

**Engaging Young People on State Service Commissions:  
Identifying Effective Practices**

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National Service Fellow

July 2002

National Service Fellowship Program

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- Learn and Serve America, which helps link community service and learning objectives for youth from kindergarten through college as well as youth in community-based organizations; and
- The National Senior Service Corps (Senior Corps), the network of programs that helps Americans age 55 and older use their skills and experience in service opportunities that address the needs of their communities. Senior Corps includes the Retired and Senior Volunteer Program (RSVP), Foster Grandparent Program, and Senior Companion Program.

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**Contract Number:** CNSHQP01138

*This material is based upon work supported by the Corporation for National and Community Service under a National Service Fellowship. Opinions and points of view expressed in this document are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official position of the Corporation for National and Community Service.*

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## Acknowledgements

The final report and accompanying companion guide are importantly informed by the insights and institutional knowledge of state service commission executive directors, chairpersons, and youth commissioners. Thank you for sharing your experiences, honesty, and valuable time to converse on the topic of youth engagement on state service commissions.

A warm thank you goes to the 2001-2002 National Service Fellows, Robin Dean, and Deena Johnson for creating space to dialogue and sharing stories of success throughout the program year.

Thanks to the Corporation and ASC staff I had the pleasure of working with this year, including Brad Lewis, Bill Ward, Jeanne Sanders, and Sara Braaf, who believe in the importance of youth voice and youth-adult partnerships.

Thank you to Johanna Brenner for guiding me in this work and linking me with Portland State University facilities and resources.

A very special thanks to Marlene Howard, Scotti Cunningham, Patricia Bollin, and Kathleen Joy for the generosity of the Oregon Commission for Voluntary Action and Service to serve as host site and provide me room to grow.

I deeply thank Lori Kajkowski for giving heartfelt and enthusiastic encouragement, creative ideas, and technical expertise.

And finally, thank you to the friends and family who affirmed the value of this work in the face of many challenges that arose throughout the year.

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## Abstract

### Engaging Young People on State Service Commissions: Identifying Effective Practices

This fellowship report and companion guide are resources to policy-makers at the Corporation for National and Community Service, staff at America's Association of State Service Commissions, and members of state service commissions to augment current levels of youth involvement and to meet the Corporation's mandate that each state engage one youth commissioner on its service commission. The methodology includes a literature review; surveys of commission executive directors, chairpersons, and youth commissioners; and in-depth interviews with selected executive directors and youth commissioners. The primary recommendations are presented for three key stakeholders.

*The guiding research questions include:*

- ◆ How are youth currently represented on state service commissions?
- ◆ What are the existing barriers that challenge youth commissioner involvement?
- ◆ What are the effective practices that commissions employ to involve young people?

Common barriers to youth involvement encountered by state commissions include 1) scheduling and youth commissioners attendance conflicts; 2) insufficient training or orientation for youth commissioners; 3) prohibitive expenses; and 4) lengthy appointment processes.

Effective practices to support youth commissioner involvement include 1) commission staff communicating consistently with the youth commissioner and their school; 2) rotating meeting times and locations while pre-paying expenses to youth commissioners; 3) providing specific training and networking opportunities; and 4) appointing more than one youth commissioner to serve on the commission.

The Corporation for National & Community Service should:

- ◆ Enforce the requirement that commissions engage at least one youth commissioner;
- ◆ Strengthen partnerships with Departments of Education and Campus Compact to create service-learning credit and serve-study positions for youth commissioners; and
- ◆ Fund future research to measure the motivations and impacts of youth commissioner involvement.

America's Association of State Service Commissions should:

- ◆ Develop curriculum on youth-adult partnerships for all cluster trainings;
- ◆ Provide technical support to help states identify potential youth commissioners; and
- ◆ Continue to offer peer exchanges for youth commissioners to share information.

State Service Commissions should:

- ◆ Ensure consistent communication with the youth commissioner and their school;
- ◆ Provide clear orientation and expectations with ongoing training opportunities; and
- ◆ Rotate meeting times and locations while pre-paying youth commissioner expenses.

# Executive Summary

## Engaging Young People on State Service Commissions: Identifying Effective Practices

### Project Purpose

The National and Community Service Trust Act of 1993, which formed the Corporation for National and Community Service, states that “an individual between the ages of 16 and 25 who is a participant or supervisor in a program” serve as a representative on each state service commission (H. Res. 2010, 1993, p.84). When I originally proposed this research topic in May 2001, 11 of 51 state service commissions (22%) reported no youth commissioner, and at the time of this report only four of 52 states, or 8 percent of all commissions, still report no youth commissioner.

This fellowship report and companion guide are resources to policy-makers at the Corporation for National and Community Service, staff at America’s Association of State Service Commissions (ASC), and members of state service commissions to augment current levels of youth commissioner involvement in service. The report and guide are intended to support state service commissions in meeting the Corporation’s mandate that each state engage at least one 16- to 25-year old individual on its service commission.

My interest in identifying effective practices of state service commissions to involve young people as commissioners grew out of my own experience as a former youth commissioner. Although much literature documented how to support young people in decision-making roles, there was little documentation on how to most effectively engage youth on state commissions specifically. Consequently, I saw a need to survey state commissions and document both the challenges they face, and effective practices they employ, to involve young people as commissioners. The results that are discussed in-depth in the final report and companion guide are summarized below.

#### The primary research questions included:

- ◆ How are youth currently represented on state service commissions?
- ◆ What are the existing barriers that challenge youth commissioner involvement?
- ◆ What are the effective practices that commissions employ to involve young people?

#### The anticipated outcomes were the following:

- ◆ State service commissions would meet a range of youth commissioner involvement measures; and
- ◆ State service commissions would demonstrate a relationship between youth commissioner involvement and the number and kind of supports they provide to youth commissioners.

The evaluation of the level of youth engagement attributed to a particular commission was based on several factors that describe the involvement of the youth commissioner and the support provided to the youth commissioner by the commission. The lack of

documentation on what specifically defines “youth involvement” made it necessary to create measurements of the components that collectively describe youth involvement. These measurements were defined to specifically relate to young people and state service commissions and were identified through conversations with Corporation, ASC, and commission staff. Commission support components reflect the most common, generalized practices to engage young people as volunteers and decision-makers. These indicators were derived through my review of the literature and were adapted to apply specifically to state commissions.

From these indicators I developed broad questions, as well as the measurements for engagement. The indicators for youth commissioner involvement included the number of youth commissioners appointed, the percentage of meetings with a youth commissioner present, the way youth commissioners participate in meetings, the other kinds of commission-related activities the youth commissioner is involved in, and the kinds of roles the youth commissioner identifies with on the commission.

The indicators for commission support to youth commissioners included the frequency of communication between youth commissioners and other commissioners or staff, the kinds of training and technical assistance provided to the youth commissioner, and the other kinds of accommodations the commission provides the youth commissioner. The survey questions then flowed from these indicators and included:

#### *Youth Commissioner Involvement*

- ◆ How many youth commissioners are appointed to the commission?
- ◆ What percent of commission meetings has a youth commissioner present?
- ◆ How does the youth commissioner participate in commission meetings (e.g. contribute to discussion, suggest policy, advocate for youth programs)?
- ◆ How many and what other commission-related activities does the youth commissioner participate in each year, exclusive of meetings (e.g. participate in state board member training, participate in national service day projects, attend national conferences)?
- ◆ How many and what kinds of roles does the youth commissioner identify with throughout the year (e.g. voting member, sub-committee member, site visitor)?

#### *Support to Youth Commissioners*

- ◆ How often do commission staff, fellow commissioners, and the youth commissioner communicate with one another?
- ◆ How many and what kinds of training and technical assistance opportunities does the commission offer the youth commissioner (e.g. orientation to the commission and Corporation, youth-adult partnerships training, public speaking training)?
- ◆ How many and what kinds of specific accommodations does the commission provide the youth commissioner (e.g. hold meetings on evenings or weekends, rotate locations of meetings, communicate with the youth commissioner’s school regarding commission commitments)?

## Methodology

The methodological approach included an extensive review of the literature, paper-and-pencil surveys, and in-depth interviews. First, I reviewed a body of research detailing the benefits of, barriers to, and effective practices that sustain youth involvement within community-based organizations, boards of directors, and city commissions.

Second, I administered mail-in surveys to all state service commission executive directors (n=51), commission chairpersons (n=52), and youth commissioners (n=61) nationwide. Respondents were asked to identify how youth commissioners are involved on the commission, barriers to youth involvement on the commission they have encountered, and what the commission does to support the youth commissioner. I received survey responses from 44 executive directors (86%), 33 commission chairpersons (63%), and 46 youth commissioners (75%). The overall response rate was 74 percent for all groups. Data were collected from January 4<sup>th</sup> through March 1<sup>st</sup>, 2002 and were analyzed with SPSS 9.0 statistical analysis software. I analyzed the data by tabulating frequencies of responses across all groups. Looking at totals and percentages, I examined the degree of importance of variables across all commissions and differences in perceptions among categories of respondents.

Next, I developed criteria and set standards for “High Youth Engagement (HYE) commissions.” These criteria, which included both levels of youth involvement on state commissions and levels of support to those youth, were based on conversations with commission and ASC staff. They were further defined as I reviewed the existing literature on youth involvement as volunteers and with boards of directors.

I limited the pool of possible HYE commissions to those where at least three respondents from the state completed their survey. This would allow me to compare the responses between multiple respondents and groups to eliminate commissions in which a disparity between respondents and among groups was evident. Then I looked at the commissions that met the HYE youth involvement criteria and compared them against the HYE support indicators to examine the relationships that emerged.

To meet the standard to qualify as a High Youth Engagement commission, at least three respondents from a commission had to say that the commission met at least three of the four HYE involvement criteria and at least two of the three HYE support criteria outlined below.

### *HYE Involvement Criteria:*

- ◆ One or more youth commissioners attend 75 percent or more commission meetings each year;
- ◆ One or more youth commissioners participate in meetings in at least three ways;
- ◆ One or more youth commissioners participate in at least three other instances of commission-related activities exclusive of meetings; and
- ◆ One or more youth commissioners occupy three or more roles on the commission.

*HYE Support Criteria:*

- ◆ One or more youth commissioners communicate with commission staff or fellow commissioners on a monthly basis or more often;
- ◆ The commission offers at least three training and technical assistance opportunities to youth commissioners; and
- ◆ The commission provides at least three accommodations to support the work of the youth commissioner.

Thirteen of 51 state service commissions (25%) met the criteria for High Youth Engagement commissions. I then compared responses of these commissions against responses of other commissions. I also conducted linear and multiple regression analyses to compare responses of HYE commissions against each other to examine the relationship of various supports to youth involvement indicators. I found that High Youth Engagement commissions have specific support characteristics that correlate with higher levels of youth involvement.

After analyzing the survey responses, I conducted in-depth telephone interviews from March 19<sup>th</sup> through April 5<sup>th</sup>, 2002 with seven executive directors and six youth commissioners to provide anecdotal evidence to support the survey findings. These individuals were selected from a pool of respondents who indicated on their survey they would be willing to participate in a telephone interview. The interviewees were selected to reflect gender and geographic diversity.

