

## **A case study of cross-disciplinary leadership utilizing Youth Advocates for Community Health.**

### **Introduction**

From 2021-23 UW-Madison Division of Extension (Extension) utilized Well Connected Communities funding and support to build diverse local initiatives that recognize and address systemic health inequities. Health & Well-Being (HWB) and Positive Youth Development (PYD) Educators in four Wisconsin counties implemented the Youth Advocates for Community Health framework. The counties included two rural counties, Forest and Adams, and two urban areas, Dane County and Racine/Kenosha Counties. HWB and PYD educators collaborated in each county to recruit groups of young people and use the Youth Advocates for Community Health framework to guide the young people in initiating meaningful community health improvements tailored to their specific concerns and priorities.

Youth Advocates for Community Health focuses on policy, systems and environmental change projects. When young people are included in these projects, there is the potential to empower them, break down barriers, energize adults, and ensure the efforts have the greatest impact in communities. After the pre-planning process, which includes creating ground rules, team building exercises, and learning more about community health, Youth Advocates For Community Health helps to guide a project led by young people through five steps of action. First, young people identify and research health issues that affect their communities (choose your battle). Next, they reach out to peers and adults to raise awareness and find support for their issue (raise awareness). Finally, they create and implement an action plan that fits the young people's interests and talents (make an action plan and implement your plan.) Throughout the process, groups focus on evaluating and celebrating along the way to be prepared and motivated to take on the next project together.

Extension HWB programs focus on efforts to strengthen policy, systems, and environments to promote health, while PYD programs develop community leadership and learning opportunities for young people. Both Extension Institutes utilize partnership and community capacity-building strategies. Leveraging cross-disciplinary collaborations between HWB and PYD educators using Youth Advocates for Community Health contributed to the increase in skills, confidence and communication of young people and empowered them to be advocates for change. These projects also built educators' capacity for leading youth-led community health initiatives that foster multidisciplinary Extension programming to advance community health through shared learning opportunities.

### **Context and Data Collection**

From March to July 2023, eight Extension educators who were involved with Wisconsin Well Connected Communities Youth Advocates for Community Health projects were interviewed to gather their perspectives on youth-adult partnerships, the projects young people selected, the roles that both educators and young people took on in their respective partnerships, how decisions were made throughout the process, what educators and young people learned as a result of participating in a youth-adult partnership, and how working as part of an interdisciplinary collaboration enhanced the project. Three educators were from Adams County, one from Dane County, two from Forest County, and two from Racine/Kenosha Counties. Four of the educators' primary appointments were in the HWB Institute; the other four had primary appointments in the PYD Institute. Each project site was to have an educator from each institute share facilitation of the projects. However, due to staff turnover, transitions to other roles, and other factors, only two counties maintained active participation of educators from both institutes for the project's duration. Dane County only had representation from PYD, although that educator had health related content expertise. Data was also collected from Extension's online reporting portal, where educators' work is recorded, to report on new partnerships, interactions with young people, and progress towards goals.

Interviews were also conducted with eight young people who participated in the Youth Advocates for Community Health projects. The aim was to capture their viewpoints on the overall experience and the knowledge gained through their involvement in the project. Questions were asked about program recruitment, logistics, relationships built, skills learned, and how the project affected their perception of community, community health, and career intentions.

## **Positive Youth Development Outcomes**

### Skills Development

Nearly all young people reported **improved social confidence and communication skills** when interacting with peers and adults. One young person commented, “The public speaking and communication aspect of it was definitely the hardest for me and I feel like I'm a pretty quiet and shy person. So having to speak up, especially when we were doing presentations in front of the Council, that feels really intimidating. But having that opportunity, I think, really helped me practice and improve my communication skills.” In the context of data collection, young people said that effective communication played a pivotal role. Approaching and convincing individuals to participate in a survey was challenging and pushed young people out of their comfort zones. However, it was considered a valuable skill that was acquired during the experience.

The projects offered young people opportunities to **learn practical skills** such as designing a survey, prioritizing issues, photo mapping, and leading a group. Young people spoke about learning how to create and distribute surveys to assess community needs and prioritize issues. Creating a survey constituted a significant part of one group's efforts, focusing on questions related to the preferences and perceptions of the Teen Center. The young people adapted questions to align with the specific requirements and interests of various demographic groups. In a collaborative effort, the young people participated in a photo mapping activity, capturing images of elements deemed valuable or needing improvement within the community. The elements were then categorized into sections, including community needs, health needs, job needs, etc. This helped to foster mutual understanding, shed light on shared values, and identify gaps. This also provided a clear overview of the resources and conditions the young people were dealing with in communities. Another young person spoke about it being difficult to work with other young people of the same age and that some may feel discouraged to participate in a Youth Advocates for Community Health project. The young person had not realized the importance of adult leaders using specific skills to facilitate a group to create motivation and energy around a project and indicated that this insight is something that can be utilized in the future.

