Youth Engagement Innovation Fund Offers Insights for Meaningfully Engaging Young Adults

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Introduction

Organizations, communities, and funders increasingly recognize the value of engaging young people to help shape the policies, systems, programs, and practices that affect their lives—along with the mutual benefits this engagement brings to both young people and the organizations that serve them. Engagement can take many forms along a continuum, from gathering input from youth, to appointing them to serve in advisory roles, to full intergenerational partnership. Yet even as engagement becomes more common practice, some young adults are rarely invited in.

The Annie E. Casey Foundation created the Youth Engagement Innovation Fund (YEIF) to help youth-serving organizations pilot approaches to engaging three populations: young adult workers, opportunity youth (young people who are not working or in school), and students at community colleges; see box.

How the YEIF initiative allowed grantees to meaningfully engage young adults

A key goal of the YEIF initiative was to strengthen organizations' capacity and internal structures for engaging young adults while creating meaningful opportunities and benefits for participating young adults. Rather than requiring grantees to achieve specific outcomes from their engagement strategies during the grant period, YEIF gave grantees the space to innovate by creating only one grant requirement: that grantees pilot an engagement approach and learn from their experiences. To facilitate grantees' participation and learning, YEIF provided technical assistance and coaching through School & Main Institute (SMI). Each grantee was paired with a coach who supported them as they designed and implemented their engagement strategies, navigated challenges, and built their organizational capacity. SMI also facilitated a peer learning community for grantees to exchange ideas and strategies.

This brief draws on the experiences of four YEIF grantees—Corporate Coalition of Chicago and Cara Collective (CC), Corporation for a Skilled Workforce (CSW), Jobs for Arizona's Graduates (JAG-AZ), and Towards Employment (TE)—and their SMI coaches. It highlights the grantees' youth engagement strategies, the benefits reported by young adults and staff, and the resources needed to do this work well. The information and takeaways in this brief are drawn from project documentation and interviews with eight grantee staff, two of the initiative's SMI coaches, and six young adult participants. We hope these lessons offer practical insights for practitioners and funders seeking to engage young adults in ways that strengthen organizational programs and practices while also supporting young adults' professional and personal development.

Key takeaways

Design and planning

- **Young adult engagement isn't defined by a single—or static—strategy**. YEIF grantees chose a range of strategies that offered different levels of young adult involvement and decision-making influence and fit within their organizational goals (including advisory boards and participatory research), sometimes shifting tactics within a single strategy.
- **Effective engagement of young adults requires unique capacities and skills**. Project management, communication and trust building, and facilitation are essential skills, as is technical expertise in areas specific to the engagement's goals.
- **Plan for what to do with young adults' input**. Before engaging young adults, organizations should identify how they intend to use young adults' input and establish clear expectations about how that input will inform decisions, programs, or actions. They should also plan how to communicate to young adults what changed as a result of their input, what did not, and why.
- **Partnerships can fill organizational capacity gaps essential to implementation.** Partners may be needed to access resources, relationships, or expertise that are essential to a young adult engagement strategy; however, bringing on partners might result in less control over parts of the engagement strategy.

Implementing and sustaining engagement

- **Meaningful engagement requires a substantial investment of staff time.** Regular meetings, reminders, and follow-up help young adults shape and translate their ideas and prepare both young adults and external partners to work together.
- **The ability to act on young adults' input depends on who holds decision-making authority.** YEIF grantees could act directly on input about their own programs, but changes at employers and colleges rested with those institutions. Strong existing relationships were key to getting young adults' perspectives heard.
- **Engagement struggles may reflect barriers rather than lack of interest.** Young adults juggle work, school, caregiving, and transportation. Mixing virtual and in-person options, ensuring access to devices, and offering short-term or menu-style commitments can help them stay involved.
- **Young adults benefit when engagement is structured intentionally to provide skill-building opportunities.** In addition to monetary compensation, YEIF strategies paired collaborative work with training, coaching, and mentorship, and young adults reported gains in communication skills, technical skills, self-confidence, and professional networks.
- **Organizations benefit from engaging young adults.** YEIF grantees reported improvements in organizational practices, stronger connections with young adults, and increased staff expertise. All grantees planned to continue their engagement efforts, despite ongoing funding and time constraints.

