

Unleashing Youth Potential

Understanding and Growing Youth Participation
in Philanthropy and Volunteerism

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Contents

Abstract	5
Introduction	7
Youth in Philanthropy.....	9
1. Environment and Opportunity	
Youth Participation as a Global and Local Movement	11
The Millennial Generation.....	12
The Voluntary Sector: Roles in Transition	13
The Potential for Youth	14
The Potential for the Voluntary Sector	15
The Potential for Community Foundations.....	17
2. Making It Work	
Re-framing the View of Youth in Philanthropy as a Complex Adaptive System.....	20
Principles for Complexity Management	21
3. Conclusion	
Learning, Listening and Linking.....	28
References	33

Abstract

Combining youth participation and development with communities and philanthropy affords a rich opportunity to create positive social change. This paper explores rationales for youth engagement in organizations, and the current environment and opportunities for youth participation, locally and globally. The author suggests that community foundations and other voluntary sector organizations can optimize conditions for, and benefit from, effective youth engagement by re-framing their views of youth participation and through a better understanding of youth, adult and organizational roles. Viewing Youth in Philanthropy as a complex adaptive system is suggested as an effective approach to developing the necessary organizational attitude and environment. The paper concludes with an outline of key lessons learned.

*The young do not know enough to be prudent, and
therefore they attempt the impossible –
and achieve it, generation after generation.*

PEARL S. BUCK

Introduction

It's about making a difference, adding value, recognizing gifts, and mobilizing assets. About adults who listen, support, believe trust, invite, bridge, educate, mentor, champion and open doors. And organizations that offer meaningful volunteer opportunities, and invite youth to participate, and are inclusive and patient, and believe that youth are capable and worthy of being part of their organization and their community. It's about youth who are community and globally minded; about youth who care.

Youth philanthropy is a dynamic new movement that has swept North America over the last decade, and is now starting to spread throughout the world. By combining youth participation and development with communities and philanthropy, a rich opportunity is opened up to create positive social and environmental change in ways that are relevant, long-term and inclusive. Just as the community foundation movement is creating excitement and opportunities for civil society development worldwide, youth engagement in philanthropy – this “movement within the movement” – has the potential to profoundly change the face of community foundations and of philanthropy, now and in the future. It also has the potential to significantly affect other voluntary sector organizations through its support and promotion of community youth initiatives, its modeling of effective youth engagement and its facilitation of youth volunteerism.

Genuine youth engagement does not just happen. It requires the presence of a variety of factors in combination for its initiation and implementation, and the creation and maintenance of conditions to support its growth and evolution. These include a field of interest relevant to youth, real decision-making responsibility, supportive adults, room for new ideas, and shifts of power and control. Such factors can be threatening to many organizations, for they often represent fundamental changes to their culture, ways of doing business and power structures. Yet even many conservative and traditional types of organizations find that the inclusion of young people is an effort worth pursuing, and it is increasingly becoming a priority in the voluntary sector.

Such is the case in community foundations. In engaging young people, they are challenged to confront the real changes that youth participation will bring to their

organization, both known and unknown. By their nature, community foundations are bridgers and connectors, often working in many different worlds: among people of wealth and influence; among the marginalized; among social entrepreneurs, community volunteers, politicians and activists. Their work crosses business, government and voluntary sectors and sub-sectors, ranging from the arts and education to environment, health and social development. They must be conservative in their investment policies and advocacy work – though able to take greater risks in their grant-giving and community leadership activities. They must balance charity and social justice, tradition and change, short-term needs and long-term endowment building. Yet, they must maintain their credibility, accountability and reliability across all of the fields they work in.

This paper will explore the challenges and opportunities presented by engaging young people in philanthropy, in the context of the organizational culture and practices of Canadian community foundations. It is based on the development of Vancouver Foundation's Youth in Philanthropy program in British Columbia, and the dissemination of its model elsewhere in Canada. We will examine several questions, which arose as the program evolved and must continue to be considered as it expands:

- How can we attract young people to traditional organizations?
- How can we provide leadership while also developing leadership?
- How can we give direction without taking direct control?
- How can we ensure accountability without having direct control?
- How can we ensure good practice while respecting the autonomy and differences of the community?

In exploring these questions, consideration will also be given to additional research and experience of youth participation in other organizations, and to the practical application of the principles of complexity management to Youth in Philanthropy.

By reframing our views of youth participation through a better understanding of adult and organizational roles, this examination will seek to expand our thinking about the role of young people in philanthropy and volunteerism, and contribute to the creation and

optimization of the conditions that will unleash their potential in the community foundation movement and in other voluntary sector organizations.

