

EXPANDING YOUTH-DRIVEN SPACE ACROSS SOUTHEAST MICHIGAN

EVALUATION REPORT 2019-2020 (YEAR 2)

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EVALUATION OVERVIEW

Evaluation Overview

The Evaluation of Expanding Youth-Driven Space Across Southeast Michigan is a three-year project with funding support from the Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. Foundation since the summer of 2018. Youth-Drive Space (YDS) refers to a positive youth-development environment where youth partner with adults to meaningfully engage in decision-making throughout the organization's governance and programming activities. YDS involves three core practices: tapping teens' intrinsic motivation; supporting teens' developmental needs; and fostering genuine partnerships between adults and youth. This initiative is led by the Neutral Zone, a youth-driven teen center located in Ann Arbor, Michigan that is dedicated to providing social, cultural, educational, recreational, and creative opportunities for high-school teens. Through this project, youth-serving agencies participating in this initiative receive intensive coaching and training supports to promote youth leadership, social-emotional learning, and effective school and community change.

Since 2010, Michigan State University's Outreach and Engagement (UOE) has established an extensive and mutually beneficial partnership with the Neutral Zone, with a common goal to empower youth in communities across Michigan. The objective for this current initiative is twofold: (1) to support the Neutral Zone and the participating agencies with timely feedback so coaching and training efforts can be best utilized, and (2) to identify best practices and effective ways of enhancing youths' experience in meaningful decision-making, identifying mentors, co-learning with adults, and feeling connected to their organizations and the community-at-large. These experiences represent the four key aspects of youth-adult partnerships and are aligned with high quality program standards. Working together with the Neutral Zone, our goal is to transform these organizations into YDS model sites where teens are able to find a voice within themselves, their organizations, and the local communities.

This Year 2 evaluation report documents some of the major activities during the second year of the initiative. The second cohort includes six diverse youth-serving agencies: The Youth Connection, Generation of Promise, Downtown Boxing Gym, Detroit Horse Power, American Indian Health and Family Services, and Life Directions. The report is organized around three events: **Kick-off**, **Institute**, and **Virtual Programming**. The **Kick-off** event was held in Neutral Zone in September 2019 with adult members from the participating agencies. The **Institute** was held in October 2019 in Jackson, MI with about 60 youth and adults from the participating agencies attending the two-day residential event. **Virtual Programming** was offered as a response to the near-total closure of Michigan K-12 schools starting on March 13, 2020 as affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

HIGHLIGHT OF FINDINGS

Highlight of Findings

Kick-Off

In September 2019, Neutral Zone hosted an all-day Kickoff Event for the 2019-2020 Youth Driven Spaces (YDS) cohort. The event was planned and facilitated by Neutral Zone staff for organizational staff of the YDS cohort. The MSU Evaluation Team attended this event to connect with the organizational staff, provide an overview of the evaluation components of the project, and collect field notes from the event.

Institute

The two-day Youth Engagement Institute was held from October 26-27, 2019, hosting 17 adults and 41 youth. Among the many activities that the youth and adults participated in at the Institute, the most notable involved discussions between organizations around establishing group values and norms, setting goals, and providing separate training sessions for the youth and adults to build teams, and explaining ways to build Teen Advisory Councils (TACs) within participating organizations.

Virtual Programming

Beginning in May, Neutral Zone began hosting monthly meetings with program staff in both large and small group settings to mitigate the impacts of COVID-19. These meetings worked to ease the transition from in-person programming to virtual or hybrid programming, as well as to share best practices and resources for fostering an engaging and inclusive virtual environment.

KICK-OFF

Kick-Off

The purpose of the Kickoff event was to provide YDS cohort organizational staff:

- An opportunity to build community among each other
- An overview of the components of the Youth-Driven Spaces theoretical model and expansion project
- An opportunity to reflect on the current youth-driven practices within their home organizations.

