

Youth Civic Engagement through the Youth City Council Program

By Stanley M. Guy



A crowd in City Hall witnesses the swearing in of a new Mayor and City Council. The city recorder asks those taking office to repeat the oath:

"I do solemnly swear that I will support, obey, and defend the Constitution of the United States, and the Constitution of this State; that I will discharge the duties of my office with fidelity."

These new "city officials" bring dedication, enthusiasm, and youthful energy to City Hall. They are members of a Youth City Council (YCC) and affirm youth civic engagement is alive and well throughout the United States. Though YCCs exist across the U.S., with the help of Cooperative Extension these councils could be duplicated in each state in the country.

Youth City Councils – An Established Concept

The first YCC in Utah was established in the early 1970s as a cooperative project between officials in Hyrum City and Utah State University (USU) Extension. It was part of a Utah Community Progress initiative used to stimulate community self-improvement. Nearly half of the 246 cities and towns in Utah have active Youth City Councils.

The councils mirror local city government.

As such, they are non-partisan. They have a youth mayor, youth council members, and a youth city recorder. If they're large enough, they have youth city department heads and committee chairs, and the youth councils can adapt to small and

large numbers of youth participants. YCCs create and adopt charters that detail their purposes. They provide city officials with a teenage point of view. The teens gain perspectives on local government and the political process. Madison, a YCC member noted that, "One of the most fascinating things about being a member of the Draper, Utah, Youth Council is our involvement in government. We have had opportunities to see government close up and personal on the local, state, and federal levels."

Youth City Council Endeavors

The success of the Youth City Council program lies with local ownership. The Mayor and City Council approve the creation of a YCC in their respective city and elected officials consider youth involved in YCCs as ambassadors for their city. YCC participants are usually 14 to 18 years of age and reside within city boundaries. They have their own council meetings, work meetings, service projects, and celebrations. They decide what projects to do to meet local needs. YCCs team up with a multitude of local service-oriented organizations to carry out projects in their communities. This includes service projects with police departments, parks and recreation, and other community groups.

Many Youth City Councils are involved with their local schools and help with reading and tutoring programs. One YCC chapter sponsors a freedom essay contest for students in their school. Others are involved in local school carnivals, after school programs, and mentoring at-risk students.

Communities throughout America have Founder's Day Activities, Fourth of July parades, and other celebrations that promote civic pride, and Youth City Councils participate in many of these celebrations. Councils also hold meet-the-candidate nights, police and firefighter appreciation dinners, and Senior Citizen Balls. YCCs plan and carry out food and clothing drives for local charities. The endeavors of YCCs are varied, based upon the decisions of the YCC.

Role of Extension in Youth City Councils

Extension resources are important in creating a focal point for Youth City Councils and helping keep YCCs connected with each other. Utah State University Extension provides training and marketing for the Councils. Marketing of the YCC program is supported through the Youth in Action newsletter and the Association of Youth Councils website. The newsletter highlights activities and events about Youth City Councils. The Association of Youth Councils website (<http://ayc.usu.edu>) contains information for prospective members, current members, youth resources, and awards and recognitions. USU maintains a listserv where YCC advisors sign up to send and receive e-mails.

USU Extension also facilitates the annual Youth Leadership Institute for YCC members. These three-day conferences have inspirational speakers, workshops, peer mentors, and social activities. Evaluations show that approximately ninety percent attending the Leadership Institutes feel they are "excellent" or "good." More importantly, approximately ninety percent of participants say they

are going to adopt best practices taught at the conferences. Eighty-four percent actually used one or more of the best practices taught at prior leadership institutes.

Councils receive USU Awards of Excellence at a banquet during the Leadership Institute. Councils compete in categories based on council size. Both large and small councils receive 1st Place, 2nd Place and 3rd Place awards. Youth City Councils share their positive contributions, involvement with other community groups, difficult or extraordinary circumstances they face, and how they demonstrate competence, growth, and commitment. They describe their positive image among peers, elected officials, and citizens. Letters of recommendation from the Mayor and local elected officials accompany and support the applications. USU Extension gathers information on YCC impacts through this award program.

Partnerships

Utah State University Extension partners with civic-minded organizations to benefit the Youth City Council program. The Utah League of Cities and Towns sponsors Local Officials' Day with the Legislature. This event provides unique opportunities for YCCs to meet with their legislators and discuss important issues. During the event, the Councils interact with their representatives while they attend Committee Meetings, observe the State Legislature in action, and enjoy a luncheon with their legislators.

Youth City Councils – Lessons Learned

What does it take to start a Youth City Council in your city? The best approach is to find someone in the community to present the concept to the Mayor and City Council. This may be an elected official, parent, municipal employee, or in some cases, a youth who wants to be involved in YCC. Once one city implements the YCC model, other cities in the area begin to adopt it. Typically, the Mayor and City Council will be supportive of a Youth

City Council. To gain and maintain their support, it is imperative for YCCs to keep the Mayor and City Councils well informed about their progress, service, and activities. And it is recommended that the Youth City Council submit monthly reports to the City Council.

It is essential that volunteer YCC Advisors work alongside the teens. Successful YCCs use sound principles of youth/adult partnerships. This requires respecting and valuing the unique contributions from each group.


It is important Youth City Councils have the opportunity to meet with other Councils to share best practices, discuss their involvement in community service projects, and to provide opportunities for the advisors to interact with one another. Consider partnering with your university's conference services to hold a Leadership Institute as the number of youth city councils within your state grows. Councils learn and gather strength from interacting with each other.

Now It's Your Turn!

The Youth City Council model is an effective way for youth councils to organize, to help youth understand municipal government, to become more civic minded, and to develop and apply leadership skills. The program has stood the test of time, and now it's time for you to think about starting Youth City Councils in your state! They are a great way for Extension to promote youth civic engagement in partnership with local cities and towns. 🏡

Author's Picks for Further Reading


Association of Youth Councils

 <http://ayc.usu.edu/>

For information on youth civic engagement: The Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE)

 <http://www.civicyouth.org/>

For information on adult/youth partnerships: The Innovation Center for Community and Youth Development:

 <http://www.theinnovationcenter.org/>

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