Youth Lead the Way:
How Museums and Youth can Collaborate to Advance Climate Justice

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What is a YARB?

The worsening climate crisis has pushed museums to rethink their role in climate awareness, turning that awareness into action. Inspired by the lead that youth have taken in climate action, the Oregon Museum of Science and Industry (OMSI) explored a symbiotic collaboration model for museums and youth regarding climate change. The model is flexible and can work with broader themes of socioeconomic interest.

The innovative "YARB," or Youth Advisory Research Board model, combines Youth Advisory Boards and Youth Participatory Action Research.

YARBs have the potential to broaden impacts, benefitting participating youth and museums

This project employed diverse youth (ages 16-20) to work in paid positions as purveyors of climate science, to develop communication and leadership skills, and engage in timely conversations with members of the public about climate change impacts in their own communities.

YouthCARE

OMSI's first YARB (YouthCARE) worked in small groups to develop an educational tool based in personal narrative, climate science, and research as a way to raise public understanding and awareness about local climate impacts.

YouthCARE programming stats:

Summer 2021 programming:
15 youth, 20 hours/week for 10 weeks, in person
School-year 2021-22 programming:
10 (continuing) youth, 8 hours/biweekly for 28 weeks. Mix of ⅔ in person, ⅓ remote
Summer 2022 plan:
5-6 continuing youth, 14-18 hours/week for 8 weeks, 16 hrs in person, 4-8 remote

Climate Stories Created:

Youth Curated Art Show
Climate change-inspired art was gathered from 22 youth ages 8-18 and has been displayed at the museum as well as other community centers. It also featured a 3 part interview piece about international climate awareness.

Policy Formation Board Game
A board game where players cooperate to advance climate friendly policies, without being foiled by the "lobbyist".

Informational Videos
Two short informational videos were created on Urban Green Spaces and Wildfire Impacts that are used in museum educational programming.

Lessons Learned and Challenges

Lesson 1: Build Together
Programming works best if it is co-created with the youth from the beginning, regardless of how many years experience museum staff may have working with youth. Including youth voices from initial conception through to completion helps ensure that every aspect of the program is engaging, relevant, and timely.
Considering what projects within the museum youth will advise on is also very important. Projects that are in full swing and used to a familiar, cyclical working schedule can be difficult to integrate teens into for a variety of reasons: not well defined roles for youth joining midway, unfamiliarity with established staff members and professional practices, scheduling conflicts, etc.

Lesson 2: Mindfulness, Intentionality, and Explicit Expectations
For successful YARBs, all aspects of the program must be approached with responsive, explicit expectations and boundaries. For example, if the youth are expected to be available to museum staff via email, there should be a training with practice on professional email etiquette. If museum staff are expected to work with youth colleagues, they need explicit training on best practices for engaging with that age range.
These expectations should be set prior to the start of the programming, and explained early in the process. Framing a YARB as a professional experience is necessary. It will be the first professional experience for many, so these expectations should be laid out in full for the success of the overall program.

Challenges:

Communication between youth and adult staff
Many youth were not accustomed to communicating in an office-like setting, while staff had difficulties understanding that the youth's school schedule is mostly non-negotiable and difficult for contact hours, even through email.

Attrition
Youth stepped out of the program for various reasons, including moving on to college and prioritizing extracurricular activities, which reiterated the importance of setting explicit expectations.

Pandemic and staff capacity/overturn
Intermittent museum closure due to the pandemic had noticeable consequences for youth interactions with general audiences. Staff were also impacted by the increased pressure and responsibilities that rose due to staff reduction and overturn.

Empowerment Theory and Next Steps

Empowerment Theory
Empowerment Theory emerged as a theoretical framework that gives tructure to the YARB model. Empowerment Theory establishes a set of empowering conditions (such as being informed or sharing leadership) and empowered characteristics (such as influencing others or having a sense of control).
These conditions and characteristics can be analyzed at three levels: the individual, organizational, and community levels.

Buidling on Empowerment Theory, the research team of the project is constructing a modified YARB Empowerment Theory Model that includes the YARB as a sub-group that can empower itself.

Next Steps:

We plan to submit a full proposal this winter to expand on this exploratory study. The full proposal will explore the adaptability of this model in different informal education institutions, accounting for limited staff capacity by integrating YARBs with existing programming

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