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"Youth Involvement" in Our Field

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

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The IAVE World Volunteer Conference was held in Amsterdam on January 14-18, gathering 1500 participants from over 90 countries. One of the missions of this event was to involve young participants and develop momentum for attention to international youth volunteering. One way this was done was to invite young delegates from around the world to a pre-conference forum and then to report on their deliberations to the "adult" conferees (the word the young people chose to use).

The subject of young people engaging in community service is certainly far from new. Neither are youth "forums" or "days of service." But some issues surfaced in Amsterdam that made me stop and think-so a new "Hot Topic" was born!

What Do We Mean by "Youth"?

In the process of discussing "youth," conferees found that no one definition is acceptable to all. In many European countries, "youth" refers to ages 18 to 24. For the United Nations and in many African countries, "youth" includes people up to age 30-which strikes those of us from North America as strange. We, in fact, tend to include teenagers in our term "youth," which many countries do not. I submit that, until we can be clear about the age group under discussion, we cannot take effective action.

For those of us who want to include teenagers (and even children) in the "youth" category, what exactly do we expect from teenagers who have few legal rights but lots of energy and skills to share? Energize has advocated children as volunteers since our original book on the subject in 1983 - [Children as Volunteers](#). Yet, as already discussed in this section in [Mixed Messages: What Do We Really Think about Young Volunteers?](#), effective programs are not as easy to find as might be supposed.

Another wrinkle in the definition question is whether, when discussing "youth as volunteers," we mean any or all of the following:

- students in formal service-learning programs
- students engaging in service on their own
- young people not yet fully employed and therefore prospects for full-time (even out of country) service
- young adults who are in the workforce but want to be active citizens
- group civic action that includes young people because they are family members and residents of the community involved
- "pre-family" adults, in that the tendency is to see anyone married with children (even if still a teenager) as no longer in the category of "youth"-and some cultures accept motherhood at a very early age

Again, lumping all these categories together can muddy the waters badly.

What Role Should Youth Play in Planning and Leadership?

- In developed countries, we proclaim the wish to include youthful voices in planning as well as doing volunteer work. But this theme takes on far greater significance when one considers some sobering demographic facts in other parts of the world. For example, due to deaths from AIDS, war, and other disasters, the number of youth in some African countries tallies over 60% of the population. In such circumstances, young people have no choice but to take a leadership role in addressing their nations' needs.
- Much of the discussion about young volunteers includes the word "leadership." Understandably, young people want to be seen as more than "helpers" and desire a role in planning and coordinating activities. And many youth are competent to take on leadership roles. But the debate sometimes overlooks one important fact: youth may also mean lack of experience. And there are times when experience does count. We do not do young people a favor by advocating their move to the front of the line before they learn the skills necessary to lead. In fact, learning the best practices of "followership" might be one of the significant outcomes of volunteering.
- Do some societies actively block young adults from contributing? How? It was unclear as to whether the obstacles are legal ones, such as age of consent, or traditions such as honoring age and status over new ideas. This is especially important if we think of anyone under age 30 as a "youth." How does this differ from being a "young adult" ...and should it?

Should There Be Age Segregation?

More than anything else, I would like to learn readers' response to what troubles me most: age segregation. Offering a "youth forum" as a "pre-conference" activity is becoming popular, just as youth service recognition days are commonly "lifted" out of general volunteer celebrations. For that matter, we often do the same thing with older volunteers, too.

While there are good reasons to allow age categories to meet together sometimes in separate sessions, when and how do we then integrate them into the talent pool of all "people"? Put another way, if a 20-something affects change, is this attributable to "youth" or "talent"? Does it matter? Creating artificial categories may be counterproductive. Instead of holding separate sessions for young adults, why not truly integrate them into the main events-as workshop leaders, keynote speakers, and vocal participants?

Do any of these issues strike a chord with you? What are your thoughts on youth involvement in our field?

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Posted 3/20/01

Submitted by Vanessa KleinHaar, Vice President of Student Issues, Ontario, Canada

I understand what you're saying about the creation of separate age groups having the potential to be detrimental to an overall goal of segregation. As a 24 year old university student, I do think however, that in situations such as forums to get youth feedback, a separate forum is okay. Since there still is, and maybe always will be, a large amount of ageism in N. America and the world in general, there either needs to be many small steps to integration or some type of forced integration (which would probably be a lot more trouble than its worth). The example of a pre-conference youth forum has been given...and is a good one, as long as the same youth who participated in the forum are given the chance to interact in the conference. The problem occurs, when no interaction occurs or one person speaks on behalf of all youth.

