Sustaining Youth Engagement Initiatives
Challenges and Opportunities

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Sustaining organizations and initiatives that promote youth engagement is challenging. To develop the funding needed to sustain the work, initiative leaders are constantly juggling time-limited grants, narrow categorical funding streams, and a lack of core operational support.

Many youth engagement initiatives exist in a tenuous state with few financial reserves. It is even more difficult to maintain services during economic downturns or political shifts that lead to cutbacks in public and private funding. This funding environment favors larger, established initiatives with strong development and management capacity. As public and private funders become increasingly aware of these challenges, potential grantees’ ability to sustain initiatives beyond their start-up phase has become an important factor with regard to rewarding funds.

Youth engagement is the intentional, meaningful, and sustained involvement of young people in a decision-making activity. Large and small, public and private organizations in diverse settings provide youth engagement opportunities. In this strategy brief, the term “youth engagement initiative” includes many engagement approaches:

- youth service
- youth media
- youth philanthropy
- youth in research and evaluation
- youth civic engagement
- youth organizing
- youth decision-making and governance
- youth leadership development

This strategy brief will help leaders of youth engagement initiatives sustain their work and connect to resources. It includes examples of promising strategies to build support and engage youth as active participants in the sustainability process. It will also help funders and policymakers understand the creative approaches behind youth engagement initiatives.

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Eight Elements to Sustain Youth Engagement

The Finance Project has created a framework of eight key elements of sustainability. Leaders working on sustainability tend to focus on the funding needed to sustain their initiatives. While funding is critical to sustaining programs, other factors relate to the ability to generate those fiscal resources, including the leadership of management and boards of directors, the strength of administrative and financial management systems, the support of community members and policymakers, and the ability to communicate the vision and values of an organization effectively.

The framework is meant to help leaders of all types of youth engagement initiatives understand how to ensure the on-going stability of their work. Initiatives that support youth engagement also have a unique opportunity to involve youth voices in each element of sustainability, from developing their vision through drafting a sustainability plan. This brief presents information, considerations, and resources associated with the eight elements of sustainability—vision, results orientation, strategic financing orientation, broad-based community support, key champions, adaptability to changing conditions, strong internal systems, and sustainability plan—for youth engagement initiatives.
Facing intense pressures to obtain funding in a competitive environment, youth engagement leaders may be tempted to allow funding opportunities to drive the initiative’s vision, rather than the other way around. This is extremely dangerous. Without a compelling vision, youth engagement initiatives risk losing one of their most critical assets: the buy-in of youth, community members, and other stakeholders.

Developing a vision begins as a collective process. Initiative leaders and stakeholders, including youth, must consider the initiative’s desired
short- and long-term results. They must also understand how their efforts currently fit into the landscape of other initiatives in the community and how they should fit in the years to come.

Defining an organization’s niche—what distinguishes it from others and how it works in conjunction with others—is key to formulating a vision.

Considerations

- Involving young people in defining an initiative’s vision is critical. In recent years, many more organizations have come to recognize the value of supporting the voice of youth in efforts to strengthen communities.² With support, young people can participate in decision-making in ways that enhance their own personal development and provide valuable insight.

- Leaders, youth, and other stakeholders must be able to clearly articulate the initiative’s vision to ensure community support. Partner with youth media engagement initiatives to determine the best way to convey the vision to youth in the wider community.

- Youth engagement initiatives may struggle to articulate a niche because they strive to be youth-driven and respond to needs as they arise. To generate funding, however, a clearly documented and articulated focus or expertise is necessary. The unique connection and ability to respond to youth needs may be the niche that a youth engagement initiative chooses to articulate. If that is the case, the leaders need to show, in a compelling way, how the initiative formulates youth-driven responses to youth-driven needs. Leaders must also articulate the broad results they hope to achieve in the community. Specific strategies may evolve in response to changing youth needs, policies, and priorities, but big-picture results are likely to be consistent over time.

Element 2: Results Orientation

By focusing on results, youth engagement leaders ensure that they create a cycle of continuous quality improvement.

Documenting the effectiveness of their work helps leaders secure funding and the on-going support of other stakeholders. A study of 19 youth engagement programs by The Finance Project showed that, while most organization leaders identified research and evaluation as an important component of a program’s sustainability, few invested resources to conduct internal or external evaluations that document their results.³

Increasingly, both public and private funders require demonstrated results in proposals and grant reports. The ability to generate and communicate sound information on positive results


Challenges and Opportunities

helps organizations stand out when competing for funding. Documenting positive results does more than convince existing funders to maintain or expand their investments in programs. It also attracts new funding opportunities.