Organization Information

Based on the data collected at the Kick-off event, each participating organization's service population, number of youth served, and the mission statement is displayed in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Cohort 2 Organization Information

Organization Name	Age Group	Number of Youth	Mission Statement
The Youth Connection	14-21	N/A	"To connect youth to brighter futures and enrich their lives by connecting them to the resources that are available in the community."
Generation of Promise	16-17 (High School Juniors and Seniors)	60	"To develop a community of young leaders from across metropolitan Detroit who honor diversity and are dedicated to the elimination of discrimination."
Downtown Boxing Gym	8-18	150+	"Through education, athletics, mentorship, and intervention, the Downtown Boxing Gym empowers Detroit students to be positive and productive members of society"
Detroit Horse Power	10-18	100 (Summer Program) 30-35 (After School Program)	"To give at-risk youth a safe and enriching space that furthers their development. We believe that horses can teach children critical life skills and have developed a social-emotional learning program that

Organization Name	Age Group	Number of Youth	Mission Statement
			focuses on the traits of perseverance, empathy, responsible risk-taking, confidence, and self-control.”
American Indian Health and Family Services	3-24	N/A	“To empower and enhance the physical, spiritual, emotional, and mental well-being of American Indian/Alaska Native Individuals, families, and other underserved populations in Southeast Michigan through culturally grounded health and family”
Life Directions	13-35	N/A	“To motivate young adults, 13-35, especially the economically poor and ‘at-risk’ to mature into responsible productive adults through self-direction”

Community Building Activities

One of the primary focuses of the event was fostering a stronger sense of community within each organization. When developing activities, it is important to think about the safety and comfort of the participants, the language to be used, and explore ways to promote diversity and inclusion. The examples below show some of the community building activities that were utilized during the event:

Name Games: encourage participants to learn each other’s names, which allows group members to feel like they matter and belong

Energizers: short and active exercises that provide a change of pace for participants, allowing them to move their bodies and feel rejuvenated while also developing stronger group bonds

Thinking Deeply: conversation activities that lead to a broader worldview, empathy, and compassion for others. These activities must be cultivated and improved through prior community building activities

Reflection: encourage participants to reflect on the event and transform experiences into ideals and thoughts about larger social issues, and personal values and goals

Agree or Disagree

The agree or disagree activity allowed for adult leaders in each organization to reflect on their organizational and youth work practices. The facilitator, a member of the Neutral Zone, read off a statement and adults had to decide where they would be placed on an agree and disagree spectrum. Participants would indicate their placement on this spectrum by moving throughout

the room – one side was designated as agree, while the opposite was designated as disagree. After giving adults time to decide their location and move, facilitators spent a few minutes discussing their responses, which provided an opportunity to hear how other organizations function. Some of the questions and responses are as follows:

In our organization, youth have genuine opportunities to set goals and make plans for individual projects and activities.

“I think our issue is the follow-through and making sure they get finished. We’re here, we offer it, but it doesn’t always come full circle, and feels a little like it was rushed or we didn’t dedicate enough time to genuinely, fully, really do it.” -YDS Adult, Detroit Horse Power

In our program, youth have structured opportunities to give feedback and reflect on activities.

“We were over-evaluating the kids...bombarding them with surveys for every individual program we were doing so that just completely stopped. There’s a happy medium and we need to start doing that again, which is what we’re hoping to get out of this work that we’re doing here together. We hear a lot from them and it’s not necessarily structured and we don’t do anything with their opinions.” -YDS Adult, Detroit Boxing Gym

In our organization, a critical mass of youth serves on our organization’s Board of Directors.