The interviews were conducted to elicit specific examples of youth involvement and support offered by High Youth Engagement commissions, and to identify effective practices. It was important to include representatives from states not identified as HYE commissions to gain additional insights to specific challenges that commissions experienced. Five of the seven executive directors and five of the six youth commissioners came from HYE commissions while the remaining executive directors and youth commissioner came from other commissions.

## **Discussion of Data Analysis & Key Findings**

Across all commissions, I encountered a number of effective practices, as well as challenges.

*Identified effective practices to support youth commissioner involvement include:*

- ◆ Ensuring commission staff communicate consistently with the youth commissioner and their school;
- ◆ Offering accommodations such as rotating meeting times and locations and making advance payment arrangements for costs to youth commissioners;
- ◆ Providing training opportunities, such as orientation to the commission and Corporation, youth-adult partnerships, public speaking, and leadership development;
- ◆ Creating opportunities for youth commissioners to network with other commissioners at the state and national levels; and
- ◆ Appointing more than one youth commissioner to serve on the commission.

*The most common challenges to youth involvement include:*

- ◆ Conflicts between commission meetings and youth commissioner school schedules;
- ◆ Insufficient youth commissioner training or orientation to the commission;
- ◆ Prohibitive expenses for youth commissioners to work on a reimbursement basis; and
- ◆ Lengthy processes to appoint youth commissioners.

## **Implications & Recommendations**

Based the research, the following are recommendations to better engage young people on state service commissions, which are presented for three key stakeholders: the Corporation, ASC, and state service commissions.

The Corporation for National & Community Service should:

- ◆ Enforce the requirement that commissions engage at least one 16- to 25- year old individual with experience in a national service or service-learning program;
- ◆ Strengthen partnerships with Departments of Education and Campus Compact to create formal service-learning credits and serve-study positions for youth commissioners;
- ◆ Fund additional research to measure the motivations of youth commissioners and impacts of their involvement;
- ◆ Engage youth commissioners as trainers, presenters, grant reviewers, and evaluators at all opportunities; and
- ◆ Add a second youth board member to the Corporation Board of Directors.

America's Association of State Service Commissions should:

- ◆ Develop curriculum on youth-adult partnerships and the importance of youth voice for all cluster trainings;
- ◆ Provide technical support to help states identify potential youth commissioners;
- ◆ Continue to offer and promote peer-to-peer exchange opportunities for youth commissioners to share information;
- ◆ Assist individual states to develop orientation materials and position descriptions for youth commissioners; and
- ◆ Engage youth commissioners as trainers, presenters, grant reviewers, and evaluators at all opportunities.

State Service Commissions should:

- ◆ Ensure commission staff develop consistent communication with the youth commissioner and their school, if applicable;
- ◆ Provide clear orientation, ongoing training or development opportunities, and well-articulated expectations to youth commissioners;
- ◆ Rotate meeting times and locations to accommodate youth commissioners' schedules while pre-paying youth commissioner expenses;
- ◆ Engage youth commissioners as trainers, presenters, grant reviewers, and evaluators; and
- ◆ Voluntarily add at least a second youth commissioner to avoid marginalization.

SEC. 178. STATE COMMISSIONS ON NATIONAL AND COMMUNITY SERVICE.  
(c) COMPOSITION AND MEMBERSHIP

1) REQUIRED MEMBERS - The State Commission for a State shall include as voting members at least one of each of the following individuals...

**(H) An individual between the ages of 16 and 25 who is a participant or supervisor in a program. ...**

*National and Community Service Trust Act of 1993 (H.R. 2010, 1993, p.84).*

## Introduction

When I originally proposed this research topic in May 2001, 11 of 51 state service commissions (22%) reported no youth commissioner, and at the time of this report only four of 52 states, or 8 percent of all commissions still report no youth commissioner.

It is through my own experience as a former youth commissioner that I became interested in exploring effective practices and barriers to young people's participation on state service commissions. Only two of the 50 commissioners present at the Pacific Cluster commissioner leadership training held in San Diego, California in March 2001 were youth commissioners. While I felt privileged to be one of the two attending, I was also disturbed at the low level of youth participation. At the time, I still considered myself new to commission work, as I had been appointed to the Oregon Commission for Voluntary Action and Service only six months before, and had attended only one meeting. I wondered if few young people were interested in state commission work or were they simply unable to attend? What did others think of their commission experience? What might we be able to learn from one another?

Since I originally proposed this project in May 2001, several circumstances have changed.

- ◆ The first youth commissioner training at the National Community Service Conference took place in Minneapolis in June 2001 with approximately 25 participants, launching a national youth commissioner movement to further the goals of the Corporation through increased levels and documentation of youth commissioner activities nationwide.
- ◆ Youth commissioners convened again in August 2001 in Washington, D.C. to draft a "Call to Action," which was presented at the 2001 national meeting for executive directors of state service commissions. The Call to Action has since undergone several revisions and stands as a living document from which youth commissioners have drawn, to support ongoing, facilitated work groups around the Call to Action's focus areas (Anwar et al., 2002).

- ◆ America's Association of State Service Commissions (ASC) has brought two youth commissioners to its Board of Directors and has facilitated peer-to-peer exchanges among youth commissioners to share information and effective practices with one another.
- ◆ Out of 60 commissioners present at the March 2002 Pacific Cluster commissioner leadership training in San Diego, California, seven were youth commissioners.
- ◆ The second youth commissioner training at the National Community Service Conference took place in Salt Lake City in June 2002, involving 35 youth commissioners in dialogue and training to become more active participants and leaders on state service commissions.
- ◆ Youth commissioners have arranged a formal communication structure through elected cluster leaders.

Clearly, within a year's time many internal improvements have been made to promote the involvement of young people on state service commissions. In addition, the United States has survived the events of September 11<sup>th</sup> and experienced a resurgence of national service and volunteerism, due in part to President George W. Bush's "Call to Service." With a greater focus on national service in general, it comes as no surprise that state service commissions have become stronger, more visible models for youth engagement. My hope is that this project contributes to and builds on the existing body of knowledge that supports the institutionalization of systems and attitudes within state commissions to better support the work of youth commissioners. In turn, I envision that the Corporation for National and Community Service ("CNCS" or "Corporation") and state service commissions ("state commissions" or "commissions") exercise an active commitment to foster youth voice in governance roles.

Although existing literature cites the benefits of youth involvement and effective practices to support young people in decision-making roles, I found little documentation on how to effectively engage youth on state commissions specifically. Depending on the research, "youth" includes anyone between the ages of 12 and 29. But despite the broad definition of young people in the research, the results are clear: young people benefit from positive youth development opportunities such as being involved in decision-making and leadership roles. New research is also emerging, which documents the positive impact on adults, organizations, and communities when young people are at the table in governance roles.

However, there are significant barriers as well. I personally encountered a number of challenges to my involvement as a youth commissioner, including financial issues and a lack of training on the functioning of a commission. It was evident that my situation was not an isolated occurrence, when at the time I proposed this project, 22 percent of all state service commissions had no youth commissioner appointments, despite the benefits and legal requirement to involve youth. Consequently, I saw a need to examine the current representation of youth on state service commissions; existing barriers that challenge youth commissioner involvement; and effective practices that commissions employ to support the involvement of young people.

The methodology includes an extensive review of the literature, paper-and-pencil surveys, and in-depth telephone interviews. First, I reviewed a body of research detailing the benefits of, barriers to, and effective practices that support youth involvement within community-based organizations, boards of directors, and city commissions. Next, I surveyed all state service commission executive directors, chairpersons, and youth commissioners. Lastly, I interviewed a select number of executive directors and youth commissioners to provide anecdotal evidence to support the survey findings. Based on this work I developed two products: this report and a companion guide, that offer suggestions and identify effective practices for more fully engaging young people on state service commissions nationwide.

This fellowship report and companion guide are resources to policy-makers at the Corporation for National and Community Service, staff at America's Association of State Service Commissions, state service commission members, and young people who wish to augment current levels of youth commissioner involvement. The products are intended to support state service commissions in meeting the Corporation's mandate that each state engage at least one 16- to 25-year old individual on its service commission.

## **Why Involve Youth? What the Literature Says**

### **Youth Voice: Benefits to Society**

Why is it important for state service commissions to sustain youth involvement in decision-making? State commissions provide ample opportunities to engage young people in partnership with adults as resources, organizers, presenters, trainers, evaluators, and decision-makers to create community change. In doing so, state service commissions model community youth development opportunities to other organizations, and demonstrate a commitment to youth within national service structures.

Not only does the Corporation mandate that each commission ensure the participation of a 16- to 25-year old, but research reveals a more compelling rationale for commissions to fulfill this requirement. Hoover and Weisenbach assert that "in order for young people to truly experience social justice, we must create a society in which young people are full citizens, empowered to contribute ideas and make decisions" (1999, ¶ 1). Checkoway echoes this sentiment when he observes that youth are "competent citizens who have a right to participate and a responsibility to serve the community" (1996, p.1). He suggests that "youth participation can lead to...strengthening social responsibility and long-term civic values" (Checkoway, 1996, p.3). These perspectives identify the overarching need to involve young people as decision-makers in connection with larger issues of civil rights and civic engagement.

Others have documented more specific benefits to society from engaging young people in governance. These benefits are classified into three categories: benefits to youth, benefits to adults, and benefits to organizations.

First, the young people involved as decision-makers are positively affected. Newsome and Scalera describe benefits identified by young people who served on city commissions and nonprofit boards of directors in the San Francisco Bay Area. Young people themselves identify personal outcomes such as:

...learning a great deal and making strong connections with other leaders in the community. They learned about the organizations they served, the community, and nonprofit management. Growing as individuals, a number of youth noted feeling more comfortable speaking up, and being challenged to take responsibility for their decisions as a board member when amongst their peers (2001, p.8).

Similarly, the Innovation Center for Community and Youth Development (Innovation Center) posits that:

Youth involvement as leaders in civic activism [is] a forceful, dynamic strategy that recognizes that young people are capable of addressing societal problems and concerns and provides a forum for them to do so. In the process, young people acquire the core skills and competencies that prepare them to be community leaders now and in the future (p.3).

The Innovation Center also notes that through this activism, “young people contribute meaningfully as they participate in community building, work toward social change, and apply their leadership skills, while at the same time gaining access to the services, supports, and opportunities that facilitate their own development” (p.4). The young people involved can benefit from participating in leadership roles on boards or commissions in governance roles. Being active in decision-making can lead to personal growth, allow opportunities to explore career choices, or provide experience in professional settings. Additionally, “youth...stated that being on a board was a life changing experience, a great opportunity, a way to really be involved in their community, to have a voice, and to be empowered” (Newsome & Scalera, 2001, p.15).

Second, young people positively affect adults through collaborative decision-making opportunities. Zeldin, McDaniel, Topitzes, and Calvert assert that adults “witness the competence of youth, and perceive them as critical to organizational improvement; enhance their commitment to the organization; feel more effective and competent in working with youth; and develop a stronger sense of community connectedness” (2000, pp.31-34). Newsome and Scalera found similar areas of impact where board members, city commission members and staff identified that “youth provide energy, excitement,

creativity, and new perspectives, as well as help to keep the governing body focused on the mission of the organization” (2001, p.15). Youth then, play an important role in decision-making by positively affecting the adults with whom they work.