Implementing a results-orientation begins by clearly defining the results an initiative is trying to achieve. Next, identify indicators and performance measures to track progress toward those results. A sound logic model helps leaders define those indicators and benchmarks.

Regularly measuring progress towards results tells initiative leaders and potential funders:
- what works for whom
- under what circumstances
- within what timeframes
- with what expenditures

Initiatives can use that information to make on-going decisions about program design and to continually refine their work.

Developing the capacity to track and report on progress towards results is a significant challenge. Youth engagement initiatives tend to have small staffs, small budgets, and limited infrastructure, so leaders should form partnerships and seek out technical assistance.

Initiative leaders should also involve youth in research and evaluation efforts. Doing so demonstrates the initiative’s commitment to youth engagement and provides young people with opportunities for learning, empowerment and development.

- Colleges and universities can provide expertise. Get professors and/or students involved.
- Get technical assistance from community foundations and the United Way.
- Access various written publications and online resources for ideas to engage youth in research and evaluation. (See “Resources to Engage Youth in Research and Evaluation” on page 8.)

Considerations

- Beginning to track progress is often a daunting prospect, but even a little information is better than none. Leaders can begin tracking results without formal scientific evaluation. Start by identifying one result that is central to the work. Then identify one or two related measures to track.
Generating anecdotal success stories through audio-visual presentations or written case studies is also a compelling way to document the value and outcomes of your initiative. Involve young people in the process of collecting these qualitative narratives through interviews, focus groups, and observations.

To have meaningful youth involvement in evaluation and research activities, leaders must engage in an intentional process to support youth participation in evaluation roles. For example, the adults working to engage youth in these processes must provide the tools, knowledge, and opportunities to prepare young people to participate successfully and effectively.

RESOURCES TO ENGAGE YOUTH IN RESEARCH AND EVALUATION

Scholars and practitioners often include youth as vital partners in designing and participating in evaluation efforts. Terms including “participatory action research,” “youth participation in community research and evaluation,” “youth-led research and evaluation” and “community youth mapping” are frequently used to describe youth engagement in research studies.

The Child and Youth Participation Guide produced by UNICEF presents resources on child and youth participation from Asia, Europe, North America, Latin America, Africa, Australia and the Pacific. The guide includes a section on involvement in research, analysis, planning, implementation and analysis for youth. It promotes child and youth participation in government, community-based organizations, child-led organizations, NGOs, and UN and donor agencies.
http://www.unicef.org/adolescence/cypguide/resourceguide_intro.html

The Youth Action Research Institute (YARI) of the Institute for Community Research publishes a Participatory Action Research Curriculum for Empowering Youth. YARI promotes the use of action research for personal, group, and community development. Participants include children, preadolescents, and youth of diverse ethnic backgrounds as well as sexual minority youth.
http://www.icrweb.org/research/yari.htm

The Texas Workforce Commission Youth Program Initiative provides a series of training packets for youth engagement, including an evaluation module. www.twc.state.tx.us/svcs/youthinit/ypi.html
The Summer Youth Research Institute of the Institute for Community Research (ICR) offers teenagers in the Hartford, Connecticut, area the opportunity to use research to solve important social issues.

In the annual six-week summer program, teens work as members of the ICR research staff. Using cooperative instructional techniques, staff and teen facilitators train youth in research methods, such as surveying, interviewing, photo-documentation, and mapping. Then teens conduct a group research project on a social issue of their choice. Local activists speak to the teens about models of social change and how to use strategies like lobbying, petitioning, boycotting, and social marketing. Youth also learn how to use the arts to influence audiences.

After training, the youth spend most of their time out in the field, conducting research. Depending on their chosen topic, they may interview their peers, Connecticut legislators, staff from state and social service agencies, or youth organizations and hospitals. In addition to interviews and other research methods, they visit various universities where they meet with students, share research results, and meet role-model faculty researchers.

At the end of six weeks, the youth exhibit their results in the ICR Gallery. Using interactive visual techniques, they present their findings to their parents, ICR staff, program collaborators, funders, and youth groups. Several young people continue to work at ICR during the school year as youth action researchers and peer educators. They are encouraged to act on their research results by continuing and completing short and long-term plans.

Research topics include teen violence and drug abuse, discrimination against youth based on sexual orientation, teen stress, school dropout rates, sex at an early age, and AIDS attitudes among their peers.