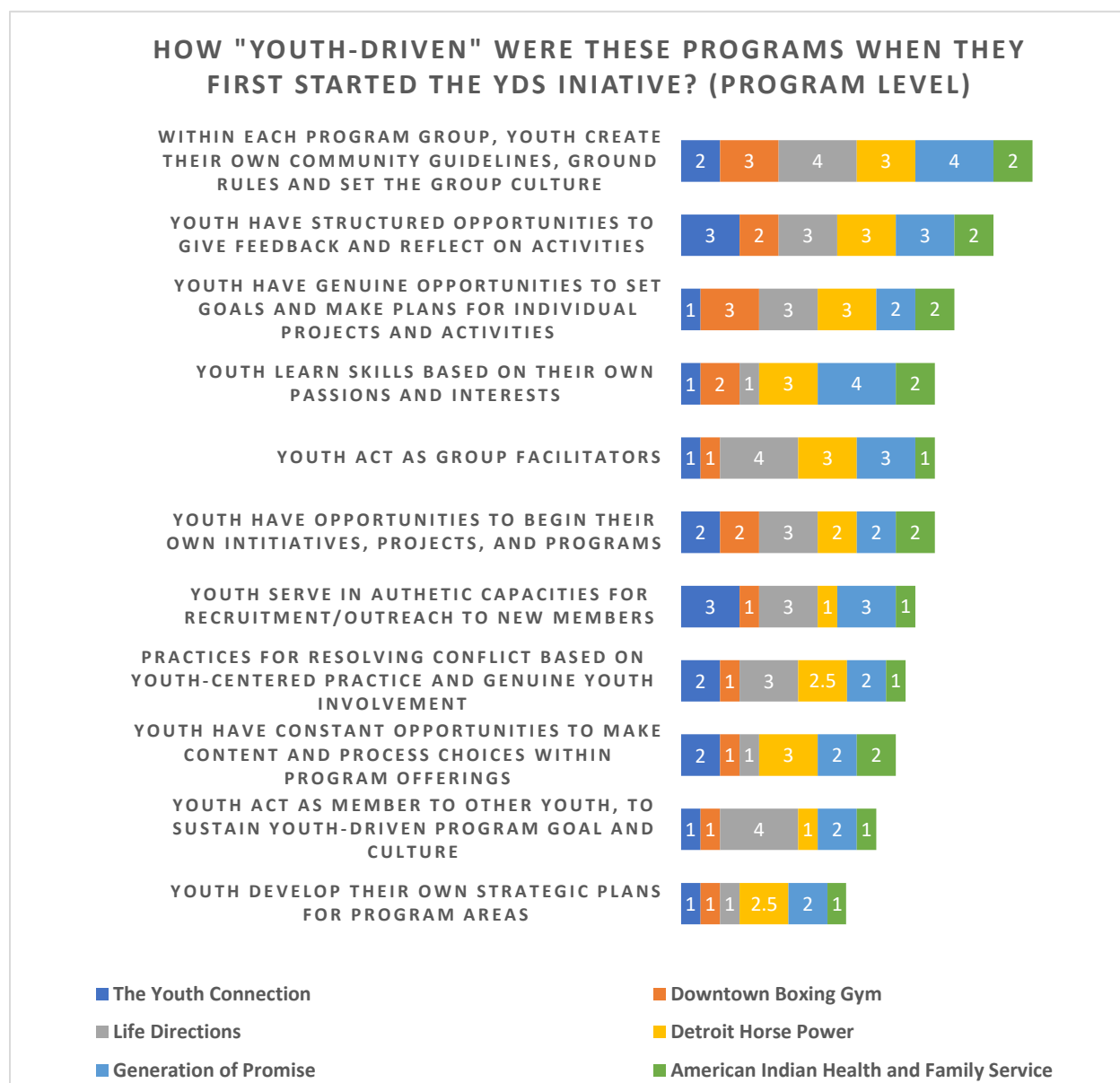
“Our Board is pretty tired. We have a lot of work to do in terms of building our Board back to where it once was and a lot of the interest coming from them, too, is that ‘we want a younger board, we want alumni of our program,’” -YDS Adult, Generation of Promise.

Formative Index

Programs used the “YDS Formative Index,” which allowed organizations to review their own practices at the beginning of the initiative, to help determine how they would like to utilize upcoming coaching visits conducted through the Neutral Zone. Adult leaders within the organizations responded to questions regarding their organization and individual program offerings. Options for response included “Not Present, Emerging, Present, and Exemplary”, which were then translated into a numerical scale for the Formative Index.

1 = Not Present 2 = Emerging 3 = Present 4 = Exemplary

Figure 2: Formative Index, Program Level at Pre-YDS



In general, youth were more likely to participate in program leadership as compared to organizational governance. Almost none of the organizations had youth participating in: planning or hosting fund development for program resources, leading program evaluation, serving on Boards of Directors, and having youth's decision-making roles written in the organizational bylaws. The level of youth involvement in decision-making is displayed in Figure 2 for the program-level activities and in Figure 3 for the organizational-level activities.

Figure 3: Formative Index, Organizational Level at Pre-YDS



INSTITUTE

Institute

Serving as a formal introduction to youth involved in the second cohort of this initiative, the two-day Institute was held at the end of October 2019 in Jackson, Michigan. Hosted by youth and adults affiliated with the Neutral Zone, they provided a wide variety of activities for individuals from six youth-serving organizations based in Southeast Michigan. The activities and discussions conducted throughout this event strongly focused on community building, with the ultimate goal to empower youth and uplift youth voices and decision-making.

Organizational Crests: The first activity conducted involved organizations designing their own crests. This involved identifying mission statements, programs, and goals within each organization. In doing this activity, the dynamics varied from organization to organization. In some groups, youth took complete control. In others, adults facilitated, directed, or instructed youth.