Posted 2/17/01

Submitted by Gail Elberg, Director, Volunteer and Intern Programs, New York City, New York

I share Susan Ellis' concern about the segregation of different segments of our population -- in this case youth, and in that case -- the elderly, blacks, hispanics, gays, etc. etc. This is not unique to volunteer conferences. We have been conditioned to think, recruit, organize, build etc. on behalf of "separate" constituencies because this is how, for the last forty years, programs get funded. While very important gains have been made by bringing attention to especially oppressed groupings it has become a way of life that has over-determined how we think and how our society is organized. At the All Stars Project, which produces some of the largest and most successful inner city youth programs in New York City, proudly without government funding, we ask the question what is the best environment for development to take place. Sometimes it's youth meeting together. Most often what's most developmental for growth is a coming together of diverse peoples who together, we feel, will create a better society for all.

Posted 2/16/01

Submitted by Ann Sprouse, Volunteer Roanoke Valley, Roanoke, Virginia

The Points of Light Foundation has wonderful information on working with youth and a new initiative to encourage service learning as opposed to "community service". Community based service learning

programs not only promote youth development but community development as well and is grounded in youth/adult partnerships. Through this process young people improve academic learning and develop personal skills through structured service projects that meet community needs. By giving young people the responsibility of designing, planning and implementing their service projects, we allow them to offer us fresh/new perspectives and even new funding sources! Most young people don't see volunteer work as "feel good" work. They see it as a means to an end - a way to create community change. By using the service learning process when working with youth, we allow them to be involved in helping others, with a particular emphasis placed on the learning that occurs through service. I would encourage folks to use the guidance provided by the Youth Outreach team at the Points of Light Foundation when working with young people.

Posted 2/14/01

Submitted by tan chee koon (mrs), executive director, national volunteer centre, singapore

You struck a chord with your observation that there were repeated calls for youth involvement in leadership and planning, but were the youth prepared to be trained in "followership" principles as well? This was the feeling I came away with at the conference - that the youth want to be heard, but are they prepared to listen too, especially to the voices of wisdom that come with maturity? There was an uncomfortable element of "we" vs. "them" in the conference proceedings; an outcome I think of setting aside the youth at the pre-conference youth forum. We are firm believers in our youth and if they can be trained in followership as well as leadership, as you suggest, they will make strong leaders for the volunteer movement.

Submitted by 2/13/01

Submitted by Tom Rinkoski, Director, Volunteer Services, Diocese of Green Bay, Wisconsin

I work with youth 12 - 20 as a trainer for Assets Development (Search Institute, Minneapolis, MN). I have discovered that youth are willing, even excited to work on Assets teams if they experience being valued. While I do not always have a handle on how best to offer that for all youth, I do now constantly check it. Youth being asked to participate in existing programs, even in leadership positions, is considerably different than asking them to grow a program from the ground up and take it in places they consider meaningful. From the numbers I work with (small by any count) this is not an all encompassing model, but I do know that the youth I have worked with here in Northeast Wisconsin have been enthusiastic members of our leadership teams. In fact, when we have had teams without a 50/50 composition of youth and adults it has never been as enjoyable or effective.

Posted 2/9/00

Submitted by Diane Leipper, Leipper Management Group, Nevada, USA

It seemed only a small number of participants in the youth forum stayed for, or got involved in the entire conference. Fully integrated participation adds richness and broadens perspectives. The format that AVA has followed, scheduling meetings for specific groups within the overall conference, allows like minded people to meet but it is just another option within the overall plan. There were two themes expressed by the youth forum that concerned me and some other adults (those over 30). One, that adults needed to "let us", "give us" opportunities and options. The other seemed to indicate

that adults are not creative, don't have new ideas, and are stuck in old ways. Both of these themes seem counterproductive to vital and viable volunteer involvement. I think of the many great youth programs such as Girl Scouts, Junior Achievement, and 4H. They all enable youth to create their own opportunities, learn leadership, gain skills, develop resources, and to explore all kinds of creative options. What kind of lessons are youth learning if the message is that someone has to provide opportunities? Is this the kind of volunteer leadership we want? Youth do have a lot to offer. Many young people, on their own initiative or as part of an organization or group have made their own opportunities and done great things. They are a vital part of our volunteer community. The combined resources, experiences, and ideas of all of us working together can accomplish great things.