Considerations for funders

- **Match funding timelines to engagement goals.** Young adult engagement is a tool that can serve many different purposes, some of which will take longer to accomplish. Funders should establish timelines that reflect these goals while remaining flexible when recruitment, partnership development, skill-building, or other implementation activities take longer than anticipated.
- **Funders need to be aware of the full costs of engagement.** Budgets should cover staff time plus less obvious costs like food, transportation, child care, meeting space, and internet access or devices.
- **Support the development of specific staff skills and capacities to successfully engage young adults.** Funders can encourage organizations to assess their staffing needs during planning and allocate sufficient funding for hiring, training, or partnerships to address gaps rather than assuming existing staff can absorb the work.

- **Funders can invest in staff capacity through technical assistance, coaching, and peer learning.** Tailored coaching helps grantees build the skills their strategies require and overcome challenges around structuring engagement and sharing power, while peer learning lets organizations exchange best practices and lessons learned.

Four Engagement Approaches at a Glance

The four grantees used a range of strategies to engage young adults, reflecting differences in their organizational missions, populations served, and goals for engaging young adults. Their strategies also varied in the degree to which they granted autonomy and decision-making power to young adults. Several models describe a continuum of youth participation (for an example, see the Annie E. Casey Foundation's Youth Engagement Continuum), with approaches that collect input from young adults on one end and those that give young adults complete decision-making power on the other end. YEIF grantees' strategies varied by stage along the continuum: At different times, grantees may have ***consulted*** young adults for their perspectives, ***involved*** them in shaping decisions, ***collaborated*** with them as partners in making decisions, and/or helped them ***lead*** aspects of the work.

Table 1. YEIF Grantee Strategies

Grantee	Strategy	Population served	Level of engagement[1]
Corporate Coalition of Chicago and Cara Collective (CC)	Engaged young adults through a Young Adult Advisory Board (YAB) and later an Emerging Talent Advisory Board (ETAB); board members provided perspectives on workplace practices and employer practice-change efforts and participated in professional development and networking opportunities.	Young adult workers in Chicago, IL	Consult, involve, collaborate, youth-led
Towards Employment (TE)	Established a World of Work (WOW) Council made up of young adult workers; council members participated in leadership and professional development activities while helping shape TE's employer engagement strategies and engaging with employers around job quality and workplace practices.	Young adult workers in Cleveland, OH	Consult, involve, collaborate
Corporation for a Skilled Workforce (CSW)	In partnership with Kennedy-King College (KKC), trained community college students as researchers; student researchers designed and conducted research examining KKC students' experiences and definitions of success in vocational and academic programs and presented their findings and recommendations to college leadership.	Community college students	Collaborate, youth-led
Jobs for Arizona's Graduates (JAG-AZ)	Recruited program alumni as fellows to develop, launch, and lead its Alumni Association; fellows helped shape the association's structure and priorities, generated ideas for activities, and assumed ongoing roles in its operation and leadership.	JAG-AZ program alumni	Collaborate, youth-led

[1] Based on the Annie E. Casey Foundation's descriptions of the youth engagement continuum. See Annie E. Casey's blog post about Strategies for Youth Engagement for more detail.

Considerations for Organizations That Want to Engage Young Adults

Design and planning considerations

Young adult engagement isn't defined by a single—or static—strategy.

Young adult engagement aims to reflect and advance each grantee's broader organizational mission and goals, from advancing job quality practices to engaging program alumni. At the same time, grantees did not develop their strategies from scratch. Rather, each built on existing or prior initiatives, structures, and/or relationships, drawing on relevant organizational experience as a starting point for its YEIF strategy. However, some grantees cautioned against fully developing plans until young adults have had a chance to weigh in, saying, "Don't assume that what you're building is what [youth] want."