For more information about the Summer Youth Research Institute, contact Marlene Berg at marlene.berg@icrweb.org.
Element 3: Strategic Financing Orientation

With a strategic financing orientation, initiative leaders know what they want to sustain, the resources needed to sustain those activities, and how to access those resources. A strategic financing orientation requires taking these steps:

1. Define the initiative’s vision and results and the strategies and activities that will lead to those results.

2. Estimate how much it will cost to sustain those strategies.

3. Identify, pursue, and secure a diverse base of resources to support those strategies and activities, including public and private dollars, as well as in-kind support.

An initiative should never become overly dependent on any one source or type of funds. Align funding sources with particular funding needs, so that the most flexible dollars are used to fund functions for which dollars are most difficult to secure.

Finally, consider the full range of public and private resource options:

- federal, state, and local governments
- national, regional, and community foundations
- the United Way
- corporate foundations
- businesses
- civic and religious organizations
- universities and colleges
- community fundraising events or donor development
- dues or other fees
FUNDING YOUTH ENGAGEMENT INITIATIVES

In a study of 19 youth engagement initiatives, The Finance Project (TFP) found that most youth engagement programs rely on a diversified portfolio of private funding. Among the study sample, private funding (specifically foundation grants) was the largest share of total program funding. Importantly, half of programs reported three or more sources of foundation funding.

Public funding constituted a smaller percentage of total funding. Few programs that access public funding reported more than one public funding source. All of the initiatives relied on in-kind donations, but few organization leaders could specify how much support is received in this form.

With information on their program costs and available resources, program leaders can assess their funding gaps and develop strategies to meet their financing needs. Financing strategies can include:

- making better use of existing resources
- maximizing public revenue
- building partnerships
- creating more flexibility in existing funding
- developing new dedicated revenue

Taken together, these strategies provide a clear roadmap for addressing financing issues for youth engagement programs. The TFP study found that most leaders have focused their efforts on making better use of existing resources, building partnerships, and developing new dedicated revenue; however, few programs access public revenue.

Despite the low utilization of public funds in the TFP study, there are more than 100 federal funding streams that can support youth programming, and many of these funding programs have the potential to support youth engagement. Among the most prominent are the 21st Century Community Learning Centers Program, the Social Services Block Grant, and YouthBuild. In addition to federal funding, states and localities can support youth engagement through their general funds.

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When considering resource options, initiative leaders should not underestimate the importance of in-kind support to contain on-going costs:

- low-cost or no-cost space
- volunteers, interns, or work-study students to reduce staffing
- graphic design and printing for promotional or educational materials

Youth engagement initiatives may be able to partner with local high schools, vocational schools or post-secondary institutions to engage student volunteers or student interns in any number of in-kind supports.

Successfully pursuing funding requires considerable time and expertise. Larger organizations can generally hire specialized development staff, but this is beyond the reach of many youth engagement initiatives. Leaders of youth engagement initiatives must often raise funds while simultaneously carrying out day-to-day operations and activities.

As part of a strategic financing orientation, broaden the circle of individuals involved in fundraising, beginning with youth, staff, board members, and active volunteers. A financial planning process can help inform stakeholders of the organization’s financial status and needs. It can also engage stakeholders in considering and identifying appropriate sources of support they can pursue. Training and technical assistance opportunities can also help program leadership, staff, volunteers, and board members better understand fundraising options and strategies, articulate the value of your organization, and ask for support.

**Considerations**

- Youth philanthropy is a growing movement. It includes personal giving, as well as volunteering, fundraising, and organized grant-making. When considering strategic financing, youth philanthropy should be a central strategy. Common values at the root of youth philanthropy encourage, respect, and recognize the contributions of youth—and the responsibility of all citizens to improve the social health of their communities.

- Many youth engagement initiatives do not have the scale or history to successfully compete for large grants from the federal government or national private foundations. Forming partnerships with complementary organizations—especially youth-serving organizations that do not yet effectively engage youth in decision-making or programming—can be very successful. Although a small youth engagement initiative may not be able to complete for a large grant individually, it may be able to receive funding as part of a collaborative proposal or to act as a subcontractor to a larger organization. Initiative leaders should think about how their work complements the work of other organizations and take time to build strong relationships with leaders of other efforts.

- Some large, national, fundraising sources are probably not appropriate for youth engagement initiatives. Instead, pursue a diverse base of funding among appropriate options, such as community and regional foundations, city or county support, and community fundraising and development.
As young people have become more engaged in the political process—turning out in record numbers to vote in the 2008 elections—many private foundations have increased interest in youth engagement programs. Search for funders with a particular interest in youth engagement. For example, the Funders Collaborative for Youth Organizing (FCYO) is an affinity group of funders working for a society in which young people are integral leaders and decision-makers in their own lives and communities. To learn more about FCYO, visit http://www.fcyo.org.