Third, Zeldin, et al. also identify that youth positively influence the organizations involved as well:

Youth involvement becomes the organizational expectation. Young people clarify the organization’s mission. Organizations become more connected and responsive to youth in the community. Organizations place greater value on inclusivity and representation...and organizations are more appealing to potential funders (2000, pp.37-42).

Newsome and Scalera found similar outcomes among the organizations they surveyed, and add that “young people have often been the most dedicated and hard working volunteers” (2001, p.9). These findings are corroborated by other studies and surveys of research including those conducted by Carstaphen, 2001; Hughes & Curnan, 2000; Irby, Ferber, & Pittman, 2001; Justinianno & Scherer, 2001; Kurkoski, Markendorf & Straw, 1997; Michigan Community Service Commission (MCSC), 1996; Parker, 1999; and Young & Sazama, 1999.

## **Youth Development: Benefits to Youth & Communities**

Over the past three decades, notions of young people as active participants within organizations and employing “youth development” or “positive youth development” as a theoretical framework, has undergone a series of revisions. In the mid-1970s, the National Commission on Resources for Youth defined youth participation as:

...the involving of youth in responsible, challenging action that meets genuine needs, with opportunities for planning and/or decision-making affecting others in an activity whose impact or consequence is extended to others.... Other desirable features of youth participation are providing for critical reflection on the participatory activity and the opportunity for group effort toward a common goal (1974, p.25).

Around the same time, the Youth Development and Delinquency Prevention Administration in the 1970s outlined the process of defining a youth development model

to include “a sense of competency, a sense of usefulness, a sense of belonging, and a sense of power or potency” (Obtained from Hahn & Raley, 1999, pp.4-5). Three decades ago, the critical elements of a youth development approach included involving young people in a way that was deemed important and valuable to the young person and the organization.

Currently, the National Youth Development Information Center defines youth development as a “process which prepares young people to meet the challenges of adolescence and adulthood through a coordinated, progressive series of activities and experiences which help them to become socially [and] morally...competent” (2000, p.1). Similarly, the National Collaboration for Youth (NCY) “promotes a focus on positive youth development” which “embodies a wide array of programs” including leadership development...community service, civic participation...and youth-led programs” (2001, p.1). The shift here lies in the focus on long-term investment in cultivating civic engagement and preparation of young people as active social participants.

The positive youth development approach arose from the movement that viewed young people as social actors, rather than solely as recipients of social services. A youth development approach focuses on the strengths that young people bring to the community as resources, which contrasts with deficit-based models that focus singularly or primarily on youth problems. As a result, youth development programs proactively prepare young people to avoid “high-risk, unhealthy behaviors that can delay or derail positive development” (NCY, 2001, p.1). The Search Institute details a strengths-based approach through the framework of 40 developmental assets, which are widely utilized by a range of youth-focused and –serving organizations.

More recently, practitioners and academics have defined another related approach, building on components of a youth development framework. Irby, Ferber, and Pittman describe the National Network for Youth’s “use of the term ‘community youth development’ to refer to this shift in youth programming that emphasizes *young people and adults* [emphasis added] working together to change their communities.” (2001, p.2). Hughes and Curnan outline the components of community youth development as:

...a new philosophical, sociological, and educational movement which harnesses the power of youth to affect community development and, similarly, engages communities to embrace their role in the development of youth.... It is a process of youth and adults working in partnership to create just, safe, and healthy communities (2000, p.1).

Community youth development thus adds another dimension to a positive youth development framework by specifically addressing the importance of youth-adult partnerships in the process of engaging young people in community and leadership roles.

Other terms that have emerged from these approaches include “youth action,” “youth as resources,” “youth participation,” “youth engagement,” “youth voice,” “youth inclusion,” “youth organizing,” “youth-as-partners,” “youth infusion,” “youth on board,” and “youth governance” (Checkoway, 1996; Carstaphen, 2001; Forum for Youth Investment [FYI], 2000b; Education Commission of the States [ECS], 2002; Irby, et al., 2001; Justinianno & Scherer, 2001; and Zeldin et al., 2000). These terms describe forms of youth involvement within programs, organizations, and communities that range from general to specific. The definitions overlap with converging themes on the extent and nature of youth involvement as active participants.

Within the context of this study however, “youth governance” is the most important concept to clarify in the discussion of effective practices to engage young people on state service commissions. Zeldin, et al. propose that “youth governance...refers to those situations where youth work – often in partnership with adults – to set the overall policy direction of organizations, institutions, and coalitions” (2000, p.3). More specifically, Justinianno and Scherer offer that “youth governance then, means that young people are equal stakeholders in decisions related to budget, staff, and strategic planning of an organization. This is also called ‘youth on board’” (2001, p.27).

Other activities in which youth commissioners may be involved are outlined in Howe’s summary of board member responsibilities such as “attending meetings regularly, defining the mission and participating in strategic planning, evaluating and hiring the CEO or Executive Director, assuring financial responsibility, overseeing and evaluating programs and staff, fundraising, and assuring the board fulfills its responsibilities and maintains effective organization” (1995, p.24). While these are general board member responsibilities, they also apply to the work of commissions, although the specific responsibilities of commissions may vary within each state.

## **Youth Voice & Development: Benefits to State Commissions**

State service commissions that involve young people as equal stakeholders and decision-makers will accordingly benefit themselves, youth commissioners, fellow commissioners, and staff, while they fulfill the Corporation mandate. Further, these commissions are better equipped to serve the interests of their state and meet Corporation standards in the process of continued devolution.

The extent to which this participation affects all involved, however, depends largely on the type and magnitude of barriers that block young people’s participation, as well as the strength of the support systems and attitudes that encourage youth engagement. If approached strategically, youth and adults involved on state service commissions can benefit tremendously when young people assume leadership roles, and in turn, affect the quality of national service programs, community service, and volunteerism in general. Not only will these changes be felt immediately within the lives of individuals, but also over the long term, as youth carry with them the skills developed and refined through their experiences as young leaders.

# How to Involve Youth: What the Literature Says

## Identifying the Challenges

Researchers have already identified common barriers that present challenges to young peoples' involvement in decision-making and governance. Youth-adult partnerships in decision-making can be negatively impacted by attitudinal barriers and stereotypes, insufficient orientation and training, scheduling conflicts, and other logistical challenges.

Barry Checkoway, a leading researcher on and strong advocate for youth-adult partnerships describes the concept of "adultism [as] all of the behaviors and attitudes that flow from the assumption that adults are better than young people, and are entitled to act upon young people in many ways without their agreement" (1996, p.13). Pittman, et al. suggest that "paternalism plays a large role in restricting participation by youth" and acts as the primary barrier to youth's involvement in decision-making (2001, p.2). Newsome and Scalera note that they found that the "youth interviewed mentioned difficulties around power dynamics and inequalities, feeling disconnected, alienated, silenced, unsupported, under-appreciated, disrespected, and unheard" (2001, p.9). Others have also noted that youth-adult partnerships and engaging youth in decision-making rely on sharing power between the youth and adults involved (Justinianno & Scherer, 2001; Young & Sazama, 1999; and Zeldin, et al., 2000).

One of the challenges cited most frequently in the research by youth and adults alike, is the lack of thorough orientation and training for youth who are new to decision-making in partnership with adults. Princeton Survey Research Associates (PSRA) found that "young people are negatively affected when leaders do not clearly communicate their expectations" (1998, p.18). Newsome and Scalera point out that the young people they surveyed:

...needed a more thorough orientation to their organizations and boards, and a far more detailed explanation of board and board members' roles and responsibilities.

Most notably, the overriding concern expressed by adult board members and executive directors was that, by and large, they were unable to provide adequate training for youth – or adult – board members (2001, p.9).

Another challenge described in much of the research are scheduling conflicts with youth participants in decision-making. Studies indicate that scheduling conflicts arise from two sources: young peoples' lack of time in general (Bernard; Newsome & Scalera, 2001; PSRA, 1994; Parker, 1998 & 1999) and the resistance of the organizational body to be more flexible in scheduling meetings at times typically more convenient for youth (Hoover & Weisenbach, 1999; Kurkoski, et al., 1997; and MCSC, 1996).

Finally, logistical challenges act as barriers to young people's involvement in decision-making. These include transportation issues (Parker, 1999) and young peoples' restricted access to resources as they generally have "fewer resources than do their adult counterparts" (Checkoway, 1996, p.12). In general, previous research points to areas that challenge the involvement of young people as: adults' negative attitudes toward youth; lack of orientation and training for young people; scheduling conflicts with school terms; transportation to meetings; and prohibitive expenses to young people on limited budgets.

## **What Works? Identifying Effective Practices**

A significant body of existing research has documented effective practices to involve young people in decision-making, particularly within youth-serving organizations and programs. The components that create meaningful opportunities for youth to be involved in decision-making are consistent across studies. Although some of the research draws from the examination of youth and volunteerism in general, similar practices are identified in the research that focus more specifically on youth and boards of directors.

Zeldin, et al. identify six conditions for organizational change to support youth infusion and the role of young people in governance:

The Board of Directors is committed to youth governance and entrepreneurial decision-making. Adult leaders strongly advocate for including young people in decision-making roles. Youth provide pressure and support for increasing youth participation and governance. Adults need a variety of experiences with youth.

Organizations provide support for youth to advance through a variety of decision-making opportunities. Organizations involve older youth in governance positions early on in the organizational change process (pp.45-48, 2000).

Mason and Goll describe additional areas of focus when thinking about engaging young people in decision-making. They indicate they would "place a much greater emphasis on training and preparation of youth to be involved, which is essential for them to have both the skills and confidence to succeed" and "that more attention should be paid to the challenges of developing partnerships between youth and adults...where the adults are not prepared to work with youth" (p.49-50, 2000).

Based on their research with San Francisco-based boards of directors and commissions, Newsome and Scalera also find that:

Young people should be selected carefully, and informed. Members must be willing and have an interest in learning about the organization. Both adult board members and new youth members should be very clear as to why they are coming together, the purpose of having youth on the board of directors or commission, and the roles of all the members. Young people should also be fully informed of the nature of the board or commission so they can determine their interest level. Appropriate training and mentoring should be provided to ensure their active participation. Youth should have equal voting rights. Design youth participation so that at least two young people serve on the board or commission. Get youth involved in committees as this is often where the nitty-gritty happens and there is more room to learn and try (2001, p.13).

Similarly, Justinianno and Scherer (2001) provide an array of practices that have proven effective in engaging youth in decision-making within service-learning programs. These include identifying motivation for involving youth, making structural changes, identifying additional resources, providing clear expectations and roles, providing training and orientation, constructing meetings and work differently, providing ongoing support, and engaging more than one youth at a time (pp.27-28).

