

STAYING CONNECTED: ORGANIZATIONAL APPROACHES TO ONGOING YOUTH RE-ENGAGEMENT

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AUDIENCE

Informal / OST Educators
Education Directors
School-Partnership Directors
School Administrators or Ost-Point Person

WHAT'S THE ISSUE

OST educators often first come to know a young person through a program or event offered by the OST organization. We have written extensively about how educators, youth mentors, and program youth can play an instrumental role in supporting youth engagement in interest-driven learning with digital media by offering brokering support during programs and events (Ching, Santo, Hoadley & Pepler, 2018). However, we also observed that, for many youth, such crucial support can taper off or disappear altogether once the program ends, due to a loss of ties with helpful individuals (Ching, Santo, Hoadley & Pepler, 2015). One promising approach to minimizing this “post-program slump” in social support is through ongoing re-engagement with youth. This brief focuses on strategies OST organizations may employ to continuously re-engage with youth in their contexts.

CHALLENGES

There are several practical challenges to supporting youth through ongoing re-engagement. These include:

- **Lack of organizational processes and structures.** Approaches to engaging alumni require that significant effort and organizational routines be in place, as well as staff dedicated to carrying out these activities.
- **Misaligned communication strategies.** Traditional practices around alumni communication — posting updates on organization’s website, publishing a monthly newsletter, sending messages via email — might not align with the communication practices of youth today (e.g., social media, SMS).
- **Lack of opportunities at institution.** Organizations may not have additional opportunities to share with youth who have already engaged in a majority of their programming.
- **Youth may be shy about keeping in touch.** While some youth may naturally keep in touch with organizational staff after a program ends — occasionally dropping by, sending updates, asking for college recommendation letters — other youth may assume that it would be inappropriate to try and maintain ties.

ATTENDING TO EQUITY

One of the most important equity issues to keep in mind when it comes to this topic is that youth may differ in terms of the strategies that will successfully communicate opportunities to them or opportunities that may attract them or meet their needs. It is advisable that organizations pursue a diverse strategy and also invest in ways to evaluate how well those strategies are working, especially in terms of who is and is not responding to them.

APPROACHES TO CONSIDER

To stay connected to youth, organizations may wish to experiment with effective ways to stay in touch with youth who have gone through their programs, with opportunities they share through this ongoing relationship that youth will value. In this section, we briefly describe some approaches to consider.

- Explore youth-centric ways to stay connected.** Use social media tools to share organizational opportunities. For example, Mouse, a non-profit youth development organization in New York City, has an active Instagram account that it uses to post pictures of its programs and events, including an open monthly “Maker Night” where teens are invited to visit the Mouse office and partake of various maker and DIY activities.



- Develop strategies for alumni cultivation.** Offering ways to stay in touch by joining a program’s “alumni group” has many benefits in terms of re-engagement, including providing a way for youth to feel valued by and connected to an organization and creating a rationale for potential future re-engagement. Staff may share with their alumni an update on the organization’s activities, relevant opportunities including internships and jobs, as well as leadership and speaking opportunities. For example, GripTape, an organization that organizes small grants to youth to pursue their own crafted Learning Challenges, keeps in touch with each cohort of Learning Challenge winners. A subset of those winners have also served on the organization’s youth leadership board. Consider how “power” resides in both young people and the broker. Brokers are not the only individuals with power
- Consider offering a wider array of opportunities to meet a wider range of students’ needs.** Some organizations have been offering events and services to meet students’ needs. For example, the Harold Hunter Foundation, an organization formed to serve the needs of urban skater youth, and City Lore, an arts and urban history organization, offered a free legal aid and college counseling session to youth after they noticed that some youth had experienced conflict with local law enforcement!



REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- Am I making an effort to re-engage with all past youth participants?
- Are the strategies I'm using/planning for youth re-engagement likely to be effective for all youth participants?
- Are there additional opportunities we can offer past youth participants?
- Are there other organizations or opportunities we endorse that we should also recommend?
- How might I leverage my growing alumni network of youth advocates to assist me with key organizational objectives such as program recruitment and programming?
- Are there youth leadership or "levelling up" opportunities that I might share with past participants?
- What are things we can do, now, in a year, and in five years, to increase our ongoing youth-engagement strategies?

REFERENCES

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