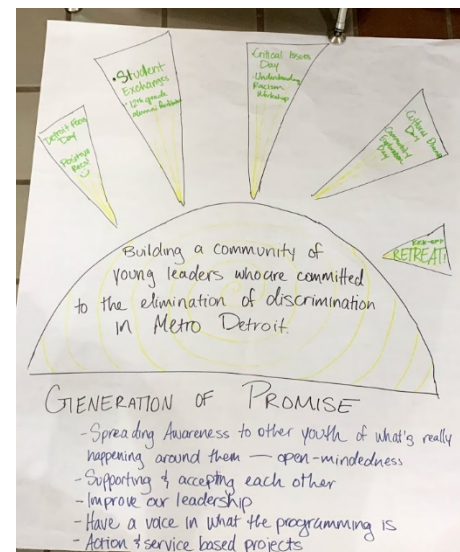
Youth Leadership Roles: One significant full-group activity involved a facilitator reading statements and individuals traveling to stand in front of an aspect of their organization that corresponded to the statement. Examples of questions included:

- Youth play the strongest role in _____
- Youth can contribute the most in _____
- Adults have the hardest time sharing _____
- Youth are the most interested in getting involved in _____

The answers to the statements had to be one of the following components:

- Promoting events and projects
- Creating new programs
- Staff hiring and organizational leadership
- Community outreach
- Evaluating programs
- Board of directors
- Fundraising
- Designing physical space
- Recruiting other participants
- Planning programs and run meetings

Figure 4: Sample Organizational Crest



This activity showed youth members and adult facilitators what the other group thought should be prioritized in their organization, as well as showed the perspectives of all six organizations in the cohort.

Figure 5: Sample Values and Group Norms

Values and Group Norms: This particular activity was conducted in three stages:

Step One: Everyone was given a paper plate and wrote down their personal values. Examples include equity, respect, and social consciousness. Youth and adults sat with their organization and shared their values with one another

Step Two: Groups picked out at least five significant values that they shared as an organization and illustrated them on a large piece of poster paper. Examples of these include open-mindedness and community-driven

Step Three: From these group values, two group norms for the organization were developed. Examples of group norms include “one mic, one diva,” which encourages one person to speak at a time, and “Las Vegas rules,” meaning that what is shared in the space of an organization remains in the space of an organization.



Misconceptions, Perceptions, and Corrections: Another notable activity was when youth and adults were put into separate groups and asked to discuss misconceptions, perceptions, and corrections they have about one another based on their experiences.

Figure 6: Misconceptions, Perceptions, and Corrections Responses

What adults think youth think of them	How youth think adults think of them	Youth and adults come to a consensus about each other
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bossy • Unapproachable • Lack understanding • Judgmental • Don't exist outside of the job • Only serve as figures of authority • Have all the answers or none at all (nothing in between) • Don't like the youth 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lazy • Disrespectful • Ignorant • Needy • Always try to have an attitude • Irresponsible • Naïve • Rebellious • Sneaky • Don't have their own developed opinions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Misunderstood • We value them • Not all of us are the same • We can learn from them • We make mistakes • We are growing • We mean well • Some of us don't understand as much as others • We're exhausted • Trustworthy

In a large group sharing session, it was discovered that there was a lot of overlap between the two groups. There was an emphasis on the fact that not all these qualities apply to all youth and adults. Everyone as a cohesive unit is responsible and needs to work together. Specifically, adults realized that they needed to step back and let kids be kids. In a smaller group debrief between members of individual organizations, youth and adults provided some rationale for their responses. Youth stated that everyone has their own experiences. In applying this to their organization, youth wanted to be more involved in generating training materials as well as to connect more with one another. On the other hand, adults emphasized that youths' safety was their number one priority. Building relationships with youth is necessary in their profession, but poor treatment by other adults serves as a significant barrier. In ensuring that both youth and adults are successful in their given organization, communication is key.

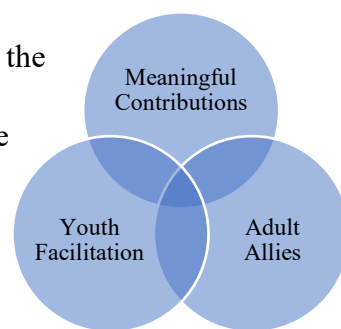
Figure 7: Youth Goal Setting Word Cloud



Individual Goal Setting Towards the end of breakout sessions that separated youth and adults, youth were tasked with coming up with three goals they had for the upcoming year, whether it be in school, within their organization, or elsewhere. The Word Cloud to the left shows the goals that were shared, with the more common goals being written in larger text. The most prominent goals included speaking out and building confidence, followed by improving public speaking, implementing a project, and stop procrastinating.