Others have found similar practices effective in engaging young people in leadership positions as volunteers in general. They reinforce important factors to support the involvement of youth within community-based organizations, that are also valid considerations in discussions of infusing youth voice within state service commissions. Other issues that have not been mentioned above, include offering creative forms of learning or structuring meetings (James, 1997; and Lesko & Tsourounis, 1998); communicating regularly with the young person's parents or guardians (James, 1999); including time for reflection for the young person on their experience (NCY, 2001); explicitly committing to working with diverse groups in general (NCY, 2001); and recognizing youth for their work and participation (Advertising Council, 2000; McLaughlin, 1999).

Across the research, the most common factors to genuinely involve young people in decision-making, however, focus on the significance of:

- ◆ Articulating high standards and clear expectations or involvement (Bernard; Carstaphen, 2001; Checkoway, 1996; ECS, 2001; James, 1997 & 1999; Justinianno & Scherer, 2001; Kurkoski, et al., 1997; NCY, 2001; and Young & Sazama, 1999);
- ◆ Offering opportunities to cultivate personal relationships and connections between youth and adults (Bernard; Carstaphen, 2001; Checkoway, 1996; ECS, 2001; James, 1997 & 1999; Mason & Goll, 2000; Young & Sazama, 1999; and Zeldin, et al. 2000);
- ◆ Providing sufficient orientation and training (Bernard; Carstaphen, 2001; Hoover & Weisenbach, 1999; James, 1998; Justinianno & Scherer, 2001; Kurkowski, et al., 1997; Mason & Goll, 2000; NCY, 2001; Young & Sazama, 1999; and Zeldin, et al., 2000); and
- ◆ Ensuring flexibility in meeting times, locations, transportation, and other logistics (Bernard; Carstaphen, 2001; Kurkoski, et al., 1997; Parker, 1998; Young & Sazama, 1999; and Zeldin et al., 2000).

Bernard, Young, and Sazama (1999) also identify effective practices for young people. They urge young people to ask questions, be confident, identify a mentor, show up to meetings, and continually find new ways to be involved. These practices help ensure that the involvement of youth in decision-making remains in partnership with adults who can provide the systemic supports mentioned above. For the purposes of this report, however, I will focus on challenges presented, and supports provided, by commissions and adult service partners, rather than the individual, characteristic traits of youth commissioners.

## Methodology

After reviewing a body of research detailing the benefits of, barriers to, and supports to promote youth involvement in decision-making within community-based organizations and boards of directors, I developed surveys based on the existing research and recommendations of Corporation, ASC, and commission staff. The purpose of the surveys was to gather information on the current nature and extent of youth involvement on state service commissions. I also conducted 13 follow-up, telephone interviews provide anecdotal evidence to support the survey findings.

*The primary research questions included:*

- ◆ How are youth currently represented on state service commissions?
- ◆ What are the existing barriers that challenge youth commissioner involvement?
- ◆ What are the effective practices that commissions employ to involve young people?

*The anticipated outcomes were the following:*

- ◆ State service commissions would meet a range of youth commissioner involvement standards; and
- ◆ State service commissions would demonstrate a relationship between youth commissioner involvement and the number and kind of supports they provide to youth commissioners.

## **Mail-in Surveys**

First, I compiled an updated mailing list of state service commission executive directors, commission chairpersons, and youth commissioners based on existing contact information obtained from ASC, the Corporation, youth commissioner cluster leaders, and executive directors through a survey pre-notification letter. I then mailed a survey to all individuals within the three respondent groups, which included 51 state service commission executive directors, 52 chairpersons, and 61 youth commissioners, that were identified at the time of distribution for a total of 164 potential respondents.

I chose to survey executive directors and youth commissioners because of their direct experience with youth involvement on state service commissions. Based on the recommendations of Corporation and ASC staff, commission chairpersons were included as a third survey group to provide an additional perspective on youth participation on state commissions. I included chairpersons as they were the next most identifiable group based on available mailing list information for commission members nationwide.

At the time of the survey, 51 state service commissions existed, which included all 50 states, the District of Columbia, American Samoa, and Puerto Rico, but excluded the Dakotas. Since the distribution of the surveys, another commission was created, bringing the total number of state service commissions to 52.

I employed aspects of the Total Design Method, detailed by researcher Don Dillman (1978), which included three separate survey distributions: an initial mailing with a postcard reminder, and two follow-up mailings to non-respondents. I asked 51 executive directors to respond to a 25-question survey, 52 commission chairpersons to respond to a 23-question survey, and 61 youth commissioners to respond to a 57-question survey. The executive director and commission chairperson surveys were nearly identical, requesting similar kinds of information. They were asked to comment on the type and extent of youth commissioner involvement, as well as the challenges they encounter and effective practices they foster to involve young people. The youth commissioner survey asked respondents to provide information about the type and extent of activities they participate in as youth commissioners. Youth commissioners were also asked to reflect on their experience through the use of a 4-point Likert scale, measuring if they “strongly disagree,” “disagree,” “agree,” or “strongly agree” with statements measuring satisfaction with their experience, for example.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Please refer to Appendix 1 to view the survey instruments in their entirety.

The evaluation of the level of youth engagement attributed to a particular commission was based on several factors that describe the involvement of the youth commissioner and the support provided to the youth commissioner by the commission. The lack of documentation on what specifically defines “youth involvement” made it necessary to create measurements of the components that collectively describe youth involvement. These measurements were defined to specifically relate to young people and state service commissions and were identified through conversations with Corporation, ASC, and commission staff. Commission support components reflect the most common, generalized practices to engage young people as volunteers and decision-makers. These indicators were derived through my review of the literature and were adapted to apply specifically to state commissions.

From these indicators, I developed broad questions, as well as the measurements for engagement. The indicators for youth commissioner involvement included the number of youth commissioners appointed, the percentage of meetings with a youth commissioner present, the way youth commissioners participate in meetings, the other kinds of commission-related activities the youth commissioner is involved in, and the kinds of roles the youth commissioner identifies with on the commission. The indicators for commission support to youth commissioners included the frequency of communication between youth commissioners and other commissioners or staff, the kinds of training and technical assistance provided to the youth commissioner, and the other kinds of accommodations the commission provides the youth commissioner. The survey questions then flowed from these indicators and included:

#### *Youth Commissioner Involvement*

- ◆ How many youth commissioners are appointed to the commission?
- ◆ What percent of commission meetings has a youth commissioner present?
- ◆ How does the youth commissioner participate in commission meetings (e.g. contribute to discussion, suggest policy, advocate for youth programs)?
- ◆ How many and what other commission-related activities does the youth commissioner participate in, exclusive of meetings (e.g. participate in state board member training, participate in national service day projects, attend national conferences)?
- ◆ How many and what kinds of roles does the youth commissioner identify with (e.g. voting member, sub-committee member, site visitor)?

#### *Support to Youth Commissioners*

- ◆ How often do commission staff, fellow commissioners, and the youth commissioner communicate with one another?
- ◆ How many and what kinds of training and technical assistance opportunities does the commission offer the youth commissioner (e.g. orientation to the commission and Corporation, youth-adult partnerships training, public speaking training)?
- ◆ How many and what kinds of specific accommodations does the commission provide the youth commissioner (e.g. hold meetings on evenings or weekends, rotate locations of meetings, communicate with the youth commissioner’s school regarding commission commitments)?

Of the 164 combined number of potential respondents, 122 or 74 percent completed the survey. Executive directors represented the highest responding group with 44 of 51 completing the survey. Thirty-three of 52 commission chairpersons and 46 of 61 youth commissioners ultimately completed their surveys. The corresponding response rates according to population group are provided in Table 1 below.

Table 1:

<b>Response Rates Among Survey Groups</b>	<b><i>Response Rate</i></b>
<i>Executive directors</i>	86%
<i>Chairpersons</i>	63%
<i>Youth commissioners</i>	75%

Despite efforts to maintain an updated mailing lists, 5 (10%) commission chairpersons and 5 (8%) youth commissioners were unreachable due to incorrect contact information. Nonetheless, I was extremely pleased with the relatively high response rates across all population groups.

Data were collected from January 4<sup>th</sup> through March 1<sup>st</sup>, 2002 and were analyzed with SPSS 9.0 statistical analysis software. Because the entire populations of each group were included in the research sample, the likelihood or probability of error cannot be estimated. Although the accuracy or inaccuracy of the results obtained cannot be determined, the data should be considered to represent the views of the majority of commission executive directors, chairpersons, and youth commissioners, based on the relatively high response rates for all groups.

Forty-eight (94%) states were represented through the responses received. I obtained at least one response from every state except Delaware, Georgia, and New Jersey. As shown in Table 2, the majority of commissions were represented by responses from three or more individuals.

Table 2:

<b>Total Number of Survey Respondents Per Commission</b>	<b><i>Number of Commissions (n=51)</i></b>
<i>0 Survey respondents</i>	3
<i>1 Survey respondent</i>	10
<i>2 Survey respondents</i>	9
<i>3 Survey respondents</i>	22
<i>4 Survey respondents</i>	7

Of the state commissions that were represented in the survey findings, ten states showed responses from only one individual. Fourteen states showed responses from two survey population groups, and another 25 states showed responses from all three surveyed groups (executive directors, chairpersons, and youth commissioners).

I analyzed the data by tabulating frequencies of responses across all groups. Looking at totals and percentages, I examined the degree of importance of variables across all commissions and differences in perceptions among categories of respondents.

Next, I developed criteria and set standards for “High Youth Engagement (HYE) commissions.” These criteria, which included both levels of youth involvement on state commissions and levels of support to those youth, were based on conversations with commission and ASC staff. They were further defined as I reviewed the existing literature on youth involvement as volunteers and with boards of directors.

I limited the pool of possible HYE commissions to those where at least three respondents from the state completed their survey. This would allow me to compare the responses between multiple respondents and groups to eliminate commissions in which a disparity between respondents and among groups was evident. Then I looked at the commissions that met the HYE youth involvement criteria and compared them against the HYE support indicators to examine the relationships that emerged.

To meet the standard to qualify as a High Youth Engagement commission, at least three respondents from a commission had to say that the commission met at least three of the four HYE involvement criteria and at least two of the three HYE support criteria outlined below.

*HYE Youth Involvement Criteria:*

- ◆ One or more youth commissioners attend 75 percent or more commission meetings each year;
- ◆ One or more youth commissioners participate in meetings in at least three ways;
- ◆ One or more youth commissioners participate in at least three other instances of commission-related activities exclusive of meetings; and
- ◆ One or more youth commissioners occupy three or more roles on the commission.

*HYE Support Criteria:*

- ◆ One or more youth commissioners communicate with commission staff or fellow commissioners on a monthly basis or more often;
- ◆ The commission offers at least three training and technical assistance opportunities to youth commissioners; and
- ◆ The commission provides at least three accommodations to support the work of the youth commissioner.

Thirteen of 51 state service commissions (25%) met the criteria for High Youth Engagement commissions. I then compared responses of these commissions against responses of other commissions. I also conducted linear and multiple regression analyses to compare responses of HYE commissions against each other to examine the relationship of HYE support levels to HYE youth involvement levels.

