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Project No Voice Left Behind: Youth in Santa Cruz County

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Abstract

The Youth Action Network (YAN), a youth program at United Way of Santa Cruz, focuses on youth ages 11-18 across Santa Cruz County to increase youth connection to resources, promoting youth engagement, youth voice, leadership, and well-being. Youth voice is crucial, and due to a lack of engagement, it has impacted the surrounding communities in Santa Cruz County regarding critical decision-making involving their input. This project aimed to promote authentic engagement and motivation for the youth to utilize their voices within their communities while also fostering and strengthening the relationships between the youth and adult allies and mentors. Bi-weekly meetings for two months were implemented and facilitated for this project. More than half of the youth were expected to attend, and less than half attended. This goal will be an ongoing project for YAN, as there will be a new youth coordinator for the program implementing more frequent meetings online and in person to stimulate the youth to become more authentically motivated and engaged in utilizing their voices in their communities.

Keywords: youth engagement, youth voice, youth well-being, youth

Agency & Communities Served

United Way's mission is as follows: it brings together many groups, including donors, volunteers, advocates, governments, and other nonprofits, to make the community of Santa Cruz the best it can be. The partnerships at United Way create building blocks for their community (United Way, 2023). The Community Impact Department is in charge of youth programs such as Youth Action Network (YAN), Jóvenes Sanos (J.S), and United 4 Youth (U4Y). Youth Action Network (YAN) is the program where the project will be implemented. They serve the youth ages 11-18 all across Santa Cruz County. The county is home to approximately 25,000 youth ages 10-18 (Datasharescc, 2023). YAN's goal is to increase youth connection to resources, youth programs, community events, and one another, as well as increase youth voice within local decision-making through youth participatory action research and civic engagement and student liaisons. There are currently 9 members in the YAN Steering Committee. Together with Jovenes Sanos, YAN's closest partnership and other youth programs are dedicated to promoting youth engagement, youth voices being heard and acquainting them with close partnerships and community resources.

Problem Model Background and Literature Review

Problem Statement

Youth voices not being heard due to lack of engagement

The social problem being addressed is the lack of youth voices being heard due to the Covid-19 lockdowns and isolations having a major impact with the youth's motivation and engagement, causing mental health issues, impeding them from wanting to be involved in extracurricular activities and community involvement that promotes youth voice. "The

COVID-19 pandemic has caused unprecedented educational and social disruptions to students worldwide” (Vaillancourt et al., 2021).

Adult leading conversations and interpretations of youth problems are another reason why youth voices are not being heard. Research suggests through excluding youth voices, we fail to acknowledge the value of their expertise and the impact they hold, (Martinez et al., 2018). It is important to have the youth involved and authentically motivated because they are our future leaders whose voices count and need to be taken into consideration as well. Awareness of after school programs and community resources are also another reason as to why youth voices are not being heard within Santa Cruz County. The students and youth of Santa Cruz County need safe, nurturing learning environments where it motivates them to get involved as well as enough outreach to spread awareness.

Figure 1: Problem Model

Contributing Factors	Problem Statement	Consequences
Covid-19 lockdown isolations	Youth Voices are not being heard due to lack of engagement	Poor mental health, lack of involvement/ participation
Awareness about after school programs and community resources		Youth Violence
Adult led events/ decision making where youth are not included or welcomed		Lack of life skills, personal skills, community impact

Contributing Factors

Covid -19 Lockdowns/ isolations

A contributing factor to the social problem identified above would be the Covid-19 shutdown that has had an impactful decline on youth involvement which is causing a lack of

youth voice being heard in Santa Cruz County. According to Nadeem and R. Van Meter, “Research has shown that isolation during the pandemic may have increased the risk of social anxiety and many adolescents expressed fears about returning to in-person activities” (February, 2023). Many youth being impacted by the shutdowns will make them less likely to even think about spending time outside of school due to fear. Villaincourt et al., (2021) reports that school closures due to the Covid-19 shutdowns have resulted in a plethora of negative consequences for youth that extend beyond the classroom. While restaurants and bars were still allowed to be open, the country decided that was more important than the education and wellbeing of the youth.