Teen Advisory Council Training In their own training session, adult facilitators were educated by Neutral Zone trainers on how to create a Teen Advisory Council within their respective organization. Following the layout of a guidebook created by the Neutral Zone and the David P. Weikart Center for Youth Program Quality, adults were informed of the benefits of creating a teen advisory council, how to create one, as well as what the major activities would be over the course of the year. The Venn Diagram demonstrates that all three components of a Teen Advisory Council intersect with one another.

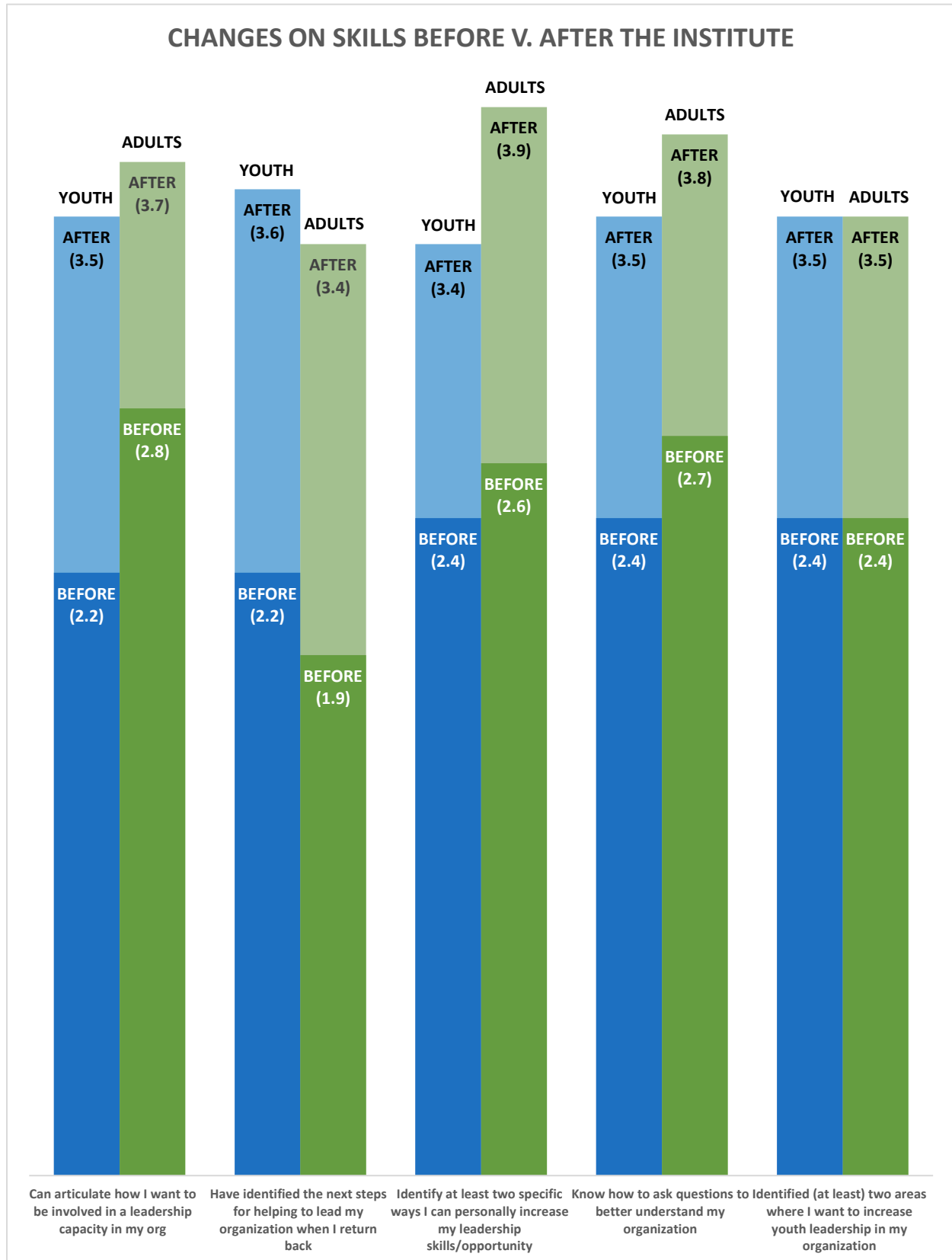
Figure 8: Teen Advisory Components



Youth Engagement Institute Evaluation Survey

Toward the end of the Institute, youth and adults were asked to respond to a survey to rate certain skills before and after the Institute, assess their engagement and connection to their program, and provide general feedback on the Institute activities. Major findings of the surveys are illustrated in Figure 9. Adults reported that the weakest area before they attended the Institute was to identify the next steps to lead their organizations while youth tended to have lower confidence in all aspects before the Institute. After attending the Institute, both youth and adults rated that they had gained more knowledge or skills in all areas.