To engage staff and board members in fund-raising, it is important to be transparent about finances and clear about anticipated fiscal needs. The more funding sources an organization has, the more challenging it is to allocate and account for funds. Provide clear budgets and account for expenditures if you hope to access, maintain and broaden support from funders. (For more information, see Element 7: Strong Internal Systems, page 19.)

**RESOURCES TO ENGAGE YOUTH IN PHILANTHROPY**

Philanthropy for young people can take many forms, including:

- donating expendable income
- volunteering
- fundraising

Currently, more than 250 youth philanthropy programs are operating.

*Youth in Philanthropy* is administered by The Foundation Center, which seeks to strengthen the nonprofit sector by advancing knowledge about U.S. philanthropy. The site describes youth philanthropy, presents stories of youth philanthropy from the perspective of young people, and details resources to help youth give back to their communities. [http://youth.foundationcenter.org](http://youth.foundationcenter.org)

*Learning to Give* was developed by the Council on Michigan Foundations to engage educators and others in teaching philanthropy in the classroom. Syllabi and curricula inform youth about philanthropy, the civil society sector, and the importance of giving their time, talent and treasure for the common good; develops philanthropic behavior and experience; and empowers youth to take voluntary citizen action in their classrooms, their lives and their communities. [http://www.learningtogive.org](http://www.learningtogive.org)

*Youth Philanthropy and Service* is a program of the Mandel Center for Nonprofit Organizations at Case Western Reserve University. The program develops and promotes leadership and personal involvement by youth in giving time, treasure, and talent to their community. The site provides resources and support for adults implementing youth service and philanthropy programs within their schools and organizations. [http://case.edu/mandelcenter/yps/](http://case.edu/mandelcenter/yps/)
Element 4: Adaptability to Changing Conditions

The world is constantly changing. Political leaders and programs come and go; new practices and approaches emerge; and the assets, priorities, and needs of youth and communities change.

The most successful initiatives are led by those who anticipate, influence, and respond to new threats or opportunities. This involves keeping abreast of current research in the field, and the social, economic and demographic conditions of youth in the community. It also means using that research to influence policymaking at local, state, and national levels. The ability to track, contribute, and adapt to changing policy environments, as well as to position an organization to influence and respond to national, state, and local decision-makers’ priorities, is key to sustainability.

Youth engagement initiatives, by definition, can engage youth in tracking local, regional, and national developments. Youth engagement initiatives also have a unique opportunity to package youth responses to policy proposals in persuasive formats and position themselves as resources in the policymaking process through youth civic engagement. This includes bringing a youth voice to public hearings and decision-making on issues, and forming relationships with legislators and officials who are willing to propose or amend legislation or regulations in response to youth input.

Considerations

- An initiative board is a great vehicle for accessing individuals “in the know” regarding federal, state and local policymaking. Consider what types of knowledge resources and networks are represented on the board. Recruit individuals with diverse experiences and connections.
Youth civic engagement allows young people to develop and exercise leadership while improving their communities. Civic engagement can be an effective and dynamic strategy to ensure that young people are powerfully represented in policymaking.

Consider developing partnerships with individuals and organizations that can help effectively package and communicate information. For example, university faculty and interns from public policy, social work, or urban studies programs may be willing to help develop policy analysis documents through a collaborative process with youth.

COMMUNITY YOUTHMAPPING AS A TOOL FOR ADVOCACY

Community YouthMapping (CYM) mobilizes youth and adults as they identify resources and opportunities in their community. Through CYM, youth and adults may discover areas in which the community fails to meet youth needs. An on-going CYM process ensures that initiatives stay abreast of resources in the community and how those resources are shifting, while positively engaging youth.

The Washtenaw County Community YouthMapping Project is a partnership between Washtenaw County Children’s Well Being, Ypsilanti Youth Empowered to Act (YYEA), Eastern Michigan University, Washtenaw County MSU Extension 4H-Development and the Judson Center. YouthMappers aged 14–18 serve two days a week and get a stipend for their time. YouthMappers gain marketable skills such as interviewing, data collection and entry, problem solving, and so much more—plus knowledge of local geography.

Washtenaw County used CYM to achieve specific aspects of their county strategic plan, such as providing an environment where children are protected and nurtured. Through the process, Washtenaw County youth were able to identify 350 safe places for youth. Partly as a result of the success of community mapping, Washtenaw County’s next goal is to develop a youth enterprise center.