### Health Knowledge and Interest

Young people expressed that they **learned more about community issues, the difference between equity and equality and the importance of health equity**. This included learning about the social determinants of health and their relationship to community health. The young people spoke about now understanding that community health is more than the actual physical health of people in communities. It also includes the mental health of people, the access to resources and other challenges that people face based on where they live and how that contributes to health. One young person noted that “during one of our presentations about the teen center, the survey information showed how historically marginalized communities tend to be more concerned about actually building the teen center, whereas communities that tend to have more privilege, were more concerned about continuing to run the teen center, I just thought that was really interesting to see how, in a historical context, that impacts our perspectives, that was really interesting.” Another young person mentioned, “Marginalized communities have different concerns and how can we use our privilege? I think being in the Madison area, a lot of times we start to feel kind of safe, like racism isn't as big of a problem because it functions very differently here than it does in a lot of places. So I think seeing little things like that come through shows you that there are definitely still problems here. So I learned that other marginalized communities have noticed the same things that I have, and have also felt discouraged in the same ways that I have.”

For many young people who participated, it helped them to determine **what they wanted to study or careers to pursue**. One young person stated, “For me, I feel like all this community work and outreach has pushed me into a little bit of a different direction than what I originally wanted to go. I still want to go into medicine and psychology. But I feel like public health would also be really interesting and looking at mental health resources and how those are allocated among different communities, that is now something I am really interested in.” Another young person stated “this definitely furthered my desire to get into something involving, and I have kind of always been interested in, political science and community engagement, law, stuff like that. I feel more confident about that idea of my future now.”

### Supportive Relationships and Shared Power

Improved social confidence and communication skills help young people **build meaningful relationships with peers and adult leaders**. When interviewed, a young person spoke about working towards a common goal and how it helped to form new bonds and relationships. Another young person appreciated the support from community sponsors and adult leaders and indicated that it made them feel more comfortable with the team and project. A young person noted, “One thing that this process confirmed is just how thoughtful and innovative the youth in our community are. Being able to hear all their opinions and see how they came up with so many really amazing ideas that even we hadn’t thought of, was just really cool.” Another young person discussed the challenge of establishing social bonds but highlighted that their favorite aspect of the project was the relationships formed with adult mentors, community members, and fellow team members.

All young people interviewed described youth-centered groups, **where their voice mattered and there was shared power with adults**. Instead of leading the project during the initial meetings, the adult leaders provided guidance to create shared language and understanding around community health. As the work continued, the young people were supported to develop their ideas, creating a good balance of input from the adult leaders and young people involved. On leadership, one young person offered, “We’d bring our own problems to the center, and then we’d all work together to come up with solutions. But if we ever got stuck, they [adult leaders] would give us a problem to solve or something to think about and then we would come up with the answer. So I felt like we were leading, we were the leading voice about all the important issues.” One young person supported this by saying of the adult leaders, “They were never demeaning to us or saying that we were too young to understand. Instead, they said they weren’t going to tell us, they were going to work with us. They never criticized you in any way that would seem discriminatory at all, which was really amazing.” Many young people indicated that working with adult leaders gave them the impression that it was akin to a genuine conversation. In many past instances, when attempting to address issues with adults, particularly within an educational setting, the young people encountered a rigid response, where adults simply assert, “This is how it is, and you have to accept it.” However, working on these projects felt different for the young people, as it resembled an open dialogue. The young people were not greeted with immediate dismissals or restrictions, which offered a sense of freedom and openness.

### **Cross-Disciplinary Collaboration Outcomes**

The Well Connected Communities approach was designed as a pilot and model for cross-disciplinary partnership with the intention of building on successes in additional communities in the future. When educators from the two institutes had the opportunity to work together, the **benefits of the cross-disciplinary collaboration were evident**. As an educator working on a project commented, “[the other educator] has the perspective of health and well-being. I have the perspective of youth development. So you put us together, and it’s like Whoa! You have a more complete perspective of how to do things.”

These **cross-disciplinary collaborations brought new partnerships to the projects**. In some cases, one educator had better connections in the community with schools and other youth-serving organizations and thus was better positioned to pursue youth partnerships. One educator noted, “I had no business even showing up at the schools, quite honestly, because nobody knew me. I didn’t know the youth, so thank goodness, [the PYD educator] did and was able to keep things moving forward.” Every project reported new community partnerships were made due to the Youth Advocates for Community Health projects. Educators reported fifteen unique community partnerships across the four locations.