> "[We wanted to expand our young adult engagement] in more intentional ways, bringing young adult voice and emerging talent voice into the room."
> **– Grantee staff member**

The four grantees' approaches reflected different levels of young adult involvement and power sharing along a continuum of young adult engagement. Young adults were not given the same responsibilities across every strategy—or necessarily throughout the life of a single strategy. CC and TE consulted young adult advisory board members who offered input on how to talk to employers about what young adult workers want. Members were also involved, at times, in decisions about which employers to approach and how to approach them, and CC's board led the design of networking events. JAG-AZ's and CSW's strategies were, varyingly, either collaborative or youth-led, depending on the situation or task. Staff provided initial structure, training, and support, with young adults assuming more autonomy and decision-making power as they gained experience and relevant skills. For example, CSW staff initially trained and coached student researchers on data collection, analysis, and interpretation, but students gradually began to carry out these tasks and make research-related decisions independently.

Effective engagement of young adults requires unique capacities and skills.

Young adult engagement requires a range of staff abilities and skills. YEIF grantees highlighted several such skills in particular:

- **Project management.** Engaging young adults requires staff to coordinate recruitment, meeting scheduling and planning, activities and events with external partners, training, and support for young adult participation. These responsibilities can become more complex when young adults have different schedules and levels of availability or when the engagement involves multiple organizations or partners.

- **Communication, trust-building, and confidence-building skills.** Staff must be able to communicate with young adults in ways that are accessible and responsive, while also allowing them to speak openly and feel that their perspectives are being heard. Trust-building may require staff to establish relationships relatively quickly and maintain them via consistent communication, follow-through, and responsiveness to young adults' needs and circumstances. Building confidence may also require modeling, repeated practice, mentorship, and reassurance that young adults' contributions are valued.

> "Relationship building, that's been the most important part. And for me personally, it's been just having text conversations with [young adult participants] and letting them know that I'm okay texting outside of the nine to five hours." **– Grantee staff member**

- **Facilitation and youth engagement skills.** All young adult engagement work involves some facilitation of conversations—both between young adults and between young adults and organizational staff or external partners. Staff facilitating these conversations create opportunities for young adults to contribute meaningfully, perhaps by helping them develop and articulate their ideas and navigate differences in perspectives. Adult facilitators must also balance structure and support with autonomy, and may continue to play an important scaffolding role—even as young adults begin to collaborate or lead aspects of the work.

> [Staff told us] don't hold back because this is how you want to make the program. We need your voices to be heard too, not just the staff. Like this program was designed for you and by you. So I think that was, since day one, his big message, don't hold back.
> **– Young adult participant**

- **Hard skills specific to the goals of engagement.** Some strategies require expertise related to what young adults are being asked to do. For example, CSW's participatory research strategy required expertise in research methods to prepare young adults to conduct interviews and analyze data. JAG-AZ staff helped fellows learn to develop bylaws and a logic model for the Alumni Association. In these examples, staff provided training and support as young adults applied the skills. Organizations must consider what technical expertise their strategy requires and whether that expertise exists internally or requires training or partnerships.

Plan for what to do with young adults' input.

Planning what young adult engagement will look like (e.g., meeting structures and frequency, how many participants to recruit) requires considerable effort and resources, but an essential component of a youth engagement plan is the determination of how to use young adults' input. Organizations should determine early whether they have the capacity and willingness to act on young adults' input, or whether another organization or decision maker will need to act. When the outcome depends on an external decision maker (e.g., employer, educational institution, government agency, or other organization), organizations need a clear plan for what they want the decision maker to do with young adults' perspectives and how they will communicate (or bring that input) to those with the authority to act. Finally, a critical and often overlooked component of engagement is planning for how young adults will be informed about the results of their participation and input (i.e., what changed, what did not change, and why)—even when the organization can't act on every recommendation or when decisions ultimately rest with another actor.