The correlation squared, or  $r^2$ , was utilized to indicate what proportion of the variation of the dependent variables (youth involvement measurements) is accounted for or explained by the variation in the independent variables (support measurements). The correlation squared is defined as a value between 0 and 1, where as the value approaches 1, the relationship is described as increasingly strong. The entire populations of each group were included in the survey, and the population sizes were relatively small. As a result, I was unable to estimate the probability of error, and the relationships should be considered with these circumstances in mind. However, based on the relatively high response rates, the regression analyses can be used to inform initial discussions on the provision of effective practices and specific supports to promote youth involvement.

## **Telephone Interviews**

After analyzing the survey responses, I conducted in-depth telephone interviews from March 19<sup>th</sup> through April 5<sup>th</sup>, 2002 with seven executive directors and six youth commissioners to elicit anecdotal evidence to support the survey findings. These individuals were selected from a pool of respondents who indicated on their survey they would be willing to participate in a telephone interview. The interviewees were selected to reflect gender and geographic diversity.

The interviews were conducted to garner specific examples of youth involvement and support offered by High Youth Engagement commissions, and to identify effective practices. It was also important to include representatives from states not identified as HYE commissions to gain additional insights to specific challenges that commissions experience. Five of the seven executive directors and five of the six youth commissioners came from HYE commissions while the remaining executive directors and youth commissioner came from other commissions.

## **Analysis & Interpretation**

The survey findings and interview results are categorized into two broad sections. First, I report on the findings from all commissions, covering broad topic areas including respondent group and commission characteristics, levels of youth involvement, challenges to youth involvement, and supports provided by commissions to promote youth involvement. Then I report on the relationships that emerged from the High Youth Engagement Commission data.

### **General Commission Findings**

#### **Respondent Group & Commission Characteristics**

Based on the responses of 44 (86%) executive directors, 33 (63%) chairpersons, and 46 (75%) youth commissioners, characteristics of each group can be generalized. As shown in Table 3, members within all groups are at various levels of experience with their commission in their stated role. Executive directors have more years of experience than

either the chairpersons or the youth commissioners, with 70 percent serving two or more years.

Table 3:

<b>Years on the Commission by Respondent Group</b>	<b><i>Executive Directors</i></b> (n=44)	<b><i>Chairpersons</i></b> (n=33)	<b><i>Youth Commissioners</i></b> (n=46)
<b><i>0 – 2 Years</i></b>	29% 13	73% 24	83% 38
<b><i>2 – 4 Years</i></b>	34% 15	12% 4	13% 6
<b><i>4 Years or More</i></b>	36% 16	15% 5	4% 2

Although it appears that chairpersons are relatively new to state commission work, the reality is different. When asked how long they had served on the commission including the time prior to their appointment as commission chair, 17 (51%) indicated they had been on the commission for four years or more, and another 10 (30%) had served for 2 to 4 years. Therefore, although only nine (27%) of the individuals serving as chairpersons have been in that position for two or more years, 27 (81%) of these same individuals have served as commissioners for two years or more.

Youth commissioners, however, are relatively new to state commission work. The vast majority have served on their commission for less than two years. It is likely that youth commissioners have higher turnover rates when compared to other adult commissioner and staff groups, due to the fact that most are students and tend to be in more transitional periods of their lives. These overall responses are not surprising, given that commissioners serve three-year terms and staff and commissioner appointments are made by state legislatures and/or governors. Consequently, the length of their terms is variable and highly dependent on the tenures of their elected officials.

The majority of youth commissioners fall within an age range typically associated with college students, with 22 (48%) reporting as 19- to 22-year olds, 15 (33%) as 16- to 18-year olds, and nine (19%) as 23- to 25-year olds. Thus, as shown in Table 4, it follows that most youth commissioners are college or high school students as well, with respectively 67% and 24% of youth commissioners identifying with these occupational categories.

Table 4:

<b>Occupational Status of Youth Commissioner Respondents</b>	<b>Percent of Cases (n=46)</b>	<b>Aggregate Percentages (n=46)</b>
<i>High school students only</i>	9% 4	24% 11
<i>High school students + part- or full-time employed</i>	15% 7	
<i>College students only</i>	41% 19	67% 31
<i>College students + part- or full-time employed</i>	20% 9	
<i>Graduate students only</i>	6% 3	
<i>Full-time employed only</i>	9% 4	9% 4

As a result, commissions must consider the needs of youth commissioners who are also primarily students, when identifying challenges and supports to promote youth involvement.

### **Selection of Youth Commissioners**

The occupational status of youth commissioners also has implications then, for future recruitment and retention strategies. Executive directors identified the most common, current sources for the recruitment of youth commissioners in Table 5, which primarily include the youth commissioners' school or national service program.

Table 5:

<b>Most Common Sources for Youth Commissioner Recruitment Identified by Executive Directors<sup>2</sup></b>	<b>Percent of Cases (n=44)</b>
<i>Colleges</i>	50% 22
<i>Learn and Serve programs</i>	50% 22
<i>Public high schools</i>	41% 18
<i>AmeriCorps programs</i>	41% 18
<i>Volunteer Centers</i>	39% 17

<sup>2</sup> The total exceeds 100% due to multiple responses.

Youth commissioners who responded to the survey reflect the executive director results on recruitment sources, with 17 reporting that another commissioner told them about the commission. Youth commissioners also identified their college (8 or 17%), service-learning program (8 or 17%), or high school (8 or 17%) as the most common contexts for commissioner recruitment.

### **Benefits of Youth Commissioner Involvement**

The most frequently-cited benefits to engaging young people on state service commissions are consistent with existing research and include making the commission more responsive to youth communities throughout the state, allowing the commission to develop a clearer mission to serve youth, strengthening partnerships between the commission and youth-focused organizations, enhancing other commissioners’ understanding of youth issues, and bringing renewed enthusiasm to the work of the commission.

As shown in Table 6, nearly three quarters of executive directors and 28 (85%) chairpersons stated that the primary benefit to engaging youth commissioners is to make the commission more responsive to youth communities throughout the state.

Table 6:

<b>Top Reasons to Engage Young People on Commissions by Respondent Group<sup>3</sup></b>	<b><i>Executive Directors</i></b> <i>(n=44)</i>	<b><i>Chairpersons</i></b> <i>(n=33)</i>
<b><i>To make the commission more responsive to youth communities throughout the state</i></b>	73% 32	85% 28
<b><i>To help the commission develop a clearer mission to serve youth</i></b>	66% 29	67% 22
<b><i>To strengthen partnerships between the commission and youth-focused organizations</i></b>	43% 19	27% 9

These findings were corroborated through several of the interviews. In one interview, a youth commissioner commented on the importance of youth voice on state service commissions as well:

“I think it’s very important to have very diverse people who serve on the commission, whether it be minorities, a young person, or people from different geographic locations within the state. Because through those diverse backgrounds I think we can really come to fully understand what our state is about and better serve the needs of our entire state, rather than serving the needs of just certain

<sup>3</sup> The total exceeds 100% due to multiple responses.

pockets of our state. Whatever it may be, I think it's very important to have young people there and their voice heard because of their perspective that they bring to the table.”

Other less frequently-cited benefits to youth involvement also include expanding the involvement of youth statewide, seeing a positive impact on other commissioners, and witnessing the commitment of youth to national service. In an interview, one executive director suggested that involving young people:

“...helps round the programs that we fund, in a way that they're truly meeting the needs of young people, but more importantly they set a tone so that we don't put up unrealistic barriers as to what can't be done. And I think they also bring a sense of enthusiasm and vision that freshens up the deliberations we have to go through.”

In addition to providing benefits to the commission, youth commissioners also cited personal benefits from their commission experiences in their survey responses. Youth commissioners most often cited that their greatest satisfaction came from building and cultivating new relationships within the national service community. It was also important that youth commissioners felt like they were making a difference and being involved in their communities, with 23 (50%) indicating these as benefits to commission participation. One youth commissioner commented on these issues in an interview:

“I love knowing what's going on, in the community, the country, I want to be in there, and feel like I was a part of it and I did my part too, to help make the community a better place. You can hear it, you can read it, but until you're a part of it, it's not really a part of you.”

### **Emerging National Youth Commissioner Network**

Youth commissioners were also asked to describe their familiarity with a growing national youth commissioner network, facilitated by ASC, the Corporation, and state service commissions. This is potentially one way in which youth commissioners can come to better understand their position and network with others across the country.

Although 18 (40%) youth commissioners agreed that they felt connected to other youth commissioners through the ASC youth commissioner web site at <http://www.asc-online.org/yc>, another 19 (41%) indicated that they didn't know about the site. Similarly, 26 (58%) youth commissioners stated they agreed that they felt represented by the “Call to

Action” position paper, but another 16 (35%) were unaware of the paper. Nonetheless, the vast majority of youth commissioners, or 87%, agreed they would benefit from a national youth commissioner network and 39 (85%) would be interested in contributing to the network. Eighteen (39%) indicated that they felt previously involved.

Youth commissioners want to be involved in a national youth commissioner network in several ways, as shown in Table 7. Thirty-seven (80%) of youth commissioners indicated that maintaining connections through attending national meetings is an important dimension to their involvement on their commission. This could be an increasingly important context for training and development to occur, as annual trainings continue to be more widely promoted, accessible, and well-attended.

Table 7:

<b>How Youth Commissioners Want to Participate in a National Youth Commissioner Network<sup>4</sup></b>	<b>Percent of Cases (n=46)</b>
<i>Attend national meetings</i>	80% 37
<i>Be on the youth commissioner listserv</i>	76% 35
<i>Participate in bimonthly conference calls</i>	50% 23
<i>Be a regional representative to ASC</i>	50% 23

ASC is a key organization in promoting these opportunities to youth commissioners and their commissions, and is instrumental in making these opportunities more accessible. Through these efforts, ASC can help youth commissioners connect with one another to meet their top reasons for developing a national youth commissioner network.

Youth commissioners indicated that the top two reasons to continue developing a national network are to better provide peer-to-peer support and to continue strengthening a youth commissioner presence at the national level. These issues were highlighted by a youth commissioner in one of the interviews:

“I think it’s great that ASC started bringing youth commissioners together. I think that it’s really helping a lot of people, not only just the youth commissioners, but also the commissioners in general, just understanding that they need training, and they’re a special population, but they can actually get their voices heard and make

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<sup>4</sup> The total exceeds 100% due to multiple responses.

change. And it's extremely beneficial. So, I just want to make sure they know that we're really excited for the things that they're doing."

### **Youth Involvement Levels**

The results of youth involvement measures, including youth commissioner attendance rates, how they participate in meetings, and how they are involved with the commission in general, provide an overall picture of youth commissioner involvement nationwide.

Youth commissioners participate on their commissions in a variety of ways that define them both as leaders and decision-makers within their state, and collectively on a national level, to inform the programs and serve the interests of the Corporation. As shown in Table 8, executive directors, chairpersons, and youth commissioners identified the most common roles of young people, with unanimous agreement that youth commissioners serve as voting members on the commission.