Figure 9: Youth Engagement Institute Survey Responses



VIRTUAL PROGRAMMING

Virtual Programming

In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Neutral Zone transitioned all trainings and programming to be held virtually. To continue the work with this cohort, the Neutral Zone hosted monthly meetings – in both large and small groups – to help programs adapt to the ‘new normal’ and share best practices for virtual or hybrid programming. These meetings hosted activities focused on communication, community-building, ‘Zoom fatigue,’ and self-care.

To understand the impact of COVID-19 on YDS organizations, and to receive feedback on the Neutral Zone’s coaching sessions, MSU evaluators conducted three semi-structured interviews with individual staff members involved in the current YDS cohort. These individuals, labeled as Staff 1, 2 and 3 throughout this section, are individuals who have been extremely active participants in these monthly meetings.

Impact of COVID-19 on YDS

Organizations

To comply with social distancing guidelines, organizations shifted their programming to keep staff, youth, and families safe. YDS program staff entered unknown terrain – virtual youth programming. Initially, Staff 1 and their program worked to develop more personalized virtual programming at the onset of the pandemic, acting more as a small-group check-in. Dividing their youth

between program staff, these groups met 3-4 times a week through July, working to ensure youth were still engaged. This program was also able to provide meals for families in their community that were struggling with issues related to food security. During the initial closures, Staff 2 and their program were only able to offer virtual support, but then transitioned to an in-person and socially distanced summer program conducted following state guidelines. However, once school started in the fall, the program shifted to accommodate youth that were engaged in both distance and in-person learning. The program offered services during the day, acting as a safe place for youth to do online school with access to laptops, internet, and adult support. The afterschool section of the program was reserved only for youth who had school completely online. To accommodate other youth, the program also offered virtual tutoring and services to keep youth engaged, no matter their current schooling situation. As an extremely hands-on organization, Staff 3’s program found it difficult to shift to virtual or hybrid programming, which impacted



their program's lessons and content. They worked diligently to transition their regular games, projects, and public speaking exercises to a digital format.

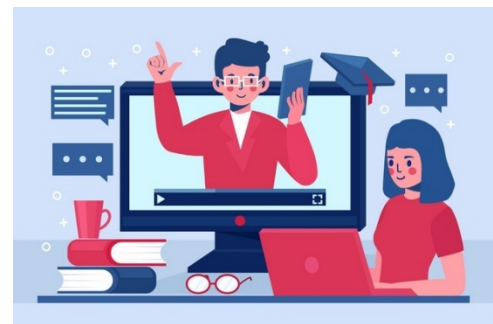
With the situation changing daily, programs had to frequently adjust and adapt to the various Stay-at-Home orders and mandates issued by the state. Staff 1 stated that their program remained virtual, and they were able to continue with a small-group dynamic. They found it important to connect with their youth and talk about things unrelated to COVID-19, as well as watch videos and make playlists to engage the youth while staying remote. Staff 2 reported that youth who were entering the space were required to have their temperature checked, answer a questionnaire, and wear their mask unless eating while socially distanced. With enhanced health and safety precautions, the space itself had a reduced capacity. For Staff 3, following the original Stay-at-Home order, their program shifted to completely virtual programming, where they held weekly meetings using PowerPoint.

Organizations encountered several challenges when establishing an alternative mode of programming. Staff 1 experienced challenges in trying to get forms signed and returned, as well as utilizing and teaching youth and parents how to maneuver different platforms for communication. Luckily, this program did not face issues related to engagement because of their use of hands-on, creative expression activities. Another major challenge, as stated by Staff 2, is technology burnout. With so much of people's days being spent in front of a screen, it is difficult to attend meetings online. Meanwhile, Staff 3 stated their main obstacle was keeping their youth engaged. Their program is built on hands-on activities, and youth are battling significant "Zoom fatigue." With youth participating in virtual learning for school all day, then going to a virtual and voluntary program after, there is not a strong incentive or desire to participate. However, Staff 3 said their program is working on recruiting new youth for virtual sessions, which they hope will contribute to community-building and increase the buy-in for youth.