For more information, please contact Angelina Hamilton Broderick, Assistant Director at The B. Side: The Business Side of Youth, at ahamilton5@emich.edu or at 734-487-6570.
Element 5: Broad-Based Community Support

A youth engagement initiative’s success is more likely when stakeholders actively support its goals and activities, and the initiative has a strong identity in the community. This involves providing opportunities for interested parties to become more familiar with the initiative’s mission and activities, and encouraging collaboration, when possible. Initiative leaders should also nurture a positive relationship with the media and spread the word about the initiative to ensure that it maintains a high profile in the community.

To attain a broad base of community support, identify and communicate with various stakeholder groups, typically:

- youth
- parents
- public, charter, and private school teachers and administrators
- community residents
- public officials
- members of the business community
- leaders of faith-based organizations
- higher education staff and administrators
- policymakers at the federal, state, and local levels
- leaders of related community organizations

The mix of stakeholders to engage and outreach strategies to pursue, depends on the initiative’s vision and resources. Think carefully about who needs to be engaged, and develop effective outreach strategies and communication materials to reach the intended audiences. When an organization is successful in developing broad-based community support, it enjoys a strong reputation for quality work among different stakeholder groups.

Youth engagement initiatives are particularly well-positioned to build a broad base of community support by drawing on their primary asset—youth. Today’s young people have mastered technology and alternative media, including:

- social networking websites
- text messaging
- e-mail blasts

Youth media is an exciting way for young people to express themselves and create change, particularly when adults have negative perceptions. Draw on young people’s skills to reach community stakeholders who may have previously been less accessible.

Considerations

- Developing leadership skills among youth and parents who can advocate for policies and services is a proactive strategy to build community support. Teens and parents are often the most outspoken members of a community. They can be an initiative’s greatest advocates.
Find new voices of community support by working in partnership with other youth engagement initiatives, especially those focused on youth media. Working in partnership not only increases a program’s visibility, it also demonstrates effective collaboration with organizations that share your vision.

Often, community support depends on relationships and word of mouth, so leaders may neglect more formal means of communication as an initiative becomes more established. Forging relationships with the media and developing communications materials should not be overlooked. Brochures and websites help staff and supporters spread the word about the initiative.

Community fundraising events can raise dollars and increase the community’s awareness of your initiative simultaneously. Consider what type of event might generate media attention or appeal to key audiences.

**YOUTH MEDIA AS A TOOL FOR ENGAGING BROAD-BASED COMMUNITY SUPPORT**

*Critical Exposure* is a youth media-making organization that helps students and organizations advocate more effectively for school reform and social change through the power of documentary photography and youth voice. *Critical Exposure* provides hands-on training and innovative tools that empower young people to develop skills as advocates and documentary photographers.

*Critical Exposure* works in partnership with out-of-school-time programs, schools, and youth organizations, as well as advocacy groups. It enables young people to identify issues affecting their lives, and provides them with the tools and opportunities they need to build public and political support for youth-supported solutions in their states and localities.

*Critical Exposure* staff members help young people and program staff implement creative strategies. It uses student photography and voices to strengthen campaigns to improve public schools and their communities. Shown in public spaces, *Critical Exposure* traveling exhibits increase awareness of conditions in schools. Based in Washington, DC, *Critical Exposure* also works in communities across the country, including New Orleans, Baltimore, Philadelphia, Austin, and Albuquerque.

For more information, visit [www.criticalexposure.org](http://www.criticalexposure.org) or contact Adam Levner at 202-745-3745 or [info@criticalexposure.org](mailto:info@criticalexposure.org).
Element 6: Key Champions

Key champions are men and women from various community sectors who have power and influence over resources—and are willing to generate support for your initiative. Often, they are leaders from the community, business sector, faith-based institutions, the media, and government.

Champions obtain media attention through public service announcements, press conferences, blogs, opinion pieces, and letters to the editor. They can also recruit other leaders to invest time and resources in an initiative. They’re vital forces in generating public goodwill, garnering increased resources from public and private sources, and convincing state and local governments to establish supportive public policies.

Key champions can make the difference between short-term failure and long-term success.

Leaders of youth engagement programs are well-positioned to work with youth to recruit key champions and to become key champions themselves. Leadership training can give youth the confidence and public-speaking ability to become effective advocates, and to recruit other connected champions to the cause. Take the time to maintain relationships with youth alumni, who are often the most effective champions.