Youth in Philanthropy

Youth in Philanthropy is a province-wide program established by the Vancouver Foundation in late 1997 in order to involve young people in their communities and in philanthropy through activity in local community foundations. Modeled on the Michigan Council of Foundations Youth Project (MCFYP), one of the earliest of a growing number of initiatives to engage young people in the work of foundations, the Vancouver program is designed to enable youth to

- develop leadership skills
- learn about community, community foundations and philanthropy
- build a youth endowment fund
- provide grants to worthwhile youth projects in their community.

Other youth in the community benefit from the skills gained in developing and implementing projects, and still others as recipients of the resources or services provided by the projects themselves. The community foundation and the community at large likewise benefit from their involvement with youth on an ongoing basis.

The Vancouver Foundation provides program development, coordination, training and technical assistance, as well as start-up matching grants over a three-year period to eligible B.C. community foundations. Participating community foundations agree to the following conditions:

- To convene a Youth Advisory Committee that is representative of the young people in their community
- To appoint an advisor/mentor to work with the Youth Advisory Committee and liaise with the Community Foundation Board of Directors

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- To establish a permanent Youth Endowment Fund, the income from which will be used for grants to youth projects in the community

Beyond these “non-negotiables” or “minimum specifications,” community foundations and their youth advisory committees make all other decisions, with the Vancouver Foundation providing information, guidance and assistance as required. This highly flexible program thus evolves differently in each community. Ideally, this results in programs that are uniquely suited to local capacities, needs and issues, and have a high degree of ownership and autonomy by their respective community foundations.

The Youth in Philanthropy program has now been in operation for over six years, and to date eighteen British Columbia community foundations have convened youth advisory councils. Additional community foundations are added as their boards of directors commit to the concept and the program.

1

Environment and Opportunity

Youth Participation as a Global and Local Movement

The concept of youth philanthropy has grown in tandem with the global movement towards increased youth participation in social action. It is clear that interest in and support for youth engagement in community foundations have not developed in isolation, but are part of a growing recognition that young people have been excluded for too long, and that, as envisioned by the Commonwealth Secretariat, “youth participation is our greatest hope for lasting social transformation. It lies at the core of our mission to create compassionate, sustainable and equitable societies where all people can thrive.”¹

In order to understand the context in which Youth in Philanthropy has developed, it is helpful to examine today’s social environment and the demographics of today’s youth, and to consider the broader implications of youth participation in the voluntary sector. Although the movement to youth participation has been progressing for several decades, until recently there has been little research or documentation of programs, policies and practices pertaining to genuine inclusion and engagement of young people. However, new information technologies, greater numbers of opportunities, increased interest and a sense of urgency have combined to increase the information available and to expand the networks of those working to facilitate youth participation, and the networks of youth themselves.

¹ Foster and Naidoo, *Young People at the Centre*, 29.

The Millennial Generation

Given the ubiquitousness of “youth culture” in the mass media, few people can remain unaware of the younger generation’s trends in fashion and entertainment. Fewer people, however, seem to be aware that, once one looks beyond the spending power of youth, the pop idol influence of teen entertainers such as Britney Spears, or the drug-induced atmosphere of rave culture, there is a generation of community- and globally-minded young people who are poised to wield tremendous power as citizens and activists.

An article in the September–October 2002 edition of the *Utne Reader*, describes today’s youth movement as one that understands how “race, class, gender and sexuality interlock” and is talking about “how to build coalitions: laborers and environmentalists, Blacks and Asians, transgendered Jews and straight Muslims.”²

Demographers, academics and corporate marketers studying the so-called “Y” or “Millennial” generation are predicting a more confident, motivated, competitive, and conservative group than their predecessors in “Generation X.”³ “Polls now show that the college class of 2005 is the most progressive in at least 30 years.”⁴

This phenomenon is not unique to North America. Notwithstanding the pervasive influence of American culture throughout the world, disseminated largely through movies, television and the Internet, there is growing evidence that other industrialized countries have also spawned a generation of young people who are more interested and engaged in politics and social justice issues, more optimistic about the future, and more globally focused.⁵ Youth in developing countries are also increasingly engaged in addressing such issues as the environment, human rights, globalization and peace, and are often able to support their efforts through the use of modern communications technology.

² Wimsatt, “Young Visionaries,” *Utne Reader* (September–October 2002), 46–47.

³ “B.C.’s New Graduates: Driven but Wary,” *Vancouver Sun* (29 June 2001).

⁴ Wimsatt, 46.

⁵ “Youth and Age,” *The Economist* (23 December 2000), 1.