Awareness

Another contributing factor would be that youth are not aware of after school programs or the community resources available to them. Research by Walker & Saito (2011) mentions that roughly half of young people don't participate in youth development programs due to them not knowing about them. Walker and Saito, (2021) also report on conducting interviews to one thousand youth and 75% did not participate in any kind of youth program due to them “not knowing what is out there or what's available”. This shows that there needs to be better outreach strategies from youth programs and other programs to spread the word to young people about what is going on in their community. “It is also increasingly clear that learning to high standards cannot take place where students have no opportunities for experiential learning and civic action, or have limited opportunities for group and extracurricular activities” (Joselowsky, 2007). Awareness and outreach is key for youth engagement, it is crucial for young adolescents to be aware of what's available to help and benefit them.

Adult led events and decision making where youth are not included or welcomed

The last contributing factor would be decisions about youth rarely including the youth's voice. For instance, having adult lead conversations and decision making instead of youth lead conversations and giving the youth a chance to utilize their voice. "This recognition of young people as important resources for systemic improvement coincides with a parallel concern about the widespread disengagement of young people from the political process and of the need to reclaim them as active contributors to their communities" (Nadeem & R. Van Meter, Feb, 2023). As mentioned before, youth hold tremendous value for their expertise; adults should take their thoughts into consideration too because of the impact they hold. Martinez et al., (2018) article mentions that by excluding youth voices, it fails to recognize the value of their expertise and impact they potentially have. It states, "when we are left to rely on adult interpretations of their realities, there is a risk that their needs and priorities will be misinterpreted" (Martinez et al., 2018).

Consequences

Poor mental health

The consequences of the contributing factor of Covid-19 would be poor mental health. "The worldwide unprecedented circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic..., school closures and social distancing may have led to an increase in depression, mental health difficulties and loneliness for adolescents" (Ellis, Dumas, & Forbes, 2020). The isolation and lockdown for an extended period also caused many youth to feel that they were missing out on daily activities and lost relationships with their peers. Samji et al. (2021), states that the Covid-19 lockdowns lead to increased anger, worry, helplessness, annoyance, post-traumatic stress symptoms, grief, and depression. The pandemic lockdowns have led to the youth's decline in participation and input

where it is needed. Therefore their voices won't be utilized and taken into account when and where it is important.

Youth Violence

An additional consequence relating to the problem would be youth violence, “the likelihood of violence increases when youth have under-developed or ineffective skills in the areas of communication, problem-solving, conflict resolution and management, empathy, impulse control, and emotional regulation and management (CDC. 2016). Many after school programs give the youth these personal and professional life skills they need in order for them to stay out of trouble and on a successful path. Adding to the evidence, recognition of risk factors that include impulsivity, prior history of exposure to violence or abuse, and involvement with delinquent peers and gangs all result from youth not being engaged, having strong relationships with trusted adults (STRYVE. CDC, 2012).

Lack of professional skills, personal skills, community impact

A consequence as a result of adult led events and decision making would be the lack of professional and personal skills as well as the community impact it will have on the youth not being heard. Research done by Wagner and Pigza, (2016) talks about how community engagement experiences that do not help and fail to help students consider issues of privilege, power, oppression and more, can negatively impact partner communities and youth alike. The article states that, “it is unfortunately commonplace for student projects to move from idea to implementation without consulting anyone in the community to be informed by their aspirations, needs,....service projects often do not consider community members to be full participants in the group or its leadership processes” (Wagner & Pigza, 2016).

Project Description and Implementation Process

Project Description

The intern will be responsible for recruiting youth to be a part of the Youth Action Network (YAN), while also facilitating bi-weekly meetings for 2 months to build developmental relationships with the youth. Having meetings each two weeks will give the youth a chance to express their ideas, concerns, goals, apparitions, while also building relationships with their YAN peers and mentors. Bi-weekly meetings will foster the youth to be more authentically motivated to use their voices in important decisions of upcoming policy changes within youth in Santa Cruz County. The project will also contribute to hosting pop-up events to make efforts in youth engagement within the community and to have more youth-led events. By building developmental relationships with trusted adults, the youth can take the lead to make positive changes within their communities and to understand their resources within their communities to experience bright futures.

Project Justification & Benefits

The primary goal of this project is to have the voices of the youth of Santa Cruz County heard as well as making them more motivated and authentically engaged within the community. According to Foster et al. “Research has shown the importance of connectedness (i.e., a sense of belonging and support from the people and organizations in youth’s life, including how connected youth feel to others and the extent to which youth seek help from these connections) in promoting psychological well-being (Rose et al. 2019) and reducing high-risk behavior among youth” (Foster et al. 2017).