Table 8:

<b>Identified Roles of Youth Commissioners by Respondent Group<sup>5</sup></b>	<b><i>Executive Directors</i></b> (n=44)	<b><i>Chairpersons</i></b> (n=33)	<b><i>Youth Commissioners</i></b> (n=46)
<b><i>Voting member</i></b>	100% 44	100% 33	100% 46
<b><i>Sub-committee member</i></b>	91% 40	94% 31	67% 31
<b><i>Liaison to or Chairperson of Youth Advisory Council (YAC)</i></b>	73% 32	73% 24	59% 27
<b><i>Site visitor</i></b>	66% 29	64% 21	43% 20
<b><i>Speaker</i></b>	70% 31	48% 16	22% 10

After their identification as voting members, youth commissioners most often identified roles with commission sub-committees and commission-related youth advisory councils. These roles provide specific opportunities for youth commissioners to expand their involvement with state service commissions. Through these roles, youth commissioners engage in a variety of related activities.

The most common commission-related activities identified by all respondent groups are indicated in Table 9. While executive directors and chairpersons most often cited that youth commissioners participate in state board member trainings, youth commissioners most often identified attending a National Community Service Conference.

<sup>5</sup> The total exceeds 100% due to multiple responses.

Table 9:

<b>Identified Activities of Youth Commissioners by Respondent Group<sup>6</sup></b>	<b><i>Executive Directors</i></b> (n=44)	<b><i>Chairpersons</i></b> (n=33)	<b><i>Youth Commissioners</i></b> (n=46)
<i>Participated in state board member training</i>	86% 38	79% 26	43% 20
<i>Participated in national service program site visit</i>	66% 29	52% 17	30% 14
<i>Participated in a national service day project</i>	61% 27	70% 23	46% 21
<i>Gave commission-related presentations</i>	66% 29	64% 21	33% 15
<i>Attended National Community Service Conference</i>	68% 30	48% 16	57% 26

In order for youth commissioners to better understand their commission position, commissions would do well to encourage increased attendance at trainings and national conferences, for example. Other less frequently-cited examples of youth commissioner activities involve educating legislators and organizing events.

Youth commissioners are also participating in commission meetings in a variety of ways, but are perceived differently depending on the respondent group, as shown in Table 10. All groups identified that youth commissioners contribute to discussions at high rates, but after that, there is less agreement on how youth commissioners participate in meetings.

Table 10:

<b>How Youth Commissioners Participate in Meetings by Respondent Group<sup>7</sup></b>	<b><i>Executive Directors</i></b> (n=44)	<b><i>Chairpersons</i></b> (n=33)	<b><i>Youth Commissioners</i></b> (n=46)
<i>Contribute to discussions</i>	89% 39	82% 27	87% 40
<i>Share experiences</i>	68% 30	58% 19	65% 30
<i>Suggest policy</i>	45% 20	61% 20	46% 21
<i>Advocate for youth programs</i>	59% 26	55% 18	67% 31
<i>Present to other commissioners</i>	61% 27	52% 17	46% 21

<sup>6</sup> The total exceeds 100% due to multiple responses.

<sup>7</sup> The total exceeds 100% due to multiple responses.

Note that Tables 8 through 10 show fairly consistent response rates among all categories between executive directors and chairpersons. Youth commissioners, however, responded at substantially lower rates in almost every category. The variation is likely attributed to the nature of the wording of the questions on roles, activities, and participation on each of the surveys. Executive directors and chairpersons were asked to identify the roles and activities youth commissioners had *ever* been involved with on the commission, whereas youth commissioners were only asked to identify roles and activities that they personally identified with. As a result, it follows that the meeting participation rates are relatively similar for all three respondent groups, as the wording of the question only asked respondents to identify how current youth commissioners participate.

### **Challenges to Youth Involvement**

The responses of executive directors, commission chairpersons, and youth commissioners reflect that commissions face barriers to youth involvement similar to those discussed in the literature. Challenges were grouped into three categories in the surveys: legal, organizational and other. Legal challenges to the commission referred to issues such as obtaining a parental consent release, providing liability insurance, or having to coordinate a chaperone for the underage youth commissioner at commission events. Organizational challenges to the commission included scheduling meeting times to accommodate a youth commissioner's schedule, pre-paying expenses, identifying a mentor, or relying on a lengthy process with the governor or legislature to make a youth commissioner appointment. Other challenges that could be considered barriers to the commission included providing additional supervision or training for the youth commissioner, the unreliable attendance of the youth commissioner, or the attitudes of other commissioners.

On the whole, executive directors and commission chairpersons cited few barriers to engaging young people effectively as commissioners. These results were somewhat surprising. I expected to find that state commissions faced many challenges to youth involvement. The consistent results across all commissions, however, imply that the challenge of youth engagement lies in identifying committed youth and implementing effective practices or supports, rather than overcoming substantial barriers. Similarly, youth commissioners identified few challenges, with the exceptions of scheduling conflicts, financial issues, and insufficient training or orientation.

#### **Scheduling Conflicts**

Thirty-two (73%) executive directors and 26 (79%) commission chairpersons noted that no legal challenges served as barriers. The most common barriers involved organizational challenges around scheduling meeting times, insufficient training or orientation, and the length of time for the governor or legislature to make the youth commissioner appointment as noted in Table 11.

Table 11:

<b>Identified Barriers to Youth Engagement<sup>8</sup> by Respondent Group</b>	<b><i>Executive Directors</i></b> (n=44)	<b><i>Chairpersons</i></b> (n=33)
<i>Scheduling meeting times</i>	68% 30	48% 16
<i>Insufficient training or orientation</i>	61% 27	61% 20
<i>Lengthy appointment processes</i>	29% 13	39% 13

These challenges are also reflected in the survey comments made by executive directors and commission chairpersons when asked of their greatest frustrations in working with youth commissioners. Although 12 (27%) executive directors and eight (24%) chairpersons indicated “none”, another 14 (32%) executive directors and 12 (36%) chairpersons made statements around “poor attendance” of the youth commissioner and “scheduling conflicts” as the source of their greatest frustration. It should be noted that poor or unreliable attendance could be related to scheduling meeting times or school conflicts, as well. When asked for the most common reasons for youth commissioners to miss meetings, executive directors and chairpersons most frequently cited conflicts between meeting and school schedules.

Table 12:

<b>Reasons why Youth Commissioners Miss Meetings by Respondent Group<sup>9</sup></b>	<b><i>Executive Directors</i></b> (n=44)	<b><i>Chairpersons</i></b> (n=33)
<i>Conflict with school</i>	86% 38	76% 25
<i>Conflict with work</i>	36% 16	30% 10
<i>Personal reasons i.e. illness</i>	34% 15	21% 7

The interviews with executive directors lend further insight into the nature of these conflicts. One executive director noted the conflict between meeting times and other priorities for youth commissioners in an interview:

“Young people have other responsibilities, this isn’t the greatest thing in their life.

They have school, most are involved and have an interest in very challenging academic programs, so there’s significant amounts of homework and research they

<sup>8</sup> The total exceeds 100% due to multiple responses.

<sup>9</sup> The total exceeds 100% due to multiple responses.

have to do, especially when they're in high school. Now in the past, we have written excuses, we've provided agendas, to show that this is an authorized skip, but nonetheless, the student has to make up the work that they miss. So they're being penalized for being community-minded. I think a challenge is that we're trying to recruit active people, whether they're youth or adults, so these individuals are also on the boards, these people are also very active in their jobs or in the community that they live and work in. Time prioritization is also hard from them."

Similarly, youth commissioners also cited scheduling meeting times as their greatest challenge to involvement on the commission. Of the youth commissioners who responded, 33 (72%) agreed with the statement that commission meetings conflicted with school, while 17 (37%) agreed that meetings conflicted with work schedules. This seems to be reinforced by the fact that 30 (65%) youth commissioners agreed that evening or weekend meetings would encourage attendance, while 34 (74%) agreed that rotating start times of meetings would encourage attendance. In an interview, one youth commissioner commented on this challenge:

"I have a big problem with getting out of class. It is very challenging to me. I don't think that my professors really understand what I'm doing, or if it's important, so I definitely think there are barriers. I think that even if there was some kind of letter or some kind of formal document stating that 'this is our youth commissioner, she plays a really important role on our commission' and kind of what the commission was, and maybe meeting dates and times, just kind of to define my role more. I think it's one thing for me to tell [professors] where I'm going, but it's another thing when our lieutenant governor writes a letter, or our executive director."

It appears that the primary barrier to youth is overcoming scheduling conflicts. The factors that could affect this outcome include the youth commissioner's schedule, which often changes each school term; the length of meetings; the location of meetings; and the willingness of teachers, professors, or parents/guardians to allow youth to attend meetings. While other commissioners are also serving on the commission voluntarily, youth

commissioners do so at the risk of compromising their academic success. Youth commissioners often get caught between obligations at school and their desire to be an active citizen to inform national service policies within their state as volunteers.

### Attitudinal Challenges

The responses of youth commissioners do not seem to indicate that attitudinal barriers of other commissioners negatively affect their experience or challenged their participation. Although the survey did not ask a series of questions to measure the impact of adults’ attitudes on youth commissioners, the responses to questions that cursorily measured their level of satisfaction with their experience as a youth commissioner are reflected in Table 13 below. In general, youth commissioners reported high levels of satisfaction with their experience on the commission.

Table 13:

<b>Youth Commissioners Reflect on their Commission Experience<sup>10</sup></b>	<b><i>Percent who Agree (n=46)</i></b>
<i>I feel that other commissioners treat me as an equal.</i>	89% 41
<i>I feel I’m recognized by the commission for the work I do.</i>	91% 42
<i>I feel I’m important to my commission.</i>	78% 36
<i>I enjoy being a youth commissioner.</i>	93% 43

While these results imply that the attitudes of adult commissioners and staff may not necessarily impact youth commissioners directly, attitudes within commissions affect young people in subtle ways. For example, youth commissioners noted in several survey responses and in one interview, that they experienced discomfort during social activity times that included alcohol.

Another possible dimension of attitudinal challenges emerged around the issue of semantics. Commission chairpersons and executive directors both commented on the title of “youth commissioner” as one executive director asserted in an interview:

“I would prefer to see the youth identification move to sort of a second place. That they are commissioners first and whatever their constituency that they’re representing second. See them all as equal commissioners first.”

While it is important that youth commissioners are able to participate as any other commissioner, downplaying the “youth” status could also prove detrimental and neglect

<sup>10</sup> The total exceeds 100% due to multiple responses.

important considerations that adult commissioners overlook. And by overlooking potential challenges that are specific to youth (e.g. limited income, transportation options, variable school schedules), adult commissioners and staff place the burden of participating on the youth. So while the adult commissioners and staff may not be blatantly expressing negative attitudes toward youth, they are instead creating youth-exclusive systems in which young people are unfairly expected to participate.