The Voluntary Sector: Roles in Transition

This creates tremendous opportunities for the voluntary sector throughout the world, although non-government organizations must be thoughtful about how they proceed in engaging youth, and must ensure that the resulting relationship is not opportunistic but mutually beneficial. What is clear is that today's youth are not satisfied with traditional volunteer opportunities; they are looking for roles that provide them with skills and knowledge, and will lead to better employment opportunities. They want challenges and responsibility and the opportunity to make a difference in areas that they care about. For example, Red Cross Youth Ambassadors for the Fight Against Landmines puts young people in influential leadership positions among their peers; Canada World Youth (CWY) has incubated EDGE (Education and Development in a Global Environment) as a way for past participants to continue their relationship with the program and with the international and community development activities they undertook during their CWY experience.

Increasingly, when they can't find an existing organization addressing the issues they care deeply about, or if such organizations do not open themselves to youth involvement, or if they believe that youth-driven action and activism send a powerful message about the potential and commitment of youth to effect change, today's youth will start their own organizations. The Spirit Bear Youth Coalition, SPARKS Club International (Students Providing Aid, Relief, and Kind Services), Free the Children and the Millennium Youth Project are just a few examples of youth-led organizations that have had significant impact in their respective fields, at local, national and international levels.

Surveys of young people who *don't* volunteer indicate that the two most common reasons given are (1) lack of meaningful or relevant volunteer opportunities, and (2) because no one has asked them.

Traditional youth-serving organizations are finding that to maintain their relevance today, they must retool and engage youth in their organizations, rather than merely serve them. Those that have not done so – having missed the opportunity to capture young people's interest at its ripest moment – have often faced significant declines in their membership or client base (or both). They have failed to recognize or act upon the statistical and

anecdotal evidence of significant shifts in youth demographics, trends, attitudes and aptitudes.

These shifts have not gone unremarked by social scientists. According to a 23 December 2000 report in *The Economist*,

In her anthropological studies of primitive cultures, Margaret Mead found that in “pre-figurative” societies – those going through rapid technological revolution – parents have little to offer their children because their knowledge is not relevant. “Adults don’t have all the answers anymore. They’re not in a position to tell young people what to do,” says Yvonne Fritzche, a researcher at Frankfurt’s Psydata market research institute. “Technology is one of the reasons that the relationship between the young and old is becoming a dialogue, rather than a lesson. It affects the traditional role of authority in a way that brings generations closer together. You can’t rebel against helplessness.”⁶

Other nonprofit organizations that are not youth-driven or youth-serving have realized that young people represent a large pool of potential volunteers to support their activities and replace the declining numbers of older volunteers. Although they have fewer hours to volunteer than the preceding generation, the number of volunteers among 15- to 24-year-olds almost doubled from 1987 to 1997, with one in three Canadian youth contributing an average of 125 hours each year to a nonprofit organization.⁷ Further, such organizations recognize the value of the high energy level, fresh ideas and different perspectives that youth bring, the importance of being inclusive, and the need for continual organizational renewal. They also recognize the truth in the oft-quoted phrase “Youth are the future,” and believe that youth should be involved in making the decisions that will affect them. Many, however, prefer a new slogan: “Youth are the present!”

The Potential for Youth

Research and experience confirm that youth are increasingly concerned about both communities of interest or purpose and their own geographical communities. They have ideas, skills, and energy to contribute, and tremendous capacity to learn, to serve and to

⁶ Ibid., 9.

⁷ Hall et al., *National Survey of Giving, Volunteering and Participating* (Ottawa, 2001).

lead. They are ready to accept more responsibility at younger ages, and are prepared to challenge the status quo and initiate change where they feel it is due. This is the first generation to have grown up with the Internet, and they are using it to connect with others throughout the world – not only for socializing but also for social change. The ease with which they adopt new technology, learn to think globally and adapt to change will be critical to their success in a rapidly changing and globalized world. Further, young people are already experiencing substantial change as they move towards adulthood: “increasingly, it is being observed that precisely because they are in times of personal transition, young people are better equipped than other generational cohorts to embrace change associated with globalization.”⁸

However, to realize their full potential, youth need the support of individuals and organizations that will share their knowledge, experience and skills, and provide experiential opportunities to learn, serve and lead. They need open-minded adults who will actively listen to them, mentors who will teach, coach and support them, and “champions” who will help open doors for them and create the space within organizations where they can be comfortable, and feel welcome and valued.

The Potential for the Voluntary Sector

While voluntary sector organizations are aware of what youth can contribute, they must also be aware that a genuine commitment is required on their part; there is no room for tokenism. Youth need to feel that their work is not done in vain: that it is meaningful, valuable and appreciated, and that they are respected as individuals and members of the organization. Today’s youth will not settle for symbolic or peripheral involvement, and will quickly go elsewhere if their needs are not met. Although it may take several years to fully involve youth in their organization, and for youth to feel a part of it, adults must have the understanding and patience to allow youth participation to develop; they must also be prepared to accommodate the changes that it will bring to the organization.

⁸ Foster and Naidoo, 5.