The **different content expertise of the educators was also valuable**. In one county, each educator worked with the young people in their area of expertise (i.e., mental health, nutrition, physical activity) as they planned the project focus. One educator talked about the value of having a diverse group of educators to brainstorm and share ideas with, particularly the value of having an educator with expertise working with young people when working through challenging project logistics. Another example an educator provided was when difficulties were encountered in determining how to get young people

enrolled in summer school and work through transportation barriers. The educators could work as a team to leverage the various ideas and connections brought to the table to facilitate the project successfully.

After their experiences working on these projects, **several educators commented on the value of cross-disciplinary collaborations that extended beyond the immediate collaboration.** For educators, the project provided the opportunity to learn more about the work of other institutes, something they believe made them a better resource to the community. Many educators thought it was important to avoid operating in silos to create greater collaboration opportunities that lead to better outcomes. Also noted was that team member's diverse experiences and skills ultimately benefit the young people, the community, and other educators. A personal learning experience was highlighted, noting a deeper understanding of other institutes, programs, and personnel. It was suggested that it contributed to a more interconnected and less isolated environment. One educator said about the cross-disciplinary collaborations, "They make us more informed about what's available for Extension programming, because sometimes we can be out with different audiences, and there may be someone who brings up a need that I don't know as much about. I welcome the opportunity to work with educators and other institutes, it makes us stronger."

In the rural counties, where capacity is more limited due to less staff, one of the educators commented that such collaborations could **increase the reach and impact of Extension's work:** "I definitely think it's a cool way to work, across program areas. I haven't had that many opportunities to do it and I will continue to look for ways because that's the way we have to work because there are so few of us to go around. But I also think that's where the opportunity is to make a bigger impact."

One educator noted that the opportunity to collaborate as part of the project had also **strengthened inter-office relationships.** "It's been so cool working together with other educators because otherwise we tend to be in our own little silos, and we don't have a whole lot of overlap in what we're doing. That not having overlap is intentional, because we don't want to be doing programming that other educators are also doing, we don't want to be duplicating. We are frequently doing our own programming and we don't always know what the other educator is doing. We know a little bit from brief updates, but it has been cool to work together on this project, where we're all a part of it. It's been really good for relationship building in the building, too. We had great relationships before this, but it's just getting better now."

Educators and young people have benefited from using Youth Advocates for Community Health in cross-disciplinary partnerships, bringing different perspectives, experiences, and expertise to projects. HWB educators were able to serve as public health experts and offer guidance around community health issues. PYD educators had expertise in positive youth development principles and facilitation of youth-led projects. This helped to work through challenges related specifically to working with young people and using age-appropriate and fun activities that engaged the young people and facilitated team building and trust.

### **Recommendations**

Based on the above findings, the following recommendations are being made for future **Youth Advocates for Community Health projects, youth-adult partnerships, and Extension work more broadly:**

- Keep as true to the Youth Advocates for Community Health youth-adult partnership process as possible, where young people drive the process. While there is always value in bringing the voices of young people into projects, the impacts on self-efficacy are even more significant for projects that are truly led by young people.
- Encourage cross-disciplinary collaborations among Extension educators when appropriate. Such collaborations lead to better awareness of one another's work, which can help educators better serve the community's needs. This can also expand the reach and impact of Extension's work and improve interoffice relationships.
- Program leaders and supervisors play important roles in fostering and encouraging cross-disciplinary collaborations. Program leaders and supervisors should seek opportunities to

incentivize and reward cross-disciplinary collaboration, elevate project successes, and support colleagues through innovation.

- Pay young people for their time, expertise, and contributions, which demonstrates that their time and perspectives are valued and sets expectations of a commitment to the project. Compensating the young people will also help with some of the participation challenges that can result from needing to work after-school or summer jobs.
- Build in time for relationship building with young people so there is a foundation of trust as the partnerships between adults and young people move forward.
- Incorporate fun activities into the process to enhance team building, trust, and young people's dedication to the group and project.
- Center the project around young people's interests. Young people are more invested in a project when they are passionate about the issue. At the same time, some young people develop an interest in the issue through the experience of working on it.
- Provide multiple opportunities to engage with community members. Many young people spoke about a positive learning experience interacting with community leaders, presenting findings, and collecting data.
- Provide opportunities for young people to try new things and engage with their community in incrementally challenging ways.
- Adult partners should work to ensure that the young people's envisioned projects come to fruition. While there is skill and self-efficacy development that comes as a result of participating in youth-adult partnerships, young people's belief in their voice and power to create change will be more significant in the instances where they can witness the change they envision actually occurring.

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