



PROJECT *NOT SO* MUCH

The Centre of Excellence for Youth Engagement supports youth initiative through an open-ended framework for youth engagement. The Centre's research evidence shows that the quality of the engagement, its meaningfulness matters. That meaning is explored by discussing the issues that are most important to the youth involved in the activities.



THE STUDENTS COMMISSION

Brock University • The Environmental Youth Alliance (EYA) • La Fédération de la jeunesse canadienne-française (FJCF) • HeartWood Centre for Community Youth Development • Youth Launch Saskatoon • Wilfrid Laurier University's Community Psychology Program • Youth Net / Réseau Ado (YN/RA) The Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario (CHEO)

WHAT'S THE DEAL?

PROJECT NOT SO MUCH

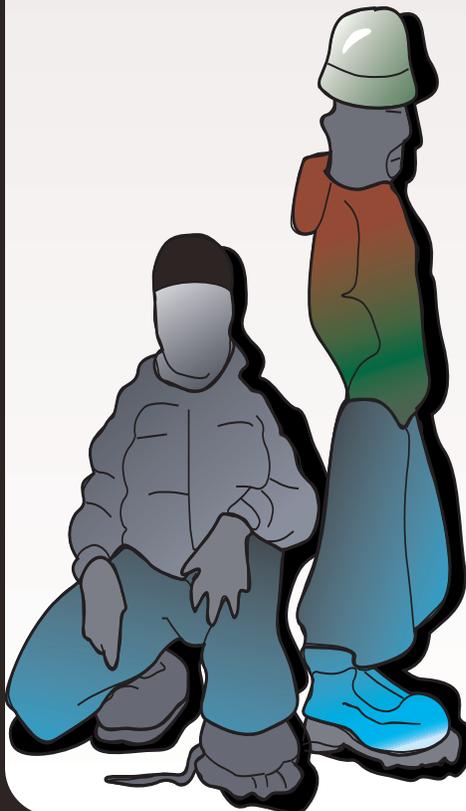
(PNSM) is a Students Commission led project that is designed to engage young men in positive activities. Its discussion-based format gives everyone a chance to talk about the issues most relevant to them, their peers and their community. These young men, ages 14-24, come together 2-4 times a month to express their biggest concerns about being a guy from a point of view that only they can provide. The group usually consists of youth at risk of getting caught up in the streets. Through discussion, tools have been developed to make the process of giving back entertaining and educational for all involved. Workshops, videos, skits, and publications are just some of the vehicles for engagement used to assist these young men in demonstrating leadership skills in a positive way.



WHO'S INVOLVED

PNSM members consist of young men from across the Greater Toronto Area representing various ethnic and racial backgrounds. Youth in school, those from the shelter system, criminal justice system, Children's Aid Society (CAS), homeless youth, street-involved youth are all represented in the group. Our past partners include Pape Adolescent Resource Center and Covenant House Toronto. Our current partners include the Community Safety Secretariat, Ryerson's School of Image Arts and Ryerson's School of Social Work. Our supporters include Regent Park Focus, The Mayor, the Toronto Chief's office and the Toronto Youth Cabinet.

We also acknowledge support for other projects of this group from the Pape Adolescent Resource Centre, Covenant House Toronto, The Counselling Foundation of Canada, the National Crime Prevention Centre, The Ontario Trillium Foundation, The Rotary Club of Toronto, Toronto Community Housing Corporation, CIBC Mellon, the Laidlaw Foundation., The J.W. McConnell Family Foundation and the F.K. Morrow Foundation.



THINGS WE'VE DONE

Since its inception PROJECT NOT SO MUCH and the youth involved have created many tools to get the word out about positive youth engagement. Two very popular youth-led workshops were created and are still conducted successfully to this day. Three videos made by the youth in the group have also been created to make those workshops more entertaining. After an overwhelming response from schools and community agencies, we were asked to do other types of workshops, which we created on various anti-oppression issues such as racism, sexism, ageism and homophobia. The magazine *Walk With Me* was written and designed entirely by youth. It was completed in summer 2005 for schools and youth centers across Canada. The magazine was created to share with others the experiences of young people from Toronto facing the transition from teenager to young adult. The magazine includes personal stories, articles and words of advice for youth by youth in a language that is easy for young people to relate to and older folks to understand. The PNSM team has also begun the second phase of the

project, taking their ideas about issues affecting youth and creating a new set of workshops and videos to present for the upcoming year. This group is facilitated by the PNSM alumni from the original group as a way of sustaining youth involvement and continuing their growth. The PNSM team, along with the experienced staff of The Students Commission is always looking for new ways to expand and get more youth involved in this unique program.

Some members are helping lead the PEACE initiative, working with the police to reduce gun and gang violence. They have been asked to conduct workshops for police officers on improving police-youth relations.