Young people involved in voluntary sector organizations worldwide have strong potential to counter some of the negative effects of globalization, particularly when new technology is exploited. Increased access to and sharing of information, instantaneous transmission of news and appeals, exposure to and dissemination of other cultures, increased opportunities for dialogue, access to alternative funding sources and inexpensive sharing of resources are just a few of the things made possible through strategic use of the Internet. These strategies can be powerful tools when used to address such issues as peace, human rights, environment, food security, health, safety and education. Moreover, they can give youth an equal voice in an adult world. Technology also allows youth to participate in addressing issues they are concerned about as individuals or through organizations, at times most convenient to their often busy schedules. It gives them unprecedented choice, something that is very important to them.

“The DIY (do-it-yourself) ethic in punk and hip-hop music – and the declining cost of technology – has contributed to the sense that anyone can become a visionary (anyone who can afford a computer, at least, or who doesn’t have to work three jobs to get by) by creating a Web site, a zine, a CD, or a movie, or by starting an organization or a company.”⁹

The propensity of youth to connect with their peers and the ease with which they adapt to new technologies, combined with their energy, ideas, knowledge, skills and commitment to causes they believe in, make young people a valuable resource for voluntary sector organizations. This includes organizations that might benefit from contact or partnerships with organizations beyond their borders. Youth must be seen as an asset and an investment, and not as a problem to be fixed or as “grown-ups-in-waiting.” This Millennial Generation has the potential to profoundly change the world for the better, if only we allow and enable them.

⁹ Wimsatt, 47.

The Potential for Community Foundations

The community foundation movement has emerged as a key component of the voluntary sector in North America, and increasingly in other countries throughout the world. Community foundations pool charitable gifts from many donors into permanent funds, the income from which is used to benefit local communities. They operate at a grassroots level, where they are in touch with their community and its concerns, and are able to respond to a wide range of interests, from health and social service programs to arts, education or environment initiatives. There are now over 140 community foundations in Canada, with assets ranging from zero to almost \$600 million, for a combined total of more than \$1.675 billion, from which they made over \$80 million in grants in 2003 to support local priorities across the country.

Over the past ten years, through their national membership organization, Community Foundations of Canada, they have built a strong network to share information and strengthen their capacity to better lead and serve their communities. The momentum and growth of the community foundation movement and its community and philanthropic leadership roles has led to the articulation of ten guiding principles for community foundations:¹⁰

1. Building community capacity
2. Understanding the changing nature of communities
3. Creating opportunities for dialogue
4. Developing partnerships
5. Reflecting diversity and fostering renewal
6. Establishing an effective and imaginative grants program
7. Building community assets and facilitating philanthropy
8. Evaluating and sharing results

¹⁰ *Principles for Community Foundations* (Ottawa, 2001).

9. Implementing responsive and accountable processes

10. Balancing our resources

These principles speak directly to the question of why community foundations would want to engage youth. Putting them into practice and at the same time fostering youth involvement brings value to community foundations in many ways:

- It offers more informed grant-giving to youth projects, as youth are in the best position to determine what will be most effective for them.
- It enhances the foundation's credibility among youth in the community.
- It enhances the foundation's visibility: not only does it expose it to a broad new network of youth and their friends and families, but there is also considerable media interest in youth participation in philanthropy.
- It exemplifies community capacity building – the development of a new generation of philanthropists, community volunteers, and foundation and voluntary sector professionals.
- It helps to reflect the diversity of the community, not only in terms of age, but also cultural diversity, as youth of other cultures generally have a greater degree of comfort than their parents in operating in both their birth culture and the dominant culture.
- It expands development opportunities. Donors are pleased to see young people engaged in positive activities in the community. Also, there is a new breed of donor that wants to know community foundations are relevant.
- It helps to make new connections, explore new opportunities and develop new partnerships, particularly with youth and youth-serving organizations, as well as inter-generational programs.

From a youth perspective, there is a genuine interest in philanthropy and foundations, and the opportunity to make a difference. They find it interesting and relevant, appreciate the power and responsibility of having control over grant monies, and it provides them with

useful skills and leadership development opportunities. It gives them good experience that is helpful when they are seeking employment, applying for awards or scholarships, or earning community service credits for school. But more than anything else, they are globally and community-minded; they care about their community and about other youth, and they feel that this is a positive way they can contribute.