Considerations

- Recruit key champions strategically. Base selections on the audience that the initiative is attempting to reach. For example, if you want to reach school personnel, seek a champion on the local school board or among leading teachers. If your target audience is youth, recruit a respected coach, or a student leader. Devise an outreach plan to engage key champions, and a follow-up plan to maintain their support.

- Many key champions are people who have something in common with the cause. Research the backgrounds and interests of potential champions to find a hook that will get them involved in the organization and maintain their active engagement over time. Tailored engagement strategies are critical. For example, a school principal may get involved because of a focus on youth leadership that can mutually benefit the school.

- Keep in mind that champions can bring more than monetary benefits. Because human resources are often scarce, look for champions who can devote their time and expertise, or help broaden the volunteer base.
Element 7: Strong Internal Systems

Stable organizations and initiatives have strong internal systems:
- accounting and auditing
- procurement and personnel
- information systems,
- governance structures
- communications and management

These internal systems maintain accountability and quality control. They demonstrate to supporters that leadership is effective and that staff can achieve the goals they have set.

**RECRUITING AND RETAINING KEY CHAMPIONS**

*Wide Angle Youth Media*, a nonprofit organization in Baltimore, Maryland, provides Baltimore youth with opportunities to use video technology, critical thinking, and public speaking skills to tell their stories and become critical consumers and skilled producers of media. *Wide Angle* trains more than 500 youth each year, and shares their stories and media projects with 9,000 people annually. Their work has been seen at neighborhood screenings, citywide events, national media festivals, and on PBS and cable channels nationwide.

*Wide Angle’s* leaders have sought to diversify the organization’s funding portfolio. In addition to foundation and government grants, *Wide Angle’s* leaders raise funds to use flexibly. Investing in a donations database made it easier to keep track of donations and donors, and ensured that communication was appropriate and timely. The database helps *Wide Angle* create and nurture key champions. Small gifts increased 30% only a year after it was installed.

Along with increasing the organization’s visibility, *Wide Angle’s* relationships with the media have resulted in new funding and in-kind support. For example, *Wide Angle* partnerships with various media outlets create and promote the annual *Who Are You? Youth Media Festival*.

Each year, graphic design services are donated, local television stations feature student work, and the festival is co-hosted by a local radio personality. Finding a shared appreciation for media and youth has helped *Wide Angle* build strong on-going partnerships.

For more information, contact Gin Ferrara, Executive Director, *Wide Angle Youth Media* at gin@wideanglemedia.org.
Maintaining good internal systems requires the support and dedication of talented board members, managers, and staff. It also requires effective communication. Board members, managers, and staff must be informed about internal financial and administrative affairs. Everyone must stay alert to emerging concerns, and know their own roles in keeping the organization successful.

Internal systems are stronger and more effective when young people are involved. In communities everywhere, youth serve as members of boards of directors, nonprofit organization and association boards, independent youth boards, and councils and advisory committees. Youth also collaborate with adults in other essential areas, including program design, budgeting, staff outreach, and public relations.6

Of course, the necessity to invest in strong internal systems often collides with a lack of resources. Initiatives rarely have the capacity or the budget for accountants, development staff, or information technology specialists. Technological resources, such as accounting or management information system software, are often out of reach.

Lack of resources can create a vicious cycle. Funders are wary of investing in a small youth engagement initiative that does not have the internal capacity to monitor and account for funds. But without funders’ investment, the initiative can never afford more sophisticated systems.

Fortunately, the small scale of many youth engagement initiatives means that they do not typically require complex or expensive systems. Several low-cost and no-cost resources are available to improve internal systems. (See “Resources for Management Information Systems” on page 21 and “Resources to Support Strong Internal Systems” on page 22.)

Considerations

- Leaders must honestly assess the strengths and weaknesses of the organization and creatively seek help where it lacks capacity. Strategies may include partnering with other small organizations to share the cost of specialized staff, such as an accountant or a human resources specialist; outsourcing functions, such as accounting or information technology, to firms that specialize in performing these functions; and creating partnerships with and/or seeking in-kind donations from businesses.

- Intermediary organizations can provide technical assistance on internal systems. Some intermediary organizations serve as fiscal agents. Some can help leaders establish an accounting system, or work through an executive transition. (See “Resources to Support Strong Internal Systems” on page 22.)

- Even a small staff still needs clear expectations. Basic documentation of job expectations and human resources policies helps avoid conflict. Documentation will also help smooth transitions when people leave or your organization grows.