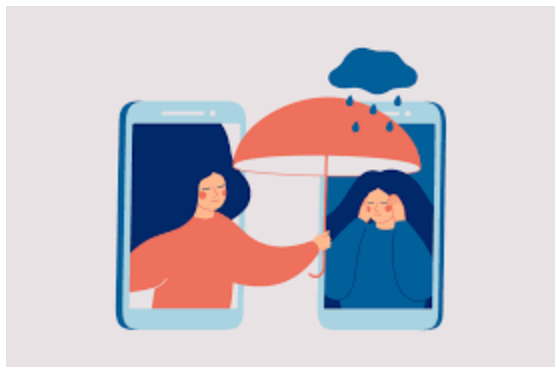
Integrating Youth Voice in Virtual Programming

Even though organizations are now running programs remotely, integrating youth voice is still critical. For example, Staff 1 used art, an activity their youth have expressed immense interest in, and developed partnerships with organizations to provide youth with art supplies and books. Next, Staff 2 started a program titled 'Project Soapbox' centered around civics, youth ideas,

and putting ideas into action. It incorporates current events and issues in their city, the state of Michigan, and across the world, encouraging youth to approach these in a solution-driven manner. This program also has youth produce check-in questions and volunteer to lead check-in every session. Long term, this program is working towards increasing youth communication with the organization's Board of Directors, as youth are the ones evaluating what parts of the program are working and what could be better. Staff 3 stated that joining last year's YDS cohort was a big step for the organization as they moved to become more youth driven. They have since formed a youth leadership council that helps look over lesson planning and assist in facilitation and fundraising. While COVID put a major pause on these efforts as the program worked to



transition to virtual programming, they now have the footing to increase the involvement of their council.



Notable Activities and Experiences

During the pandemic, programs have developed several innovative and memorable activities for their youth. Staff 1 spoke of the fact that their youth are learning to express themselves and cope with the current situation. Using art, this program worked on emotional regulation and social-emotional learning, fostering self-expression and focusing on their individual strengths. Staff 2 appreciated the fact that

this new form of programming allowed them to do activities no one was thinking about and to continue to build rapport with their youth. Youth felt increasingly more comfortable bringing things up and fostering more organic discussions and conversations. They also worked to incorporate regular reflections in this time of heightened anxiety, making a conscious effort not to make assumptions about what the youth were feeling. Staff 3 was glad their program was able to host some outdoor activities over the summer to allow for kids to socialize and build a strong community. Meanwhile, their virtual programming gives them an opportunity to try out new lesson plans and media – including online videos, quizzes, and virtual puzzles – allowing them to put a twist on programming outside of the classroom.

Youth Feedback

Based on the three interviews conducted with program staff, it appears that youth had extremely positive feedback regarding their new form of programming. Staff 1 stated that their youth group was loving the increased utilization of art activities in their program. The program was able to provide art sets for their youth, as well as other art supplies that align with the organization's mission, which had great reviews from youth. Staff 2 noticed a positive impact in youth, whose grades improved throughout the school year, as many youth came into programming having missed the first few weeks of school. Having an adult sitting with them who can navigate the different online portals, and someone who is looking out for them, has been beneficial. They are also witnessing an increase in youths' comfort levels, as youth that are coming in regularly are receiving academic services and regular social interaction. Staff 3 has received positive feedback on the fact that they begin every program by thanking their youth for coming. Despite difficulties in engagement, youth enjoy coming, as their activities provide relief and release. Youth are still interested overall in attending virtual programming because it fosters an environment where youth can be silly and have fun.

Feedback on Neutral Zone's Coaching Activities

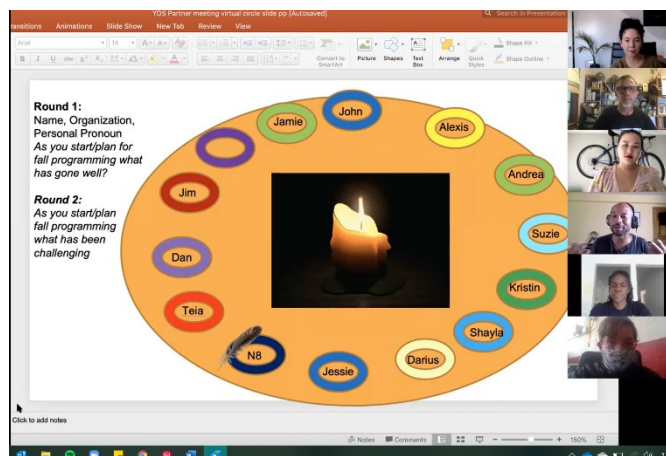
With this cohort of YDS organizations, the Neutral Zone has hosted monthly large and small group meetings. The goal of these sessions has been to provide organizations with best practices, share activities, and ease the transition to virtual or hybrid programming during this uncertain time.