By involving young people in philanthropy, community foundations can play an important role in promoting the view of youth as assets in the community, rather than problems. They can demonstrate John McKnight's assertion that "youth can be essential contributors to the well-being and vitality of the community" and that "given the proper opportunities, youth can always make a significant contribution to the development of the communities in which they live."¹¹

Community foundations that have established Youth Advisory Councils are learning this first-hand, and are now modelling to their communities what young people have to offer, and how organizations can effectively create the space for them to contribute. Through Youth in Philanthropy, they are also modelling many of the Principles for Community Foundations and demonstrating leadership among other foundations and voluntary sector organizations. Such a role, however, does not occur out of the blue; it must be developed intentionally, sustained through well-thought-out policies and practice, integrated into the key activities of the organization, and understood and supported at all levels. It requires an attitude of inclusivity, acceptance and flexibility, which may require a shift in organizational culture and the ability to view the organization through the eyes of youth.

¹¹ Kretzmann and McKnight, *Building Communities From the Inside Out* (Chicago: ACTA Publications, 1993), 29.

2

Making It Work

Re-framing the View of Youth in Philanthropy as a Complex Adaptive System

As youth participation in philanthropy and volunteerism continues to expand and evolve, and as organizations make decisions relevant to its management, administration, resourcing and governance, it becomes increasingly important to develop a common understanding of the elements of effective youth engagement. Equally important is the development of an appropriate frame through which to view youth participation.

In recent years *complexity science*, when applied to management and organizational behaviour, has emerged as an effective approach to understanding and explaining a wide variety of systems, from stock markets to hospitals, from ecosystems to manufacturing businesses. According to the authors of *Edgeware*, complexity science is not a single theory.

It is the study of complex adaptive systems – the pattern of relationships within them, how they are sustained, how they self-organize and how outcomes emerge. Within this science there are many theories and concepts. The science encompasses more than one theoretical framework. Complexity science is highly interdisciplinary, including biologists, anthropologists, economists, sociologists, management theorists, and many others in a quest to answer some fundamental questions about liveable, adaptable, changeable systems.”¹²

Complex adaptive systems are distinguished by the following characteristics:

- *Complexity*: the diversity of connections and relationships between and among a wide variety of components

¹² All references to complexity and organizations are from Zimmerman et al., *Edgeware* (1998).

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- *Adaptability*: their capacity to change and evolve, to learn from experience
 - Structure as a *system*: that is, a set of independent local agents that are also connected and highly interdependent

Viewing Youth in Philanthropy as a complex adaptive system can provide reasonable explanations, a common language and a deeper understanding of an approach to program development that may often be seen as vague, intuitive or non-conforming. It can help us see the logic underlying what we commonly think of as “unpredictable, disorderly, and unstable aspects of organizations” and explore such questions as how change and innovation happens, and the nature of leadership “where there is no direct authority or control.” It is important to note that complexity science is not offered as an exclusive interpretation, but rather it “complements our traditional understanding of organizations to provide us with a more complete picture.”

Principles for Complexity Management

Nine interconnected organizational and leadership principles have been proposed to guide organizations in complexity management:¹³

1. View your system through the lens of complexity (in addition to viewing it metaphorically as a machine or military organization).
2. Build a good enough vision. (Provide minimum specifications rather than trying to plan every little detail.)
3. When life is far from certain, lead with clockware and swarmware in tandem. (Balance data and intuition, planning and acting, safety and risk, giving due honour to each.)
4. Tune your place to the edge. (Foster the “right” degree of information flow, diversity and difference, connections inside and outside the organization, power differential and anxiety, instead of controlling information, forcing agreement,

¹³ *Edgeward*, 44.

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- dealing separately with contentious groups, working systematically down all the layers of hierarchy in sequence and seeking comfort.)
5. Uncover and work with paradox and tension. (Do not shy away from them as if they were unnatural.)
 6. Go for multiple actions at the fringes; let direction arise. (You don't have to be "sure" before you proceed with anything.)
 7. Listen to the shadow system. (That is, realize that informal relationships, gossip, rumour and hallway conversations contribute significantly to agents' mental models and subsequent actions.)
 8. Grow complex systems by chunking. (Allow complex systems to emerge out of the links among simple systems that work well and are capable of operating independently.)
 9. Mix co-operation with competition. It's not an either/or choice.

These principles, when applied to youth in philanthropy, provide an enlightening perspective on why the Youth in Philanthropy program has developed in the way that it has, and how it can continue to grow and evolve for the mutual benefit of youth, community foundations and communities. Just as it suggests appropriate action and direction, it also gives guidance about what to avoid.

In designing the Vancouver Foundation's Youth in Philanthropy program, various models of youth grant-giving were researched, but it was the experience of the Michigan Council of Foundations that was ultimately drawn upon, along with personal knowledge and experience of community foundations and of effective youth engagement. Since every community and every community foundation is different – local economies, politics, history, demographics, geography and resources guarantee this – every youth advisory council would also be different. Because a basic principle of effective youth engagement is to provide opportunities for decision making, responsibility and accountability within a supportive, educational environment, a prescriptive approach to program development would undermine the integrity of the program. Rather a framework was necessary that would allow young people to determine how their Youth Advisory

Council would develop and evolve within the structure of the local community foundation.