Partnerships can fill organizational capacity gaps essential to implementation.

Organizations should consider what capacities, relationships, or access they already have and where they need other entities' support to carry out their engagement strategy. For example, some YEIF grantees do not

work directly with young adults and relied on partners to recruit participants. CSW worked with a community college and TE worked with other workforce organizations to carry out their strategies. However, partnering comes with a trade-off: less control over aspects of strategy implementation carried out by partners. Organizations should determine whether a partnership is the best way to fill a gap and whether a potential partner's expertise, approach, priorities, and capacity align with the engagement strategy.

Considerations for implementing and sustaining engagement

Meaningful engagement requires a substantial investment of staff time.

Ongoing engagement requires time for young adults and staff to build relationships, develop ideas, work through decisions, and advance activities. Maintaining a regular meeting schedule represents a significant and ongoing commitment of staff time. Further, effective young adult engagement requires more than time spent in regular meetings. Staff may need to send reminders via text and social media to ensure that young adults come to meetings, check in with young adults between meetings on their progress, and follow up individually when young adults are not able to attend—both to encourage continued participation and to understand and address barriers to participation. Staff time is also needed to manage delays and adjust plans as engagement efforts and young adults' availability evolve over time.

Staff also play an intermediary role in translating input or helping young adults shape and enact their ideas. Even when young adults take on substantive roles, staff may still need to help them develop skills to do the work, help them articulate their ideas, translate their input for specific audiences, or identify concrete steps for enacting their ideas. This support can help young adults move from sharing their perspectives to influencing decisions or carrying out the work.

> "[To prepare the young adults, we] ended up really designing what was the equivalent of a college course. If you think about the number of hours, it was roughly 30 hours of training, and then they still needed a lot of individualized training and coaching in order to move things forward." **– Grantee staff member**

To ensure productive and respectful communication with external partners, staff must invest time in preparing both young adults and partners for those interactions. TE introduced mock board sessions and team-building activities to build WOW Council members' confidence and leveraged its Employer Advisory Board to allow council members to practice engaging with employers and strengthen their ability to advocate for workplace improvements. Staff might help adults understand the value of young adult voice, establish agreements about respectful mutual communication, and set expectations for young adults' participation.

> "We spent quite a lot of time talking to [employers] about power dynamics." **– Grantee staff member**

The ability to act on young adults' input depends on who holds decision-making authority.

YEIF grantees were able to respond relatively directly when young adults' input concerned their own programs, structures, or engagement practices. Translating young adults' perspectives into changes by

employers, colleges, or other institutions, however, was less straightforward. Organizations can bring young adults' perspectives to decision makers, facilitate direct engagement, and advocate for changes, but cannot determine whether or how another organization will act. YEIF grantees relied on strong relationships with employers and community colleges to advocate for action on young adults' input.

Organizations should clearly define what they hope to accomplish via young adult engagement and assess whether they have the authority, relationships, and resources to achieve their goals. When an intended outcome depends on external decision makers, organizations can create opportunities for young adults to influence those actors but cannot guarantee how they will respond. Organizations should consider whether they have the relationships needed to get young adults' perspectives in front of the right people.

Engagement struggles may reflect barriers rather than lack of interest.

Young adults may be balancing work, school, caregiving, transportation challenges, and other responsibilities or life changes that make consistent participation difficult, even when they remain interested in the work. One grantee staff member cautioned against assuming that a young adult is experiencing stability because they are working. When young adults miss meetings or participate inconsistently, organizations must approach that as a potential barrier—rather than a lack of interest—and consider what may be making participation difficult. For example, when a CSW student researcher struggled to participate in virtual meetings because of technology issues, CSW worked with its community college partner to arrange access to campus technology. JAG-AZ staff changed meeting locations and timing when fellows had difficulty attending in-person meetings because of scheduling and transportation barriers.

