- Youth felt that their families more than anyone encouraged them to help out in their homes, neighborhoods, and schools
- Youth had varied remarks about Student Council: Student Council is supposed to give youth a chance to help make schools better, but most of the time, students don't get to decide projects; youth just decorate for dances - "Our Student Council lets us pick a project we think is important and then figure out ways to help – it's really cool."
- It was learned that adults encourage youth to help the community but they don't have suggestions on how to do it
- Overall, youth did not feel that they currently have a significant way to make a large impact on their community because they did not feel they had the representation or power to do it

7. *If you were asked to participate in a group to decide what goes on in school or your community, would you participate? Does your answer depend on who is asking you, i.e. friend, teacher, parent?*

- The majority of youth said they would participate, as long as there was not a conflict/contradict with something else they were doing (i.e. sports/music/job)
- Youth said they would be more likely to participate if they were not going to be the "token" kid at the meeting.... "I might participate if they actually took some of my suggestions"
- Youth meetings were much more attractive
- Youth thought "it would be really cool to get to help make decisions"
- Although youth said they were more likely to participate if encouraged by a friend, most said it did not depend on who asked

8. *What do you think you and your friends could do or what would like to be asked to do to make your community a better place to live?*

- Plan and organize activities that would benefit youth in their community (i.e. build a skate park, start a teen center, fundraise for a special youth outing, etc.)
- Learn how to budget an event, manage the money, and decide where to spend it to make the community a better place to live
- Work with their community to figure out how to stop illegal drug use
- Work with senior citizens so they learn not to be scared of teenagers
- Have a youth from each grade on the school board
- Have a youth on the City Council
- Fundraise for other needy families

9. *At least half of the youth who took the survey indicated they do some type of community service—help other people without getting paid. What do you think they do? Give examples of how you help other people.*

- Make floats for the town parade
- Help setting up the music festival and community events
- Shovel snow
- Rake leaves

- Mow lawns
- Fundraise for their activities such as little league, Girl Scouts, athletic uniforms, and school events
- Help neighbors
- Baby-sit for free
- Make cards for senior citizens on holidays
- Make and deliver food baskets
- Participate can drives
- Volunteer at the community center/teen center
- Pick up litter/community clean-up

10. Lots of youth said they feel safe in their home, school, and neighborhood.

Why do you think that is a correct statement?

- Most youth felt very safe in their communities
- When the subject of the “bomb threats” came up, youth said that they were not scared because they knew (through the hallway gossip) that the threats were not real or were jokes
- Youth mentioned a few areas in town that they stayed away from because they knew it might not be safe because of drug or alcohol use
- Youth defined safe as not getting physically hurt or beat up, feeling good about where there are “at”, and not worrying about walking around town or school

Recommendations

Most of the 40 Developmental Assets are built through positive relationships. While family and friends are key, there’s a third type of relationship that also has a huge effect on youth empowerment within a community – friendships between adults and kids who are not related to each other. The focus group results indicate that youth feel valued in communities as a whole, but may not feel valued as an individual depending on the amount of personal attention or support they received from adults outside of their families. Following are some suggestions to help adults convey the message that they value youth and recommendations on how to create opportunities to empower them.

Encourage people of all ages to offer spontaneous gestures of support to one another.

- Call people by name
- Say hello
- Introduce yourself to your neighbors (kids and adults)
- Attend youth-focus events (athletics/plays/concerts) even if you don’t have a child or friend participating in the activity
- Don’t cross the street when you approach a group of youth on the sidewalk – instead greet them

Identify opportunities for kids and adults to interact together in the community.

- Intergenerational service projects
- Leadership opportunities
- Community special events

- Faith-based programs

Make a commitment to connect and spend time with at least one person who is significantly older or younger than you are.

- Mentoring programs
- Volunteer at hospitals, schools, literacy programs, etc.
- Organize an intergenerational theater or recreation program

Listen to each other.

- Ask kids their opinions, feelings, and attitudes about issues that affect them in their communities
- Educate both adults and youth about how to access opportunities to get involved in decision-making bodies within their communities
- Directly recruit youth to get involved in leadership opportunities – ask all populations and ages of kids to participate