For community foundations to participate in the Philanthropy program, three basic requirements (*minimum specifications*) were established:

- A Youth Advisory Council (YAC) must be convened that is representative of the youth of the community.
- The community foundation must create a permanent youth endowment fund, from which the YAC will make grants to youth projects in the community.
- A community foundation board member must be appointed to be the liaison with the YAC, and there must be at least one Adult Advisor.

Beyond these minimum specifications (*minspecs*), community foundations and their YACs determine how they interact and operate. Resource material, training, and information about foundations, philanthropy and how other YACs work are provided by the program coordinator, as well as by other YAC members, adult advisors and foundation representatives. This knowledge transfer occurs through orientation sessions, workshops, meetings, conferences, on-line, by mail and by telephone. This sharing is intended merely as a starting point; YAC members are encouraged to contribute their own ideas and opinions, and through discussion, conflict and consensus, make their own decisions on most aspects of their operations (*clockware* and *swarmware*).

So, although the purpose, goals and objectives were specified, and an activity outline and time frame prepared, the design of the program was intentionally loose, due to the uncertainty of how it would evolve, the nature of youth and community foundations and the number of individuals and organizations involved. Engaging youth in community foundations was a *good enough vision*. It did not need to be delayed until it was planned in every detail; in fact, it shouldn't be planned in detail at all because the details should come from those directly involved, and could be made up as youth involvement progressed. The requirements for participation were kept minimal (*minspecs*), in order to encourage buy-in, and to ensure the flexibility, creativity and diversity necessary for relevant, dynamic partnerships and programs. *Paradoxical questions* were considered:

how could we train youth participants to an acceptable standard, without being prescriptive? How could we create systems of accountability, without being too rigid? How could we lead, without directing? It was expected that as the program progressed, experiences would be built upon, modified or discarded (*chunking*). New ideas and approaches would be added, and relationships would also develop and evolve (*generative relationships*). And it was accepted that once this vision was set in motion, much of the control would be given up (in complexity science this is known as the “15% principle”: although the amount of discretionary influence on change may only be 15%, in a complex system, this can still have a huge outcome¹⁴), and that the initiator’s involvement would evolve to listening, learning and letting go.

Although some Vancouver Foundation staff members were anxious about moving forward without a detailed plan, the program was launched amid strong interest and support from the Foundation’s Board and Advisory Committee members, and other community foundations. Its fluid and flexible nature was an attractor for youth and for community foundations, but a source of resistance for some staff who had concerns about how the program would fit into existing administrative processes, or had difficulty with a program that operated outside of the standard practices of the organization. However, those with professional and personal knowledge and experience with youth were more confident of the need for flexibility in the program and employing a developmental approach.

At the risk of stereotyping, many adults who live or work with youth would tend to agree that young people often seem to be living *at the edge of chaos*. It is not surprising, then, that they seem to thrive in complex adaptive systems, which themselves “thrive in areas of bounded instability on the border or edge of chaos.” Our experience to date with the Youth in Philanthropy program has shown that youth want only enough structure to accomplish the tasks at hand, without inhibiting the free flow of ideas. Whereas adults often become attached to roles and repeated experience (the rational, repeatable comfort of *clockware*), young people’s lack of experience and inhibitions, and their propensity for experimentation and risk-taking, make them quite comfortable with *swarmware* (trials, autonomy, intuition).

¹⁴ See Zimmerman et al., *Edgeware* (1998).

Their flexibility lends itself to iterative development of the program, building more complex systems from simple, effective systems by *chunking* (starting small). Many young people develop relationships quickly, and when given opportunities to meet, there are often surprising and interesting results. Their networks tend to expand exponentially and unpredictably, building *generative relationships*. Youth in Philanthropy seeks to ensure that YACs are aware of, and actually represent, the diversity of the communities they serve. This contributes to creative tension and helps keep them *tuned to the edge* (creative self-organization, successfully striking a balance between chaotic behaviour and getting stuck in fixed patterns of behaviour).¹⁵

Another cornerstone of the program is youth *engagement, not control*. Young people have little tolerance for tokenism, and if they feel that they are being manipulated or merely “displayed,” they will not stay involved. Effective youth engagement combines mentoring, skills development, support and training with opportunities to try things out, make decisions and take responsibility – *acting and learning concurrently*.

The Youth in Philanthropy model is one of *distributed, not central control*. It maintains authority and accountability through a governance structure that empowers Youth Advisory Councils to make decisions on most aspects of their operation, and report to the community foundation board in the same way as other foundation committees. Thus it *gives direction without being directive*.