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RESOURCES FOR MANAGEMENT INFORMATION SYSTEMS

Several web-based management information system (MIS) resources are available to youth engagement initiatives. These products vary widely in terms of their expense and adaptability. Online information for nonprofit organizations, include:

- **TechSoup.org** provides free articles, resources, and support. Its TechSoup Stock service enables nonprofit organizations to access donated and discounted technology products provided by corporate and nonprofit technology partners. [www.techsoup.org](http://www.techsoup.org)

- **Idealware** provides candid reviews and articles about software for nonprofit organizations. [www.idealware.org](http://www.idealware.org)

Many organizations use widely-available office software to organize contact lists and donor lists, track fundraising efforts, and manage human resources/personnel/benefits information. However, standard software requires time, effort, and know-how to customize for your specific needs.

**Three Affordable Database Programs**

The three examples of inexpensive—or free—database programs below are not as sophisticated as more expensive programs. However, they offer basic tools to track the involvement of members, donors, and volunteers.

Even free databases require time and energy to install, learn, and use. If an initiative has minimal technological expertise among leaders and staff, seek volunteer support—chances are, many of the young people in your organization are experienced and comfortable with computer systems. Examples of free database software include:

- **ebasePro** was developed by Groundspring.org, a nonprofit providing technological services to other nonprofits. A single-user version can be downloaded for free. Accessing electronic user support requires an annual subscription which costs $50 to $75. Technical support by phone is charged on a per-call basis. Customization and training is available for a fee through a network of consultants and trainers. [www.ebase.org](http://www.ebase.org)

- **Organizers Database** was developed by the Boston-based Organizing Collaborative established in 1999 to promote better use of technology by social change organizations throughout the U.S. The database serves community organizing groups and can be downloaded on-line and networked locally among up to 15 computers for free. A variety of technical support options are available on a sliding scale, based on your budget. [www.organizersdb.org](http://www.organizersdb.org)

- **Metrix** was developed by the Fund for the City of New York to manage information on contacts with donors, volunteers and clients. Every month, free demos of the database are held at the Fund offices in New York. Free instructional information and videos are available on-line. [metrix.fcny.org](http://metrix.fcny.org)
RESOURCES TO SUPPORT STRONG INTERNAL SYSTEMS

In many communities, the intermediary organizations supporting the organizational capacity of nonprofit organizations are affiliated with community foundations, local or regional private foundations, or the United Way.

*The Fund for the City of New York* (FCNY) developed management and technology programs to improve the administrative and service capacity of New York City nonprofits. FCNY provides bridge loans to organizations waiting for committed funds from government and foundations. It also hosts an incubator program to help new nonprofit organizations with “back office” functions, such as auditing, accounting, fiscal support, and grants management. FCNY also helps nonprofit organizations better use technology through training, consulting, and its METRIX database. Through the FCNY Design Studio, design school students intern with local nonprofits to create websites, logos, annual reports, and other products. For more information, visit www.fcny.org.

*Third Sector New England* (TSNE) provides support, training, and management resources to the progressive nonprofit community in the Boston area. Services include fiscal sponsorship, management consulting, executive transition support, evaluation services, and grant making. Technical assistance fosters diversity and capacity-building. One of TSNE’s grantees is the Boston Youth Organizing Project, a youth-led, adult-supported, unincorporated organization that works for social change and justice. TSNE acts as its fiscal sponsor, providing financial management, insurance coverage, employee benefits management, and other administrative tasks. For more information, visit www.tsne.org.

*The Hartford Foundation for Public Giving* created the Nonprofit Support Program (NSP) to help nonprofit organizations in the Hartford, Connecticut area build their capacity and increase their effectiveness. NSP offers organizational assessments, technical assistance grants, financial management services, training, and networking opportunities to help participating nonprofit organizations deliver services as efficiently as possible. Topics such as how to start a nonprofit and ways to raise funds to sustain an organization are part of an online resource kit. So is a list of area consultants. In an independent assessment, 100 percent of the participants in the independent financial management program reported a significant increase in their ability to manage effectively; 75 percent of technical assistance grant recipients reported a significant improvement in their program and service delivery. For more information, visit www.hfpg.org/NSP/default.asp.
Element 8: Sustainability Plan

A sustainability plan integrates the key resources necessary for a youth engagement initiative to continue over time. It must be clear, sensible, and convincing, helping organizations determine where they are and where they want to go.

A sustainability plan helps policymakers, opinion leaders, and investors decide whether and how to get on board. It also helps key audiences understand what the initiative is, and why it is needed. A sustainability plan gives program managers a road map and benchmarks for determining success.

Youth should be involved in the sustainability planning process. Their perspective on the initiative’s vision, results, core strategies and activities is especially important. Involving youth in the process not only ensures that the initiative will reach its intended audience, but also engages young people as active members and leaders in the initiative.