Members of the group now serve on the Mayor's Advisory Youth Group, the Toronto Youth Cabinet and the Police Chiefs Advising Youth Committee. They are sought after as speakers, presenters, facilitators and consultants by a wide range of organizations, schools and government services in Toronto, in Ontario and across Canada.



WHAT YOU'LL NEED:

A positive environment for a group of adults and youth who will respect each other is essential. Both adult and youth participants in the project have to learn to be non-biased and non-judgmental.

The adults should be aware of sharing their power and workload with the youth. The adults should learn when to give their input and how to facilitate discussions so the project's full contribution comes from the youth. It is better to let the youth do most of the work and have the adults guide the youth with the various tasks. This is an effective method of youth empowerment. Adult allies do not work for the youth, but work with the youth ;-)

Definition of Adult Allies:

Adult Allies empower youth and turn them into leaders by having a combination of attitude, patience, skills and awareness.

They are adults who believe that engaging young people in meaningful activities that have focus outside of him or herself is key to youth development.

It is a partnership between the young people and adults and not a mentorship. Taking risks and sharing power for accountability and failure makes an "Adult Ally".

Pillars (grounding values or expectations) have to be used by both youth and adults in order to get the project moving smoothly.

Why use pillars?

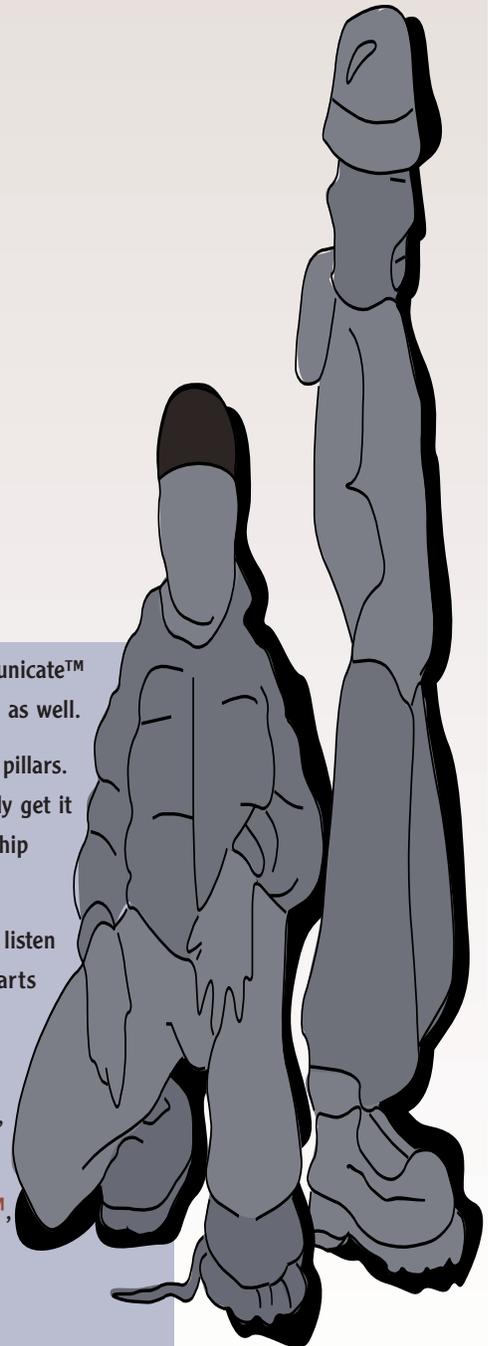
The Students Commission pillars – Respect, Listen, Understand, Communicate™ – are used not only when working with youth but also in our daily lives as well.

Respect™ is our first pillar and is known as the foundation of all the pillars. When treating people with respect (especially young people), you usually get it back. This creates the core or beginning of the partnership or relationship between the adult and young person.

Our Second is **Listen™**. When you truly respect a person, we learn to listen to that person. We listen not just with our ears, but with our heads, hearts and all our other senses.

From listening comes **Understanding™**. We process what we have heard (Listening). Understanding creates new knowledge and new skills, and opens one's horizon when thinking or when having a conversation.

If people really understand each other, then they can **Communicate™**, our fourth pillar. This pillar builds the partnership and ensures the relationship between an adult and a young person or any two individuals.



The Students Commission uses its Four Pillars, but any project can develop its own. The key is to live and breath and refer to them daily – and in each session – to use them in specific ways that deepen the understanding and integration of them in the daily behaviour of staff, volunteers and participants.