Posted 2/9/00

Submitted by Steven Lewis, LEO Advisor - Kansas Lions Clubs, Kansas, USA

As a member of a Lions club and a LEO (youth group sponsored by local Lions Clubs consisting of young people ages 12 to 28) advisor I have found that the youth I am involved with want what we all seek. Recognition, friendship, confidence and the knowledge that they are important. While the age of a person is a legal consideration, their abilities and energy are usually only limited by the access we as adults give them. I have seen few groups in our community who interact with young people in any kind of equal partnership. Most only allow limited and often very directed tasks to be accomplished while at the same time complaining that young people are not service minded. The youth in our LEO club (ages 15-18) see this club as an opportunity to break down barriers between the older and younger generations. As an advisor, My role is to enable them, and support them as they work towards helping their community. Developing personal confidence and leadership abilities that will follow them through the balance of their lives benefits us all even though we may not enjoy the shade of the seeds we planted today

Posted 2/9/00

Submitted by Marie Fox, Volunteering NSW, NSW Australia

Like you, the Youth Strand of the IAVE Conference was for we "oldies" a call to action. In NSW, we have followed up by calling a meeting of our youth delegates who will take responsibility for conducting a youth stream at our state conference in May and follow through hopefully to the Volunteering Australia Conference in December. We will focus on youth at the launch of National Volunteer Week and have a number of school based activities planned. There were two requests from youth that triggered my thoughts: 1) Don't ask how old we are but rather who we are, and 2) We're not just the future, we are the present.

Posted 2/8/00

Submitted by Suzanne Bennett, Volunteer Resources Coordinator, Allegheny County Area Agency on Aging, Pennsylvania, USA

I believe that age is not a boundary to be crossed into another age, but legal constraints in various settings, do vary the ages of appropriate participants. Good ideas can come from anyone, regardless of age, but like someone has already stated--from those who are new to the "field" or who have newly found a reason to become active volunteers. It is critical that legal matters not rule the intellectual

landscape, but their concerns must be met in some appropriate way to free the volunteer organization from legal liability.

Posted 2/8/00

Submitted by Helen Rusich, Volunteer Services, Terra Association Responding to the Needs of Pregnant and Parenting Youth, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada

Thanks for your article. On whether we should segregate youth, I tend to agree that often when a group is not seen or heard from or is at a disadvantage, then a big thing is made of trying to include them. Often this has its advantage because I believe we want to be inclusive. Once this minority group has a voice, however this is represented, then members from this group need to be included into the general population so that youth, women, seniors, etc. can dialogue and begin to understand each others concerns. In short, I don't always agree that we need to segregate groups, just having a few is sometimes enough to understanding their perspective.

Posted 2/8/00

Submitted by Sarah Oliver, Manager of Program Development, WICS Youth Programs, Washington, USA

This topic brought to mind my experience as a student-teacher (age 24) in a high school with a very diverse population. I quickly realized that 1) most of my students had more life experience than I did, and 2) I didn't have the life, or teaching experience, to make a good teacher! Now, I'm a trainer in youth development practices and principles, and the biggest problems I see are:

- putting young people in leadership/participatory positions without sufficient support and training for them to find success, or opportunities to learn both leadership and "followership" skills.
- assuming that youth can't/shouldn't do something because they don't know how, or can't take on a high level of responsibility.
- assuming that institutions (for example, board meetings, volunteer program structures) should not be changed, since they've "always been that way."

My favorite reminder for adults is, "Youth are bored at these meetings because these meetings are boring! If we work to make the meetings more engaging and alive, not only will youth want to participate...I think WE'LL want to participate more fully, too!" It's a bit trite, but the best results seem to come from a healthy mix...adults working with youth, youth working on their own, adults "leading" youth, youth "leading" adults... and being aware of, and responsive to, the individual needs, assets, and interests of each person. I'd echo the sentiment that it's dangerous and damaging to lump all youth together, and ignore the amazing diversity of experience

Posted 2/8/00

Submitted by Faride Ladak (age 36), HRD Chair for the Ismaili Council for Quebec and the Maritimes, Quebec, Canada

Great topic. From my experience as a volunteer in different capacities, the term YOUTH has been and still is very ambiguous and has a tendency to categorize and limit possibilities for many potential volunteers. In my mandate as an appointed chairperson for Human Resource Development and Management within our Religious Community, we face many challenges. A common one is working with other leaders who believe that age is directly related with the ability to be responsible and contribute positively. Within the last 10 years we are faces with a consistently decreasing number of new recruits. Part of it is due to this issue. While on the other hand we are also losing past volunteers in the age group of 50+ because they feel that young volunteers are introducing new and unknown ways to address issues, instead of just doing what we tell them to. (This is due mostly to our cultural belief of respecting adults). I am of the thinking that maybe we need to integrate all age groups, except for the inexperienced which must be evaluated and trained regardless of age when starting out. The concept of Meritocracy must be exercised. And in order for it to be successful the appropriate procedures for recruiting, evaluating and recognition are the key ingredients. The debate of what age group it should be is a great topic for professional debates (and that's about all). In our global, diverse and converging societies we must learn to work based on concepts such as MERIT which ultimately provide the best results for all concerned within the context of good ethics, values, etc..