Having youth build foundations and connections with mentors and other trusted adults to have a sense of belonging and comfort within their communities and to know their resources to have successful futures. “High-quality peer programs can help peers build developmental relationships with each other (and adult leaders) that enhance the social-emotional strengths needed for school success, health, and civic engagement” (Search Institute, 2022).

The Youth Action Network program expects to achieve youth voices being heard and taken into account on important policy decisions that affect the youth of Santa Cruz County. YAN also expects the youth to be more authentically motivated and engaged within the Santa Cruz communities for instance, having more youth-led events such as program events, pop-ups, community tabling events, and more. It will also help with potential grants and funding for United Way as a whole and its programs within.

The problem and issue this project will address is the lack of youth voices being heard, involvement and authentic engagement within the community. It will furthermore address destigmatizing any beliefs that it is “nerdy” or “uncool” to be involved in after-school extra curricular activities. It will also address the need of educating the youth of the importance of having a mentor, the importance of developmental relationships, and how crucial it is to be in a healthy safe environment for them to thrive.

The benefits that will come out of this project would be that youth voices will be heard and included in Santa Cruz County. Bi-weekly meetings will promote more youth involvement, participation and motivation, while also fostering and strengthening the relationships between the youth and adult allies and mentors. This project will also benefit Santa Cruz’s communities as a whole since YAN is a county wide program for youth. Having them authentically engaged within the community will push for great things.

Expected Outcomes & Assessment Plan

The expected outcome of this project is having at least 8 out of the 19 participants of Youth Action Network attend the bi-weekly meetings through Zoom, which will be a total of 4 meetings. This will be how we help build youth voices and provide opportunities for youth to speak and present within the community. Currently, there are 19 members in the Youth Action Network, and 12 members are part of the program's steering committee. The intern will facilitate the meetings with her mentor's support. The meetings will be hosted via Zoom and at least one in-person meeting.

There will be planning of a rollerskating day with the youth in Santa Cruz for that in-person activity. Lastly, the intern will also ask jurisdiction representatives to come, and guest speak about their experiences and help youth build capacity, whether it's personal, like gaining confidence or professional life skills. The intern will take attendance to keep a record of who attends and also for the youth to get their incentives. The intern will also create meeting agendas to structure and plan activities for the youth to get engaged and build youth capacity. There will also be a debrief meeting in the last session we meet at the end of April 7th to assess the experiences of the youth and any suggestions they have to better future discussions with the youth program coordinator.

Implementation Process

This project facilitated bi-weekly meetings with the youth of the Youth Action Network program of United Way. The intern had support from her mentor Chris Alonso to facilitate the meetings with the 19 members of YAN. In those meetings, there were activities for the youth to participate in and have breakout rooms to talk to one another while building rapport. Activities

such as “Hot Seat” where they ask the host of the meeting questions to get to know them better. Icebreaker questions at the start of each meeting to get comfortable with one another. The intern also implemented other activities and discussing topics related to youth leadership to build stronger relationships with one another while helping them develop skills and confidence to use their voice when it is time for them to speak up in important community decisions that affect the youth across the county, such as the Santa Cruz Youth Bill of Rights, incorporated by the Children’s Network Program, and the Santa Cruz Youth Liaison. The SC Youth Bill of Rights was passed a couple of years ago; it’s a program where they implement 12 youth bills of rights and create new policies for the youth pertaining to those bills of rights through the Children’s Network Program. The SC Youth Liaison is an upcoming program that will give youth leaders a chance to communicate and express concerns about certain issues related to them to jurisdictional representatives of Santa Cruz County. The meetings were hosted via Zoom.

Project Results

This project unfortunately did not achieve the expected outcomes. Unluckily, less than 50% of the youth did not attend the bi-weekly meetings. There was an average of five to six students at each meeting. Due to students having jobs, sports, or hours correlating with the intern’s availability to host the meetings, more than half of the youth did not show. The weather also affected the in-person activity day planned for the youth to build more rapport with one another, as well as the availability of Santa Cruz County’s jurisdictional representatives to guest speak at the meetings. Another obstacle faced during this project was having new youth coordinators come in and out of the Youth Action Network program leaving some of the youth confused as to what is going and putting everything on hold. Plus the new youth coordinators have to adjust and adapt to a new job making goals and plans get pushed back. It also affects the

youth since there is not much trust with them and the new coordinator so it takes time to build that rapport with the youth.