HOW YOU'RE GOING TO DO IT:

- **S**tart with meetings every week or every second week of the month.
- **I**ntroduce the project and introduce each other.
- **H**ave an organized agenda before each meeting plus the budget for the supplies needed for the entire meeting eg: food, tokens and honorariums.
- **M**ake sure that everyone gets a chance to speak and that everyone's opinion is heard.
- **A**fter the first couple of months you should be ready to start working and taking actions on the issues or topics that were discussed in the previous meetings.
- **Y**ou can turn the discussions into Public Service Announcements or educational videos or even workshops for youth who relate and adults that are working in the same fields.
- **C**ombine discussion of issues with concrete goals and production: a presentation, a video, etc.

Respect
Listen
Communicate
Understand

GROUP PROCESS

The group of youth can be a group of young men, young women or mixed.

For the first few weeks of the project it is nice to check in and check out.

Check in: introduce themselves to the group and just talk a little about how their day has been so far.

Check out: talk about how the meeting went and how they feel at the end of the day or meeting.

Participants can pass if they don't feel like saying anything.

Have the participants discuss issues that are relevant in their lives.

Have the group make their own guidelines and even come up with their own consequences if the guidelines are broken.

Always have two staff present (especially in the beginning) – one to deal with individual crises/altercations that arise in discussion, and one to keep facilitating the group.

Be alert to, and provide counselling and referrals for, personal issues of participants: housing, anger management, depression, relatives.

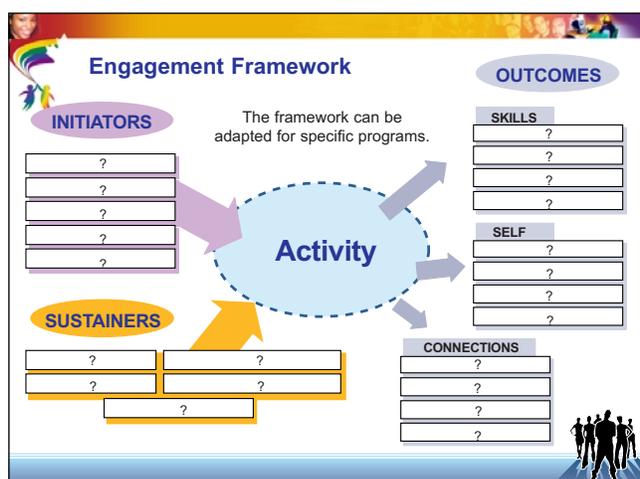
After the first few weeks, you can start taking action in the topic or topics that are most relevant to the group by finding out ways to address the issues in the community.

This is done by turning the discussions into Public Service Announcements or educational videos, or even workshops for youth and for adults that work in the same fields.



A Way of Looking at Engagement

If we think of any activity, good or bad, we can think about the things or factors that initiate or begin the activity. Next we can look at what will keep us interested and working on following up on the activity; what will sustain our action and positive behaviour? Then finally, we can look at what will be the results of our engagement? What will be the outcomes? Will our skills improve, will we be changed, will our connections with others improve? This framework is based upon work done by the Centre of Excellence for Youth Engagement.¹



In the framework, we recognize three levels of influence, and so there are three layers in our diagram and three levels of factors: individual (self), social (the individual's social influences such as family and friends), and system (the systems in which the individual goes to school, works, volunteers, and lives).

EFFECTIVE PRACTICES IDENTIFIED BY RESEARCH LITERATURE.

- 1) Peer-based approaches with peers who are knowledgeable about the issue (life experience).
- 2) Positive activities for youth to do, holistic and values-based approaches.
- 3) Knowledge, facts, access to information and services in youth-positive ways with skill-building and motivational components are effective practices.
- 4) Creating leadership and decision-making roles for youth is an effective practice.
- 5) Positive involvement with support, resources, and positive relationships with adults and institutions (schools, community centres, health services) is an effective and protective practice.

Interestingly, the relationship between all those things that initiate and sustain engagement are stronger and more significant than the direct relationship between the activity and the results, at each level. This supports the thinking that it's not about "what" the specific engagement activity is, it is about how the engagement is done, the environment in which it is done, and who is there supporting it.

MY STORY

I heard about PNSM through PARC (Rec Centre) and a friend who was already attending meetings. (Initiator: curiosity.)

The room was filled with people I didn't know but they all seemed like they were there for the exact same reason I was there. (Sustainer: new friends.)

That reason was money. (Initiator: dollar incentive, values.)

I was told you get money to give my ideas, use the computers and draw on the graphics programs they had. (Initiator: Interest in topic or skills.)

We had introductions and icebreakers. After the intros, discussions were started on what it meant to be a young man in Toronto. We all had our chance to complain about systems that weren't for men of our experience or society's view of young people in general. These talks were very interesting. It was a chance to gripe in an intelligent matter about various barriers we have to face and even the ones we put on ourselves. (Initiator: Interest in topic.)