### Financial Issues

Youth commissioners also commented on financial issues that posed challenges to attending commission meetings and related events. Twenty-eight (61%) youth commissioners indicated that pre-paid expenses would encourage their attendance, while only 13 (29%) executive directors indicated that the commission already pre-pays youth commissioner expenses. One youth commissioner described her experience with reimbursement issues in an interview:

“...going to the conference last year, I fronted my money, which was over a thousand dollars that I don’t really have. And it just took them three months to reimburse me. And I understand that it was a problem, because I got an e-ticket, and they weren’t going to reimburse my plane ticket because I didn’t have a receipt. They have been better about pre-paying my hotel so that I don’t have to worry about being reimbursed for that, but it’s always kind of hit or miss. You never know if they’re going to, or if I have to pay for that. So I think that’s something that’s really important to emphasize when you’re working with youth with limited income. And especially if they don’t have credit cards, and I know especially in high school, people don’t.”

In a different interview another youth commissioner reflected on financial issues he faced:

“Last year for the summer conference, I didn’t have a credit card and all of a sudden I find out that I need to pay for my plane ticket, and hotel up front. Finally I was able to use my parents’ credit card, but it was such a hassle, because I was in another state last year and then my parents were in another state. But you work

through it. If the youth commissioners have a good relationship with the Chair and E.D. and good communication and open dialogue, then there shouldn't be too many problems.”

### Training & Orientation

Youth commissioners suggested that orientation and training offered by their commission could be improved, as well. Although 34 (74%) youth commissioners agreed that they understood the functions and roles of organizations within the national service community (e.g. the Corporation, ASC, and their commission), and 40 (87%) agreed that they understood the different kinds of national service programs, 16 (35%) respondents disagreed with the statement that they had specific roles on their commission. Fourteen, or nearly 30% identified issues around insufficient training and orientation as their greatest frustration. While the majority of respondents implied that they received clear expectations and sufficient training to participate on their commission, one in three respondents claimed that their role on the commission was vague and that they would benefit from additional training and technical assistance to perform more effectively as a youth commissioner. As indicated earlier in Table 11, note that 27 (61%) executive directors and 20 (61%) chairpersons also noted that youth commissioner involvement was hindered by insufficient training or orientation.

Youth commissioners reported facing challenging issues that include attending commission meeting that conflicted with a variable school schedule; paying for commission-related expense on a limited income or without credit cards; and serving as a commissioner without sufficient definition of their role, orientation, or training. Clearly, barriers exist to engaging young people on state service commissions. The bureaucratic nature of state and federal financial and governmental systems commissions are linked with pose challenges to the individuals and organizations involved. In general, all commissions are dealing with similar challenges. By examining how youth commissioners can be engaged with state commissions and how to best support their work, however, states can reduce the effects of these barriers on the adults and young people involved.

### **Effective Practices to Support Youth Involvement**

To counter the potential challenges, executive directors, chairpersons, and youth commissioners identified factors to support youth involvement on state service commissions. Supports and accommodations refer to trainings or networking opportunities offered by the commission, accommodations provided by the commission, and the frequency of communication between the youth commissioner and fellow commissioners or staff.

## Training & Technical Assistance

Youth commissioners ranked the top three training and technical assistance opportunities. Their responses are shown in order of frequency in Table 14. Commission orientation and relationship-building opportunities with other commissioners were ranked as the most important training and technical assistance opportunities to youth commissioners.

Table 14:

<b>Most Beneficial Training &amp; Technical Assistance to Youth Commissioners</b> <sup>11</sup>	<b>Percent of Cases</b> (n=46)
<i>Orientation to the commission</i>	52% 24
<i>Relationship-building with other commissioners</i>	50% 23
<i>Youth-adult partnerships</i>	37% 17
<i>Leadership development</i>	30% 14

Intuitively, it follows that with specific orientation and training to perform as a commissioner, youth are better equipped to serve on their commission. Based on responses from executive directors and chairpersons shown in Table 14, commissions currently offer orientation to the commission as the most common training and technical assistance opportunity to youth commissioners.

Table 15:

<b>Most Common Training &amp; Technical Assistance Opportunities Offered Youth Commissioners According to Respondent Group</b> <sup>12</sup>	<b>Executive Directors</b> (n=44)	<b>Chairpersons</b> (n=33)
<i>Orientation to the commission</i>	98% 43	91% 30
<i>Orientation to the Corporation</i>	84% 37	70% 23
<i>Leadership development</i>	50% 22	39% 13
<i>Relationship-building with other commissioners</i>	43% 19	48% 16

Although it was not frequently-cited as being offered by the commission according to executive directors and chairpersons, youth commissioners identified that youth-adult partnerships training was one of the most beneficial to them. It would therefore benefit commissions to offer this training more often, or identify other sources to deliver this kind of training.

<sup>11</sup> The total exceeds 100% due to multiple responses.

<sup>12</sup> The total exceeds 100% due to multiple responses.

In an interview, a youth commissioner commented on the benefits of the cluster trainings as one example of training offered by ASC and the Corporation:

“The cluster trainings have been very helpful for young people and not only for young people, just in general. Gaining a solid foundation that supplements the trainings that are going on at the state level. It’s fantastic to be able to network with people from other states to find out what they’re doing in their state, and bring that information back to apply to your own area. No state has a patent on how to do everything correctly. It’s invaluable to go and see what other states are doing, and to take their knowledge and take what they’re doing successfully and bring it back into your own community.”

### Accommodations

Executive directors and commission chairpersons also identified accommodations offered by the commission to promote youth involvement, in addition to providing specific training opportunities. As shown in Table 16, by communicating with the school of the youth commissioner, for example, executive directors are already exercising ways to combat the challenges to youth involvement, such as scheduling conflicts.

Table 16:

<b>Most Common Accommodations Provided to Youth Commissioners According to Respondent Group<sup>13</sup></b>	<b><i>Executive Directors</i></b> <i>(n=44)</i>	<b><i>Chairpersons</i></b> <i>(n=33)</i>
<b><i>Encourage the youth commissioner to participate in a National Youth Commissioner Network</i></b>	66% 29	42% 14
<b><i>Communicate with the youth commissioner’s school</i></b>	39% 17	33% 11
<b><i>Prearrange transportation for the youth commissioner</i></b>	32% 14	30% 10
<b><i>Prepay youth commissioner expenses</i></b>	29% 13	36% 12

Twenty-nine (66%) executive directors and 14 (42%) chairperson respondents reported encouraging the youth commissioner to participate in a national youth commissioner

<sup>13</sup> The total exceeds 100% due to multiple responses.

network. This demonstrates that commissions appear to be supporting youth commissioners in meeting their desire, as indicated earlier in Table 7, to be more involved with the network.

Some commissions have also identified ways to problem-solve around scheduling conflict issues as well. In an interview one executive director noted how her commission supported youth by demonstrating their commitment to get youth commissioners to meetings:

“They just did it. When one of our youth commissioners says ‘Well I can’t make that meeting because of school’ [our commission chair] said ‘Well let’s try to find a date and a time that works. What if we moved it from Friday from 12 to 4, can you get off school if the E.D. writes you a letter?’ So we really worked at making it easier for them... usually, we can get a letter to the classroom and we also work with the youth’s parents to work with them about how important this is. And they’re usually really open to buying into it also. It’s kind of a family affair.”

Although this didn’t emerge from the survey data, interviews with executive directors and youth commissioners also noted the importance of engaging more than one young person on the commission at a time in order to better support youth involvement. One executive director shared her experience through a telephone interview:

“Bring on two youth commissioners. One thing that I’ve found is that young people, especially if they’re in high school or upper middle grades, feel very intimidated if they’re alone at the table. If they’re looking around the table and there’s all these adults and they’re talking in lots of acronyms that they don’t quite understand yet. What we did that seemed to work is that when the first youth commissioner came on, we decided it wasn’t right to have just one youth commissioner so we brought on another.”

## Connectivity through Communication

Lastly, youth commissioners, chairpersons, and executive directors also identified the frequency of youth commissioner-commission staff communication. Table 17 indicates that most chairpersons and executive directors report communicating with their youth commissioner every few months or monthly with 84 percent of executive directors and chairpersons indicating these frequencies.

Table 17:

<b>Frequency of Communication with Youth Commissioner According to Respondent Group</b>	<b><i>Executive Directors</i></b> (n=44)	<b><i>Chairpersons</i></b> <sup>14</sup> (n=33)
<i>Weekly</i>	14% 6	3% 1
<i>Monthly</i>	50% 22	42% 14
<i>Every few months</i>	34% 15	42% 14
<i>A couple times a year</i>	2% 1	12% 4

Table 18 indicates that most youth commissioner respondents communicate with their commission staff at a slightly higher frequency than the executive directors or chairpersons. Where 10 (22%) youth commissioners indicated communicating with commission staff on a weekly basis, only six (14%) executive directors, and one (3%) chairpersons indicated the same.

Table 18:

<b>Frequency of Communication with Commission Staff According to Youth Commissioners</b>	<b><i>Percent of Cases</i></b> (n=46)
<i>Weekly</i>	22% 10
<i>Monthly</i>	43% 20
<i>Every few months</i>	22% 10
<i>A couple times a year</i>	13% 6

Despite time constraints and pressures on the priorities of respondents within all groups, electronic mail, telephone, or face-to-face communication could be one relatively simple way to maintain consistent connections with youth commissioners. Based on the results of the High Youth Engagement commissions, consistent communication is worthy of future or increased investment on behalf of commission staff and youth commissioners.

<sup>14</sup> The total is less than 100% due to error in rounding.

## **High Youth Engagement Commission Findings**

Evaluating the survey outcomes of High Youth Engagement commissions yields insights to the specific practices of states that reported higher levels of youth involvement, according to the defined criteria. As described earlier, I limited the pool of possible HYE commissions to those where at least three respondents from the state completed their survey. Thirteen of 51 state service commissions (25%) met the criteria for High Youth Engagement commissions. To meet the standard to qualify as a High Youth Engagement commission, at least three respondents from a commission had to say that the commission met at least three of the four HYE involvement criteria and at least two of the three HYE support criteria outlined below.

### *HYE Youth Involvement Criteria:*

- ◆ One or more youth commissioners attend 75 percent or more commission meetings each year;
- ◆ One or more youth commissioners participate in meetings in at least three ways;
- ◆ One or more youth commissioners participate in at least three other instances of commission-related activities exclusive of meetings; and
- ◆ One or more youth commissioners occupy three or more roles on the commission.

### *HYE Support Criteria:*

- ◆ One or more youth commissioners communicate with commission staff or fellow commissioners on a monthly basis or more often;
- ◆ The commission offers at least three training and technical assistance opportunities to youth commissioners; and
- ◆ The commission provides at least three accommodations to support the work of the youth commissioner.

Drawing from the responses of HYE commission executive directors, three relatively strong relationships between supports and youth involvement emerged. First, by utilizing regression analysis, the relationship between the number of accommodations offered by the commission and the number of roles the youth commissioner is identified with, resulted in a correlation squared ( $r^2$ ) of .418. That is to say, 42 percent of the variation in how many roles the youth commissioner is identified with, can be explained by the variation in the number of accommodations offered by the commission. In other words, according to HYE executive director responses, HYE commissions that offered more accommodations such as rotating meeting times, rotating meeting locations, and pre-paying expenses, were more likely to identify that their youth commissioner was associated with more roles such as sub-committee member, speaker, and site visitor.