Developing a sustainability plan involves two major tasks. First, organization leaders and key stakeholders must engage in decision-making and planning to address these key questions.

- What does the organization want to sustain, including its vision, results, and core strategies and activities?

BUILDING STRONG INTERNAL SYSTEMS

Hope Street Youth Development (HSYD) in Wichita, Kansas, offers young people opportunities to gain leadership skills and build power—to reach their full potential and contribute to positive social change. HSYD provides academic help, plus guidance on youth-led projects ranging from neighborhood clean-ups to youth-led city events.

HSYD recognizes the importance of strong internal systems to long-term sustainability. With a small grant for board development, HSYD hired an outside consultant to train board members on roles and responsibilities in order to increase members’ buy-in and commitment. Board members developed specific outcomes to measure progress on program development, fundraising, and internal and external communications. They also started a succession plan to ensure HSYD’s stability and accountability in the face of inevitable changes in executive leadership.

For more information, contact Aaron Fowler, Executive Director, Hope Street Youth Development at aaron@hoestreet.com or at 316-263-7325.
What financial resources, key champions, community support, and strong internal systems are required to sustain the work?

How will the organization generate needed resources?

What are the tasks, roles, priorities, responsibilities, and timelines for generating needed resources?

Second, organization leaders must document these decisions in writing. A written plan provides a record of decisions. It is an ongoing reference for short- and long-term operations. It can be the initiative’s most important document to persuade funders to invest in the initiative.

Leaders of all kinds of organizations, of all sizes, have difficulty finding time for sustainability planning, or to write sustainability plans. Leaders of youth engagement initiatives, especially, are reluctant to take time away from their “real work” to engage in long-term planning.

But sustainability planning is vital to the real work of an organization. Without it, an initiative may be a venture of short duration. Sustainability planning can help an initiative take root and grow over time. A quality written sustainability plan for youth engagement initiatives provides evidence to funders that the organization has the capacity and foresight to think strategically about its future.

Considerations

Developing a sustainability plan involves more than strategies to develop resources. The overall vision and focus of the organization in the years to come must be considered. It is a good opportunity to broaden the base and increase the depth of input from community members and other stakeholders. Give careful attention to structuring the planning process to obtain genuine input from stakeholders. Many leaders find it helpful to structure a sustainability planning task force that includes representation from management, staff, the board, youth, and the community. Include other key stakeholder groups that may contribute to sustainability, such as policymakers or leaders of partner organizations.

To start on sustainability planning, consider an initial retreat to get away from day-to-day work. Because some decisions require research, schedule follow-ups to complete the sustainability plan.

Even after the development of a sustainability plan, the process of planning for sustainability is not complete. By nature, sustainability plans are dynamic documents. They should be reviewed and revised periodically to reflect the changing conditions in which the initiative operates.
Challenges and Opportunities

Increasingly, educators, policymakers, community leaders, and service providers are imparting youth with the skills, knowledge, abilities, and opportunities to become active participants in influential decision-making settings. Young people are critical contributors to program design, service delivery, and evaluation.

Yet initiatives face significant challenges in developing the stable resources and strong organizational structures and systems needed to sustain their work. Many initiatives show initial promise in their start-up phase, but they often fade away because they are unable access or efficiently use the fiscal and community resources that could help them thrive.

Initiatives that flourish share several elements:

- a well-articulated vision
- the ability to document and demonstrate success
- the ability to adjust to changing social, economic, and political trends
- support from policymakers and the public
- the ability to identify and tap into necessary monetary and in-kind resources
- strong internal governance systems
- clear and convincing plans to harness key resources for sustainability

An initiative’s ability to sustain and expand its work over time is a testament to creativity, adaptability, industriousness, and commitment. It also shows the power of an initiative’s greatest asset—young people, themselves.

Continued support and investment, as well as an intentional focus on capacity-building, can help ensure that youth engagement initiatives continue their important efforts in improving the lives of youth.

Conclusion
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About the Finance Project

Helping leaders finance and sustain initiatives that lead to better futures for children, families and communities.

The Finance Project is an independent nonprofit research, consulting, technical assistance and training firm for public- and private-sector leaders nationwide. It specializes in helping leaders plan and implement financing and sustainability strategies for initiatives that benefit children, families and communities. Through a broad array of tools, products and services, The Finance Project helps leaders make smart investment decisions, develop sound financing strategies, and build solid partnerships. To learn more, visit http://www.financeproject.org.