Posted 2/8/00

Submitted by Dale Leidheiser, Extension Specialist, 4-H Youth Development; Colorado State University, Fort Collins, CO

Cooperative Extension Programs from land grant universities in each state have been involving youth in decision-making and community service roles over the 100 year history of the 4-H program. While there are many challenges that adults face as they work to develop life skills in children, (as iterated in many of the above comments) youth face their own set of challenges in working with adults. Youth find adults to be controlling, rigid, narrow-minded, closed to viewpoints differing from their own, etc. Youth also find that adults have experience and wisdom that can help them make quality decisions. Adults need to acknowledge the pro's and con's of working with youth and place them in situations that are cognitively, socially, and physically appropriate for the age and sex of the child. One of the most powerful curricula we have to train youth and adults to work together is one on "Youth-Adult Partnerships" developed through the National 4-H Council. The goal for many of us is to achieve a balance between the benefit to the youth volunteer and the benefit to the program to the program within which they are working.

Posted 2/6/01

Submitted by Sarah Brown, Director of Membership and Marketing Girl Scouts of Swift Water Council, New Hampshire and southeastern Vermont

As a professional in the Girl Scouts, I am a big advocate for youth leadership (youth in our definitions are ages 5 to 17 or grades K-12). We teach leadership and decision-making. If we are doing our job, then girls are ready for leadership roles with adults by the time they are in high school and sometimes earlier. And yes, we walk the walk, girls on council boards, committees, and task groups.

Posted 2/6/01

Submitted by Lee Dae Kun, Director/Korea Volunteer Academy/Federation of Volunteer Effort Korea, Pusan, Korea(south)

In Korea, children are under 18 by the law, and youth from 9 up to 24. Whenever I give a talk to middle and high schoolers I ask them to raise their hands if they think they are children. Nobody. Then I ask them to raise their hands if they think they are youth. All of them raise hands. Both answers are wrong and at the same time both are right, according to existing law. It is really confusing. My assertion is that youth should be from middle schooler up to 19, because older than 20 is no longer minority. I think it is not wise to have age segregation. Why not let them decide themselves if they want or like to attend?. However, for the purpose of service-learning for children, it is another story. Thank you.

Posted 2/5/01

Submitted by Rob Jackson, Volunteer Development Officer (Fundraising), Royal National Institute for the Blind, London, England

First off, I love the idea of those under 30 being young people. At the age of 26 this is an attractive concept given I ceased to be a young person by the UK's definition two years ago! I've worked (volunteer and paid) in the field since I was twenty and I have rarely come across any discrimination because of my age. When I have come across it, it is invariably due to people who equate age with experience and responsibility, a maxim that does not always hold true. We recently recruited a fourteen year old virtual volunteer to do some research on young people's attitudes to volunteering with RNIB. She backed up this age equals experience and responsibility issue by saying many organisations had turned down her offer of voluntary work because she was 'too young'. All I can say to those people is that they missed out on a brilliant volunteer because of prejudicial blindness. Finally, my favourite crusade on this issue is challenging the way people can tend to consider young people as one homogenous group rather than accepting their inherent diversity.

Posted 2/1/01

Submitted by Melissa Watkins (age 23), Student, University of Guelph, Guelph, Ontario, Canada

I see youth as being any person who is either a young person, or those who are new to a given area or topic. Those people with fresh ideas and perspectives on existing infrastructure or fields. This may encompass any age group. For example, I recently took part in a youth forum on coastal stewardship, and although the majority of the delegates were under 25 years of age, several participants were 40 or 50+ but were new participants to the "field" of coastal stewardship. I think it is unfortunate when programs and events exclude potential contributors strictly on the basis of age.

Posted 2/1/01

Submitted by Cindy Petty, Community & Public Relations Coordinator, Princeton, Indiana, USA

This is a most interesting topic both in terms of my job - i.e. recruiting health care volunteers and in terms of my service club-Kiwanis. In researching the generation X (those born 1961 to 1981, it has been said that they:

- Grew up as latchkey kids
- Want it all and want it right away
- Are techno-literate
- Are quick to move to results with minimal instruction
- Are able to think with a fresh creativity, but with a perceived aloofness that tends to rub the older crowd the wrong way
- Like increased schedule flexibility
- Little expectation of spending their entire careers with one organization or industry
- Desire to expand skills a capabilities
- Want to prepare for their next steps in their careers
- The notion of a balanced life is key for Generation X'ers Have different ideas of what a family consists of (not traditional mom-pop-2.5 children)
- Less altruism and more "what's in it for me"

To get more youth, you need to make sure that you provide basic instructions, but allow freedom for them to do the job THEIR way; keep an open mind; and encourage the fact that volunteering will help with future career plans. Anyone else want to add something?

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