Second, the variation in the frequency of youth commissioner-executive director communication explains 52 percent of the variation in the percent of meetings where the youth commissioner is present ( $r^2 = .517$ ). The more frequently executive directors identified communicating with their youth commissioner, the likelihood that the youth commissioner would attend more meetings also increased.

Third, through multiple regression analysis, the frequency of youth commissioner-executive director communication and the number of accommodations provided by the commission account for nearly 54 percent of the variation amongst the percent of meetings where the youth commissioner is present ( $R=.733$ , therefore  $R^2 = .537$ ). In other words, the frequency of communication taken into consideration *with* the number of accommodations the executive director identified providing, had a positive impact on the likelihood that the youth commissioner would attend more meetings as well.

Based on the responses of HYE commission chairpersons, the strongest relationship between supports and youth involvement among effective practice states is between the frequency of youth commissioner-chairperson communication and the number of ways in which the youth commissioner participates in meetings with an  $r^2$  of .497. In other words, the more often the chairperson and youth commissioner communicate, it becomes more likely that the youth commissioner participates in meetings in more ways, such as advocating for youth programs, presenting to other commissioners, and suggesting policy. The frequency of youth commission and chairperson communication accounts for nearly 50 percent of the variation in youth commissioner meeting participation.

Finally, based on the responses of HYE youth commissioners, the strongest relationship that emerged is between commission staff-youth commissioner communication and the frequency of participating in commission-related activities where  $r^2$  is .465. To illustrate, the more often the youth commissioner and their commission staff communicated, it became more likely that the youth commissioner participated in more commission-related activities such as attending national conferences, participating in cluster leadership trainings, and giving presentations. Therefore, nearly 47 percent of the variation in how many commission-related activities is accounted for by the variation in how often the youth commissioner and staff communicate with one another.

These relationships imply that the most important variable in determining the degree to which the youth commissioner is engaged with their commission is related to the frequency with which commission staff and commissioners communicate with the youth involved. This variable is more important than any others that were analyzed. While it is evident that the commission should also be providing other accommodations and supports to encourage the participation of the youth commissioner, these results imply that direct contact in the form of face-to-face, telephone, or email conversations has a positive impact on the level of youth commissioner involvement.

These results were somewhat surprising, as I had not encountered “consistent communication” as a previously identified effective practice to promote youth involvement in the existing literature. Nor was I able to locate any previous research that focused specifically on youth involvement with statewide commissions or boards of directors. Perhaps, ongoing and consistent communication between the youth commissioner and their adult counterparts is a unique, critical element among state service commissions. This could be attributed to the fact that state commissions seek to involve commissioners throughout an entire state and for an extended period of time. Due to the

geographic diversity of commission membership, communication may play a larger role in the engagement of the youth commissioner when compared to other groups and studies.

High Youth Engagement commissions also provide specific training opportunities at higher rates when compared to the larger group of all responding states. HYE executive directors indicate that their commissions offer public speaking and leadership development training at higher rates, when compared to all responding states. Seven (54%) HYE executive directors reported offering public speaking training compared to 15 (34%) executive directors from all commissions. Similarly, 9 (69%) HYE executive directors reported offering leadership development, while only 22 (50%) of all executive directors offer leadership development training.

## **Summation**

The survey results confirmed my expectations that state service commissions would meet a range of youth involvement levels, and demonstrate a relationship between the level of support they offer and the level of youth involvement attributed to them. That is to say, commissions that provide higher levels of support report higher levels of youth involvement.

The most common barriers identified by commissions included challenges in scheduling meeting times for all commissioners; insufficient training and orientation to clearly define the roles for young people; financial issues that arise from commissions functioning on a cost-reimbursement basis for the expenses of young people, who are generally on limited incomes; and keeping young people connected to the commission during a lengthy appointment process.

The notable difference between High Youth Engagement commissions and the others is that they have higher rates of youth involvement as defined by the involvement measures. Further close examination of the HYE commissions reveals strong relationships between specific support factors and higher levels of youth involvement. While commissions generally employ a range of strategies to support the involvement of young people, HYE states demonstrate that communication frequency with the youth commissioner relates to increased levels of youth involvement. Based on HYE and other commission findings, the most important supports to provide include:

- ◆ Ensuring regular, direct communication between youth commissioners and commission staff;
- ◆ Providing accommodations such as rotating meetings times and locations for youth commissioners to attend, and prepaying costs to youth;
- ◆ Providing training and technical assistance on orientation, leadership development, public speaking, youth-adult partnerships, and networking opportunities with other commissioners; and

- ◆ Encouraging the youth commissioner to participate in a national youth commissioner network.

Other effective practices drawn from the interviews with executive directors include bringing two youth commissioners on board to promote sharing of information and peer support and communicating with the youth commissioner's school and family if appropriate.

Executive directors, chairpersons, and youth commissioners identified how young people positively affect communities and themselves. Commissions enjoy increased responsiveness to youth communities throughout the state and develop clearer missions to serve youth; adults gain enhanced understanding of youth issues and a sense of renewed energy and enthusiasm for commission work; and youth commissioners gain a sense of making a difference and networking experience in national service. In order to build on existing resources and capitalize on the resource of youth involvement, the Corporation, ASC, and state service commissions can continue to enhance their ability to support youth.

## Recommendations

Based on my review of the literature and responses of state service commission executive directors, chairpersons, and youth commissioners, the following are areas for further exploration and recommendations to foster the engagement of young people in decision-making roles. These recommendations to create a national movement to support the role of youth in decision-making are directed toward three key stakeholders: the Corporation, ASC, and state service commissions.

### **The Corporation for National & Community Service**

***Enforce the requirement for commissions to engage at least one 16- to 25-year old individual.*** The Corporation should take the lead in issues that are national in scope to better support commissions to involve young people in decisions that affect the Corporation's programs. As the governing body to state service commissions, the Corporation is positioned to support and evaluate how commissions are working to meet their guidelines.

***Partner with Departments of Education and Campus Compact to create formal service-learning credits and serve-study positions for youth commissioners.*** Youth commissioners indicate a desire to receive additional benefits to their service on state service commissions to free up some school time to be more involved with the commission. Thirty-one (67%) wish to receive an education award for their service and 24 (52%) indicate that they would like to receive education credits for their involvement on state service commissions. The Corporation is in a unique position to develop partnerships with Departments of Education to create formal service-learning credits, or partner with Campus Compacts to link youth commissioner service with serve-study positions. These credits and positions would expand the potential for youth

commissioners to be involved in other capacities, as youth cannot, in their role as commissioners, receive compensation for their volunteerism.

***Fund additional research to understand the motivations and impact of youth commissioners' involvement.*** The Corporation can also play a part by funding additional research to “support the advocates and policy makers who promote youth involvement on a broad scale” and investigate more deeply how “organizations and communities sustain youth involvement”, particularly through Corporation programs (Calvert, Zeldin, & Weisenbach, 2002, p.7-9). The Corporation can partner with established researchers to develop measures of motivation to assist with recruitment. Most importantly, the Corporation can spearhead research to identify the long-term effects of youth commissioner involvement on Corporation programs, partnership organizations, and the individuals involved as has been initiated by the current youth representative on the Corporation’s Board of Directors.

***Model youth engagement for commissions.*** Finally, the Corporation should internally model its commitment to youth involvement by including youth commissioners as trainers, presenters, grant reviewers, and evaluators at all opportunities and bringing a second youth representative to its Board of Directors.

## **America’s Association of State Service Commissions**

***Develop curriculum on the importance of youth voice and youth-adult partnerships for all cluster trainings.*** ASC could take a lead role in promoting youth voice on state commissions by incorporating such topics into each cluster commissioner leadership training.

***Leverage technical support to develop a national network for states to identify potential youth commissioners.*** Although commissions forge individual partnerships with local organizations and institutions to identify potential youth commissioners, a national system could make the process more efficient. A national recruitment system could also potentially tap into existing structures that already identify young people and students with an interest in civic engagement issues.

***Continue to offer and promote peer-to-peer exchange opportunities for youth commissioners to share information.*** ASC is in a position to provide peer-to-peer exchange opportunities through the national youth commissioner training at National Community Service Conferences, cluster commissioner leadership trainings, and individual exchanges between states.

***Assist individual states to develop orientation materials and position descriptions for youth commissioners.*** ASC can work on a national level to develop training curriculum and a general position description that every state can access on an individual basis.

***Engage youth commissioners as trainers, presenters, grant reviewers, and evaluators at all opportunities.*** ASC can serve as a model of infusing youth voice in decision-making at all levels by utilizing youth commissioners as resources.

## **State Service Commissions**

***Ensure commission staff develop consistent communication with the youth commissioner.*** This can ensure that the youth commissioner is kept abreast of commission developments, and that commission staff are more likely to retain and actively engage the youth commissioner.

***Provide clear orientation and training.*** In general, youth commissioners would benefit from specific orientation to the workings of a board, orientation to the Corporation, youth-adult partnership training, public speaking training, and leadership development. It is important that these development opportunities are on-going and include well-articulated expectations of the youth commissioner role.

***Rotate meeting times while prepaying costs to youth commissioners.*** In order to engage youth commissioners who are also often students, commissions must consider the school schedule of the youth commissioner when arranging commission meetings and related activities. Meeting locations should also be rotated so that commissioners share the burden of transportation issues to meetings, and commission-related expenses should be covered through formal or informal systems of prepayment for youth commissioners who are often on limited incomes or have no access to credit cards.

***Infuse youth voice and involvement at all opportunities.*** Commissions should utilize youth commissioners as valuable resources and add at least a second youth commissioner to avoid marginalization.

## Conclusion

Much work has already been done to document and identify effective practices to better engage youth in decision-making within programs, organizations, and communities. At the same time, much more work has yet to be done. State service commissions that devalue or disregard youth involvement are neglecting a significant constituency that is served by their and the Corporation's programs. Calvert, et al. assert that although:

Previous movements to include [specific groups] in informing government policy have had an impact,...they have often fallen short of winning access to the most important decision-making venues. The same problem exists with young people, particularly those doubly disenfranchised by the intersections of race, class, gender, and sexual orientation, as well as their status as youth. Sustained work is required for success (2002, p.12).

In order to foster effective youth-adult partnerships on commissions, it is important to build on positive experiences with youth while recognizing that challenges will arise.

And while I agree that dynamic and sustainable youth-adult partnerships rely on the commitment of both the youth and adults involved, I challenge adults to hold each other to the highest degree of responsibility to support partnerships with youth. Although stereotypes of adults held by youth can thwart the success of youth-adult partnerships in governance, adults have greater institutional, legal, social, and political power than youth. Consequently, adults have greater power to make these changes come to be, by creating space for these changes to occur and by supporting the work of young people.

Adults must intentionally unlearn the ways in which they perpetuate attitudes that prevent the full participation of young people on state service commissions, while young people draw on their experiences to confidently assert their voice in the collaborative, decision-making processes of state commission work.

It is this commitment to sustained work that I challenge adults and youth to make today. This commitment is essential for aligning state service commissions with the Corporation's guidelines, cultivating the virtue of civic engagement and responsibility within young people, strengthening the impact of youth programs on communities, and presently investing in the future leadership of this country.

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