

Fountain of Youth: Working with Young People as Data Collectors

“We have a powerful potential in our youth, and we must have the courage to change old ideas and practices so that we may direct their power toward good ends.”

Mary McLeod Bethune, education advisor to Franklin Roosevelt

Getting people on the street to stop and take a public opinion survey isn't always easy. But folks are often more willing to participate if the data collector is a young person rather than an adult. That represents an opportunity for your project – if you have a pool of youth coalition members or volunteers you can tap into.

To get some advice about partnering with young people as data collectors, we talked with Julia Velonjara, Youth Program Coordinator at the California Youth Advocacy Network (CYAN).



Julia, what are some effective methods for recruiting youth for data collection activities?

It's best if they are involved in more than just the data collection, so that you are engaging youth who are either involved in the local coalition or a youth group that is interested in public health issues and has some background on the issue. If you are starting from scratch, try to make connections with schools or other youth-serving organizations like a Boys and Girls Club – places where students already participate in activities. Build upon young people's own social networks. Have them reach out to peers or ask everyone to bring along a friend.

What can motivate students to participate in data collection activities?

An incentive of some sort will get people to show up. It could be food at the training, a gift card or even less tangible rewards like experience, community service hours, or publicly acknowledging their contribution. If youth are engaged in the issue, they will be motivated to participate so they can see the whole trajectory of what they are doing and how it affects people.

What are some things to consider when training youth to conduct public intercept surveys?



Timing is important. Keep the training short enough so you don't lose their attention – not more than 1-1.5 hours. If it needs to be longer, break it up into several sessions over a day or two. Make sure the youth are clear about what they are asking. Have a couple of different examples of what data collectors can say when approaching people about the survey so the young people can choose what is most comfortable to them. Also, make the training interactive. Have the actual survey there, let them practice asking others in the room or out in the field, and then get feedback about how it went. Explain what

the data will be used for, how it's going to affect future work, and other opportunities for them to stay involved in the issue if they want after data collection.

What sort of planning and coordination is necessary for managing youth for this kind of work?

Identify how many data collectors you'll need in order to reach completion targets. Figure out logistics for how students will get to the sites to conduct the surveys. At each site, pair groups of youth with an adult team member who can troubleshoot, if necessary. Find a good balance of overbooking enough people to do the work but not so many that they'll have nothing to do if everyone shows up. Obtain permission forms from parents and keep them informed about what the youth are doing and where they are doing it. Get emergency contact info for all of the students and give out numbers where at least two project leaders can be reached at all times.



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What sort of direction is important to provide when out in the field?

Hopefully most questions will have been answered through the practice the youth did in training. However, instruct adult leaders to be on hand to advise if questions do come up, and to check in with team members periodically to make sure that the responses are the type of info you are looking for. If everyone seems to be getting it right, then you don't need to keep checking in. Have each data collector set goals for how many people they want to try to reach in a certain time period. This will help them stay on task.

What are your thoughts on involving youth in making sense of the data?

I think it's really important to debrief about their experience collecting the data – how they were most successful in getting people to participate, where respondents had questions, what interesting comments or answers they got. Not everyone will care to take part in this process, but some youth will want to look at the data and add their impressions to the analysis that the LLA is doing.

How can youth be involved in sharing the results of the survey with stakeholders?

Have them identify who should hear or receive this information. Ask them to suggest different methods or outlets for sharing results. For example, is there someone at their school, extracurricular group or faith-based organization that they want to reach out to? Encourage them to create materials and/or images that summarize the results. In this way, they might feel more comfortable in sharing the news with various audiences.

For more ideas about working with young people in your evaluation efforts, check out:

CYAN's Youth Engagement 101 Fact Sheet <http://cyanonline.org/youth/resources/>

TCEC's Culture in Evaluation guide http://tobaccoeval.ucdavis.edu/documents/culture_youth.pdf

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