Obviously, few of those involved will consciously view Youth in Philanthropy through a complexity lens, as few have been exposed to the concept and principles of complexity theory. However, some of the stakeholders intuitively approach the program as a Complex Adaptive System, while others, more experienced with traditional strategic planning and governance approaches, tend to take more of a *clockware* approach. This unconscious framing through one’s experiences may explain the range of perceptions of the program. Youth and smaller community foundations are accustomed to less structured approaches, as they have less time, experience and resources for detailed planning exercises; they have to “just do it.” Other groups, particularly those associated with the more established and better-resourced organizations, have certain expectations about systems, procedures, plans, and consultations. It is important to address such differences

¹⁵*Edgeware, 31.*

in perception and approach them in a way that respects people's opinions and experiences but exposes them to a new way of looking at the issues, and to a rationale for why it may not be advisable to try to make the program fit existing structures.

Already, such a shift in approach has been occurring through the entrance of youth into the *shadow system*, the informal and behind-the-scenes conversations and activities where decisions, influence and creativity often reside. Staff and board members have become more accustomed to youth being around the office, participating in meetings and conferences, and attending foundation events. As they get to know the young people as individuals and not just YAC members, their comfort level with the program increases.

This is already resulting in *generative relationships*, both within and outside the organization, which are creating innovation, excitement and new opportunities, some of which are transcending the *shadow system* and making their way into the "legitimate" system. For example, youth grantmakers from across Canada, meeting for the first time at a pre-conference gathering at the 2000 Community Foundations of Canada (CFC) Conference, felt that they should have an ongoing means of communication, as well as input into youth participation in the conference. Since then, the CFC Board has provided them with resources that the youth have partially dedicated to create a national Web site, as well as a CFC-designated youth position on the planning committee for subsequent conferences. Various proposals have been put forward to strengthen and even formalize the regional and national Youth in Philanthropy networks; however, the consensus among the youth council members has been to allow these networks to evolve, building on existing activities (*chunking*). They have agreed that there is great value in meeting with each other, and there is a need to create opportunities to connect more frequently than every two years at conferences. Some of the possibilities proposed include: training and mentoring of new groups by experienced groups; the use of existing CFC programs and communication vehicles, such as the CFC Bulletin, the CF-LINKS professional development program; youth participation in regional community foundation meetings; and expansion and increased use of the Web site for networking and information sharing.

The realization of many of these activities, both regionally and nationally, will depend to various degrees on the motivation of the youth themselves, the support of their adult advisors, the leadership of participating community foundations and the resources of

Community Foundations of Canada. But it is clear that youth involved with community foundations are seeking to increase their involvement beyond local levels and to expand their influence within the community foundation movement and the voluntary sector. We will be better equipped to support and manage this expansion and evolution by being able to view the program through a youth lens, keeping the Principles for Community Foundations front and centre, learning from and building on our experiences thus far, and increasing our capacity to manage and embrace complexity.

3

Conclusion

Learning, Listening and Linking

Formal and informal assessments and evaluations in both Canada and the United States have reached similar conclusions and resulted in some fairly common descriptions of good practice. Although drawn from the experience of involving Youth in Philanthropy through community foundations, the lessons for effective youth engagement are largely applicable to any voluntary sector organization. The following conclusions are based on over six years of engaging youth in Canadian community foundations, and are largely consistent with recommendations from a variety of similar initiatives in the United States.

- Before committing to a youth initiative, *understand what is involved in engaging youth*: the resources required, both financial and human; the long-term commitment; and the expectations of adult and youth stakeholders. Boards and staff need to fully explore both the philosophical and the practical considerations of what it will really mean for the organization to effectively involve young people. They must be prepared for the accompanying changes in the organization, including areas of governance.
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- Be patient. Starting a youth program doesn't happen overnight. It takes time to develop support within your organization; time to recruit youth, and to retain, orient, train them and let them run with it; time to gather and maintain the resources required; and time to integrate it into the organization. Planning for sustainability is a long-term process. After the developmental phase, a long period

will be required to ensure program stability. These phases are not necessarily sequential. Sometimes there will be setbacks, and it may seem as if you have to start all over. Keeping your long-term vision in focus will help you reach the ultimate goal of sustainable, effective youth participation in your organization, even if you take a meandering path to get there.