Beneficial Activities and Tools:

One highly regarded tool used during these sessions is a virtual talking circle. Before each meeting, the names of the participants were put in circles and questions for the full group were added to the side of the PowerPoint. The slide also contained a talking piece – usually a feather – and would be moved when it was someone's turned to speak. Staff 1 stated that this was something their organization does in person and having the ability to do one virtually has been beneficial. They have found it keeps order in programming and encourages them to stay on schedule. Additionally, Staff 2 stated that the talking circle contributes to increased engagement, since everyone knows when to talk and when to listen.

Figure 10: Sample Talking Circle



Staff 1 also stated that with the assistance of the Neutral Zone they were able to form a Youth Advisory Council (YAC), planning all the components virtually. Currently, the YAC has gone extremely well, and Staff 1 has enjoyed seeing their youth stepping up and allowing them to work towards a “soft youth hand-off.”

Other activities that have benefitted staff include check-ins and icebreakers, as these activities were always thoughtful and worked to keep people engaged virtually.

Staff 1 stated they hope to use just about everything in their programming. Especially for younger program staff, these meetings have allowed them to foster relationships and learn what other programs are doing. Specifically, they have used the talking circles and other youth engagement components, as well as other ice breaker activities like “True Colors” and a NASA activity. Next, Staff 2 is likely to use the YDS Checklist for Youth Driven Engagement. They feel this document fosters a growth mindset – it allows organizations that are beginning to develop YDS to set long-term goals, but it doesn't portray the organization as ‘behind’ if it's just beginning the process. It is centered around how programs are meeting these milestones and how to further their progress. Additionally, Staff 3 stated that they are likely to use Jam Board and different energizers. The meetings have also provided different ideas for check-in questions and thought-provoking discussion questions to engage youth and other staff.

The meetings in general have been beneficial because they have allowed program staff to talk to people that are going through the exact same things during this unprecedented time. They also allow for networking opportunities across the region and demonstrate what other people are doing and how they are navigating the space. The monthly calls specifically have been helpful for learning about different programs and teaching how to virtually engage youth without exclusively relying on a PowerPoint. They have allowed program staff to ‘keep a finger on the pulse,’ and know that they are in the same boat as others.

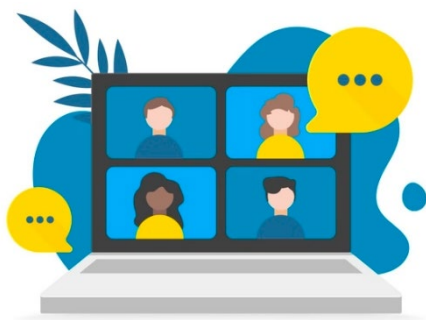
Potential Improvements:

In terms of content, staff felt the two hours allotted are very productive and they go through an appropriate amount of content for their time and capacity. However, staff have also stated that the large group meetings are less beneficial than regular small group meetings, as the topics discussed in small group meetings are not overly narrow. Program staff would additionally benefit from more tangible information being presented during training sessions.

Subjects for Future Discussion:

The staff members interviewed from this cohort would enjoy discussing the following topics in future meetings with the Neutral Zone:

- Social and emotional learning and emotional regulation
- Technology burn-out and combatting struggles to be present
- Stress relief, grieving exercises, and meditation
- How to navigate emotions while being productive
- More data on best practices
- Integrate shoutouts for people who are doing good work
- Show what organizations that are embracing YDS values are doing and how it can be replicated
- Mandatory reporting – how to go about seeing things and reporting in a virtual setting
- How to eventually shift to in-person programming
- Addressing needs related to trauma-informed care



Overall, program staff have had an overwhelmingly positive experience during these virtual training sessions. The Neutral Zone has provided helpful resources while switching this cohort's activities from in-person to virtual in a non-overwhelming way. Staff have expressed their gratitude for the organization and being a part of this cohort has given staff a way to talk about and build experience in the field.

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