Virtual meetings can make participation easier for young adults balancing work, school, travel, and other responsibilities. Almost all YEIF grantees held their regular meetings virtually to fit into participants' work and school schedules. At the same time, some young adults emphasized the value of in-person engagement and wanted more opportunities to connect face-to-face with peers and employers. Consider how a mix of virtual and in-person opportunities might provide flexibility while still creating opportunities to build relationships and engage directly. One caveat to virtual engagement is that young adults may lack access to technology or experience using it for full participation (e.g., joining by phone and being unable to access documents for shared on-screen group work). Organizations should consider either providing participants with the technology and devices they need for meaningful participation or ensuring access to them, and should plan for the expense this adds to a project.

> "We find that virtual engagement has been most accessible for young folks, particularly if they're also working at the time … That being said, we also recognize the importance of in-person engagement … [O]pportunities for in-person interaction really [do] matter for helping develop the content." **– Grantee staff member**

Another strategy is to offer short-term commitments, or a "menu" of participation options that enable young adults to customize their engagement to the amount of time and capacity they have available. TE and CSW adopted this approach, moving away from expecting all young adults to attend meetings together as a committee; instead, they began to offer a range of participation opportunities young adults could opt into based on their availability.

Young adults benefit when engagement is structured intentionally to provide skill-building opportunities.

One of YEIF's goals was not only to strengthen grantee organizations' capacity to engage young adults, but also to provide value to participating young adults. All engagement strategies were intentionally structured this way, with young adults working alongside or collaboratively with each other toward a shared goal while paired with structured training, coaching, and mentorship from grantee staff and outside experts to support their professional development. Young adults and grantee staff highlighted several benefits from these efforts:

> "My interest [in participating] came from just wanting to have a place in decisions that affect young adults around me … I saw this as a chance to advocate for other young professionals, learn from leaders, and grow as a leader myself." **– Young adult participant**

- **Growth in public speaking and communication skills**, particularly in professional settings or to large groups of adults at conferences and employer-facing events. For example, JAG-AZ fellows presented their Alumni Association plans to other JAG chapters at the organization's national conference, while CSW student researchers presented their research findings to administrators at KKC and at national conferences.
- **Career development skills and experience**, including how to tell personal stories in a professional setting, exposure to different career paths, and networking practice. For example, CC brought in outside speakers to teach advisory board members how to develop their elevator pitch, and a CSW student researcher described how their career interests shifted from plumbing and welding to business administration as a direct result of participating in the initiative.
- **Technical and applied skills specific to the engagement strategy**, such as research skills (for example, CSW trained KKC students on interviewing and qualitative analysis), project management, board development, and event planning.
- **Self-confidence and self-worth** stemming from a stronger sense that their perspectives and lived experiences had value.
- **Social capital from new relationships with peers and professionals** that offered opportunities for mutual support, mentorship, networking, and professional connection. Both CC and TE's young adult worker advisory boards were designed to provide direct engagement with employers and other networking opportunities.

Organizations benefit from engaging young adults.

YEIF grantees described a broad array of lessons learned from their efforts to engage young adults, from the most effective modes of communication to ways of balancing power-sharing. CC and TE described how their employer engagement and practice change efforts had been made more effective, and JAG-AZ built a growing alumni community and helped alumni navigate their careers. CSW developed deep staff expertise in participatory research methods; at the close of its project, KKC administrators invited student researchers to share their research findings with faculty. TE also shared lessons from its young adult engagement efforts with its local Workforce Development Board and other workforce partners to increase the visibility and potential impact of engagement strategies across the community.

All YEIF grantees planned to continue their young adult engagement efforts. One grantee remarked, "This has become a primary value in our team … any chance we can lift up the voices of those impacted, we will." However, grantees also noted the joint constraints of funding and time—particularly the resources needed to support engagement at the shared decision-making end of the youth engagement continuum.