- Avoid the *cookie-cutter* or *one size-fits-all* approach. Just as every community is different, every foundation and organization is different, and what works for one may not work for another. Explore the model or combination of models that will best meet the character, needs, opportunities and resources of your organization. As much as possible, have the youth themselves make the decisions about what their model will look like. This will require research and information about different approaches and practices, and discussion about what is a good fit for the organization and the community it serves. Keep in mind that, although the ideal plan may set short- and long-term goals, the actual program will be a work in progress. It's okay to change something that is not working well, or to try a different approach, or take advantage of a new opportunity. The most effective and innovative programs are those that are prepared to shift gears, evolve, adapt and learn from their experiences, while keeping the vision intact. Despite many different models, Youth in Philanthropy programs will have much in common and can learn a great deal from each other. There is great value in sharing information, ideas, experiences and evaluations with others in the field.
- *Appoint an adult advisor* who has the appropriate attitude, knowledge, skills and style to work with young people. Advisors must have active listening skills. They must know when to be quiet and when to speak up; when to offer assistance and guidance; when to allow the young people to work through things themselves; when to listen and when to let go. The advisor should be *a guide on the side, and not a sage on the stage* – a person who can act as a bridge between the youth and other areas of the organization, and advocate for youth at times when they are unable to advocate for themselves. They require training and orientation, and the ongoing support of other adults in similar roles.

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- *Be inclusive.* Consider diversity in all its forms: ethnic, cultural, socio-economic, sexual, religious, geographic – including persons with disabilities or special needs. Ensure that there is a variety of interests and experience included. Athletes, academics, boarders, ravers, techies, punks, those in school and those who are not, street-engaged youth, teen moms; natural leaders and not-so-natural ones. Avoid having intimidating membership criteria and application processes that might discourage young people from taking the first steps to getting involved. Inviting someone in who has never been asked to participate in something before can have profoundly positive results. Given time and the opportunity, everyone will have something to offer, and the leadership will evolve from unexpected places. Bring in new and younger youth regularly to maintain and renew the group.

 - *Create the space for youth in your organization.* Recognize that they are not miniature adults, and will have different ideas, interests, energy and skills to bring to the table. Their needs for information and support will also be different. Although they are there to do serious work, the way they do it will be different. Accept that. Recognize where it makes sense to have them adapt to the organization's systems and procedures, and where the organization needs to adapt to the youth way of working. Ensure that the culture of the organization is prepared to be youth-friendly, and that positive attitudes and understanding are nurtured by providing staff and board with information, training and support about what effective youth engagement looks like and how it can be supported.

 - *Involve young people as decision makers.* Provide them with the training, tools, guidance, information, support, mentoring and environment that will allow them to learn experientially and make progress early on. Give them roles that will enable them to make decisions, not to just provide feedback, opinions or recommendations. Be clear about parameters: what decisions they are responsible for, and what their role is in making recommendations. Create opportunities for them to move into positions of increased responsibility. Give them the trust they need to make their own decisions and the responsibility to get things done. There is no room for tokenism. There will be times when it may seem chaotic or as if nothing is getting done, but believe in them and support them, and they will come through.

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- *Learn from them.* Take the time to listen with an open mind, to inquire and appreciate their knowledge and their perspective. Be prepared for new ideas and different approaches to problem solving. Encourage opportunities for them to apply their creativity and act on their passions.
 - *Integrate young people into your organization.* Provide opportunities for interaction with the Board and staff. Include them in events. Visit their meetings occasionally. Work with them in fund development. Implement joint projects. Coordinate activities and information. Provide them with opportunities to represent the organization at events. Create internship and mentoring opportunities. Put youth on your Board. Make them feel a part of the organization, and make the organization feel that they are a valued part of it, and not just an add-on.
 - *Support peer training and networking opportunities.* There is huge value in youth speaking to youth. Make sure that new and younger members are regularly brought into the group and give them appropriate orientation, training and support. Give more experienced members more responsibility in leading, training and mentoring. Create connections with other organizations and develop partnerships, share information and training and conduct joint projects.
 - *Acknowledge the contribution of youth and the value they bring to the organization and to the community.* Send them thank you notes. Write them reference letters. Print their names and feature their activities in annual reports and newsletters. Tell their parents how great they are. Support their attendance at training or youth leadership development events or at conferences.
 - *Feed them.* Make sure snacks or meals are provided at appropriate times. Give them bus tickets or parking passes. It shouldn't cost young people to volunteer.

As the program grows and evolves, we continue to learn. At an organizational level, we are learning the value of leveraging resources, increasing opportunities for peer

networking, building partnerships, formative evaluation, the need for new tools, training and resources, and building on the lessons others have learned.

We're learning more about the growth and development of the youth philanthropy movement – the dissemination of the model, the tools and the stories. As part of a learning network on applied dissemination, we are exploring the essential elements for successful replication with other practitioners who are scaling up their programs, and applying them to our own experience.

We're developing a deeper understanding of complexity, transformation and social innovation and their application to youth engagement, community foundations, communities and the voluntary sector.

Finally, and most fundamentally, we're learning to maintain a keen awareness and appreciation of the organic nature of this movement, of the richness of youth voices, and of the inspiring effect of youth engaged in philanthropy and volunteerism. We know that we must let those voices and stories continue to teach and guide, as more organizations put promise into practice, and unleash the potential of youth participation.

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