The outcome of the project implemented for the capstone was measured by utilizing an attendance sheet each meeting to keep track of the youth that attended the bi-weekly meetings. The method used to gather the evidence of the project's success was a debrief meeting scheduled and conducted with the youth on the last meeting we met for this project. Notes were taken to evaluate the youth's thoughts and constructive criticism on how the meetings can improve and what they enjoyed about those meetings.

The notes taken at the debrief meeting showed how most of the youth agreed on some strengths about the program's overall and the effectiveness of the meetings. Some of those strengths were the fact that the Youth Action Network is a county wide program and therefore they get to meet other students from the county and build relationships and connections with. The majority of the youth that attended the last meeting also agreed how they liked the consistency of the meetings since they did not meet for a while and would also only meet once a month. Some changes the youth mentioned they would like to see in the near future are more in person meetings and activities, as well as more communication, as they felt that the intern was at times communicating more with them than the youth coordinator.

Since this is an ongoing project with Youth Action Network there are future in-person activities planned for the youth in the near future with their new youth coordinator that will be coming in mid May to take over. There will also be meetings weekly instead of bi-weekly so that the youth can continue with the goal of this project, which is to ultimately get them more engaged so that their voices are heard within their community

Conclusion & Recommendations

In conclusion, the contributing factors addressed in this project such as the covid 19 lockdown isolations, awareness of after school programs and community resources, as well as adult led events and or decision making, are all key factors as to why the youth's voices of Santa Cruz County are not being heard. While implementing this project, it was troubling to keep the youth engaged and talking in meetings, which reflects back on research done on the lockdowns of covid 19. Another finding was the fact that less than 50 percent of the youth attended the bi-weekly meetings making it difficult to talk about future plans and activities with the youth since we could not get all their input, as well as when emails and messages were sent out, many of the youth would be unresponsive. That leads to adults having to make decisions about future meetings and events without much youth input. One thing that could have been done differently in this project was perhaps giving the youth a little more of a push to attend the meetings and sending them more than two reminders to let them know that we really want them to attend. Overall, with the Youth Action Network continuing this project of having the youth voices heard and being more engaged in Santa Cruz County, gives hope that this goal can be achieved.

Some recommendations for United Way's Youth Action Network based on the findings of this project would be to set up a set date and time for youth meetings to take place and let new applicants know the dates and times before applying so they can make sure it accommodates well with their schedule. More in-person activities is also recommended for the reason that the youth all suggested they would like to participate more in person, as they feel they will benefit more with that and build better relationships with their peers. There will be a new youth coordinator for the Youth Action Network stepping in soon and it is exciting to see what they can

achieve with the YAN youth. They are a great group of young students who have very bright futures ahead of them. It was a pleasure having a chance to work with them.

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Appendix A

Project Implementation Plan

Task	Timeline	Parties Involved	Materials/ Services Needed	Completed Product
Recruitment for YAN	September, 2022	Intern, Amanda Gamban, Sarah Emmert	Emails, phone calls	Outreach
Create Zoom Links for Bi-weekly meetings	March 9th - April 6th (bi-weekly)	Melissa	Zoom link setup, Task list, Meeting agenda	Meeting minutes, Task assignments
Email YAN Youth about future meetings	March 9th - April 6th (bi-weekly)	Chris, YAN youth	Laptop	Emails sent
Create Agenda and attendance sheet for meetings	March 9th - April 6th (bi-weekly)	Chris & Melissa	Laptop	Agenda
Social media post	February-April	Melissa, Andrea	Laptop/ Social medias	Outreach
Email SC Jurisdictional representatives to guest speak for YAN	By March 9th	Melissa, Chris	Laptop	Outreach
YPAR for youth engagement	December, 2023, January 28th, 2023, February 25th, 2023, March 11,2023	Chris, Sarah, Pamela, Melissa , YAN, YPAR Youth	Worksheets, transportation,	Engagement, collaboration
Debrief meeting on the youth's thoughts about the meetings	April 5th, 2023	Melissa, Pamela	Zoom meeting/ Laptop	Post Assessments/assessment notes completed