Recommendations for Funders of Young Adult Engagement Strategies

Match funding timelines to engagement goals.

Different goals require different time horizons to reasonably achieve or show progress. For example, CSW first needed to establish its partnership with KKC, recruit and train student researchers, and seek approval for research activities from KKC's Institutional Review Board. After data collection, students needed time to analyze the data, summarize findings, and share their findings with college leadership. CC and TE aimed to influence employer job quality practices by lifting up the voices and perspectives of young adult workers, and employers need time to consider input and make internal changes.

Organizations that are new to young adult engagement may underestimate the time it will take to implement their strategies. Funders should work with grantees to establish realistic timelines. At the same time, young adult engagement often doesn't go as planned: Recruitment, partnership development, and implementation may take longer than anticipated. Regular communication can help funders understand emerging challenges and recognize the work taking place even when progress toward milestones is slower than expected. Funders can also consider opportunities to incorporate flexibility within timelines and allocate resources as needed to allow grantees to meet their goals.

Funders need to be aware of the full costs of engagement.

Meaningful engagement of young adults requires resources for a range of activities and supports, including costs that may be less obvious when developing a project budget. At a minimum, young adults need to be compensated fairly for their time and expertise. Beyond that, staff time represents a significant part of the investment, and extends beyond facilitating engagement activities to recruiting participants, building relationships, coordinating schedules, preparing young adults to participate, and following up between activities. Depending on the nature of the engagement, staff time may also include developing specialized materials and training young adults.

In addition to young adult stipends and staff time, there are less obvious expenses: In-person engagement can require meeting space and supplies, food, transportation, and child care. Virtual engagement can require providing internet access and devices to young adults. Young adults may be called on to travel, perhaps for the first time in their professional careers, to conferences or events to represent the organization. Funders should consider whether grantee budgets have accounted for the full range of potential expenses and should be prepared to support substantial staff time—particularly if an organization is relatively new to young adult engagement or if the planned engagement intends for young adults to play a role in making decisions.

Support the development of specific staff skills and capacities to successfully engage young adults.

Funders can help organizations plan for staff needs by asking grantees or potential grantees what skills their strategy requires, whether those skills exist on staff, and how any gaps will be filled. Budgets can then

support staff training, hiring, or partnerships to fill those gaps, rather than assuming anyone can do this work effectively or existing staff can absorb the work.

Organizations benefit from technical assistance, coaching, and opportunities for peer learning.

Funders can also support organizations with technical assistance and coaching that respond to the specific skills, challenges, and implementation needs associated with their engagement strategies, along with opportunities for peer learning. Coaching can address emerging questions and challenges (e.g., how to structure engagement, power sharing, and youth-adult partnerships) and provide guidance, tools, and resources relevant to each grantee's specific strategy. Grantees also learn from sharing challenges and successful strategies with peer organizations.

YEIF illustrates an approach to funding that emphasizes building organizational capacity and allowing room for experimentation and shared learning rather than focusing solely on predetermined deliverables. Through SMI's technical assistance and coaching, grantees received support as they implemented their strategies and addressed emerging challenges. This approach also allowed the Annie E. Casey Foundation to stay informed about implementation challenges through the coaches while providing grantees space to carry out their work.

Final Reflections

Young adult workers, opportunity youth, and community college students have valuable perspectives on the workplaces, schools, and programs that shape their lives, but are often left out of engagement efforts. The experiences of YEIF grantees show that organizations can engage these young adults meaningfully at many points along the engagement continuum, as long as they plan for the staff time, skills, and supports the work requires. Equally important, organizations must decide up front what will happen with young adults' input and make sure they learn what came of their participation. Grantees also demonstrated how engagement can serve multiple purposes, from informing organizational programs and practices to influencing the spaces where young adults spend their time, while also helping young adults develop skills and professional connections. When engagement is designed with young adults' competing obligations in mind and built to develop their skills, both young adults and the organizations that engage them can benefit.

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