Even though I was still very street involved and participating in risky activity, I was now becoming aware of how damaging things that seemed previously harmless really were and how narrow minded I have become because of my past times. (Outcome: Self: optimism. System: reduced youth crime. Social: connected youth.) + (Sustainer: attitudes, re-engagement.)

A turning point in the flow of the weekly meetings was the development of the workshop (engagement). (Outcomes Self: skills – teamwork, leadership, communication.)

During this time we voted to make our meetings once a week instead of twice a month in order to keep our minds fresh on the idea of a workshop and also because our first booking was in four weeks. (Sustainer: youth efficacy, increased responsibility, special event.)

Our first ever workshop was a smash!!! It was on stereotypes, the topic which we all voted on as a group. Everybody liked it and we started getting requests for more workshops at schools and even drop-in centers for homeless youth. (Outcomes: concrete results, connections – friends, social institutions.)

We created an effective workshop that was designed to let the presenters and participants speak with a lot of freedom about the subject of stereotypes.

(Outcomes: Self: skills, self-esteem, knowledge, teamwork, communication. Social: positive peers. System: education of others.)

After that, the meetings became more of an information session on our next workshops and preparation for a conference. When we first heard about the conference we were so excited. (Sustainer: youth efficacy, support for engagement, transportation, special events, targets.)

The national conference was great. We met so many youth from places that we only read about in textbooks. We got to hear about the struggles that they faced living in smaller communities and compared them to ours. The issues like drugs and violence were nothing new to us but suicide rates and lack of community centers in other parts of Canada was shocking. (Outcomes: connections. System: new friends. Social: diversity. Self: knowledge. skills - communication.)

We came back from that conference with a renewed interest in helping our community and the youth in them. (Outcomes: connected networks, connected youth.)

The fourth phase of PNSM, (with discussion, workshop creation and workshop delivery being the first three) was a magazine (Renewed engagement, new concrete project) (Outcome: youth-led projects.)

At first the group as a whole wasn't that interested in writing a magazine. We had other plans like a basketball tournament or something else that would mean more actual community presence on a hands-on level. But the more we kept coming to the meetings we realized that even if we moved on with our lives and stopped doing workshops the magazine would still be in school and recreation centers and so on. (Outcomes: optimism, knowledge, longer term youth-led projects.)

We brainstormed the topics which we thought were essential and after reviewing the long list, we realized that each topic could be grouped to form chapters. These

chapters had all the things we wanted to cover from fights to moving out. The magazine creation was a long process that was broken down into phases. (Initiator: Interest in topic, skills. Sustainers: youth efficacy, increased responsibility. Outcomes: skills: teamwork, communication.)

The first phase was just described earlier where the topics were decided. The second phase was the actual writing of these articles and short stories and making sure each chapter had enough articles. The third phase was editing these articles in a way that everyone had input. (engagement: youth driven from start to end.)

The last phase was the longest phase of all because none of us knew how to draw on the computer, much less make a layout. One of the members of PNSM became so good at layout design that he did the majority of the layout himself. (Initiator: Interest in topic, skills. Outcomes: skills: knowledge.)

Now the magazine is finished but the learning hasn't. Some of our members have learned how to write project proposals and have even secured funding from those proposals for the next six months so the learning continues...



YOUTH FRAME THEIR OWN EXPERIENCES

Participants from the project began to speak about their experiences with adults from the Centre of Excellence at conferences. Using the *Engagement Framework* as a way of looking at their involvement in PROJECT NOT SO MUCH they analysed in their own words how the project worked.

WHAT STARTED AS
A DISCUSSION GROUP
QUICKLY BECAME A FAMILY
WHERE WE PUSH ONE
ANOTHER TO REACH OUR
OWN PERSONAL GOALS
AND POTENTIAL.



Participation

The facilitators and staff members have to be non-judgmental in order to get full participation from the youth.

What to keep in mind

Keep in mind that people have different characters and come from different life backgrounds. Try to keep the group diverse. It adds to learning.

Attendance

In the beginning it might be hard and you might have a fluctuation in attendance.

Getting people to listen

The more relevant the topic of your group is, the more you will have a solid attendance.

Guidelines

Make sure that the group addresses the guidelines and consequences for the project and a solution comes out from the group as a whole.

Sharing

You might have misunderstandings, or quarrels in the group, but that's usually not a bad thing if you turn it into a learning experience for the whole group (by sharing the matter with the whole group).

References & Resources:

1. Framework originally developed by Dr. Mark Pancer of Wilfrid Laurier University, and modified by Dr. Linda Rose-Krasnor and Michael Busseri of Brock University, and Stoney McCart, Director of the Centre and The Students Commission.

Resources: The Centre of Excellence for Youth Engagement website contains a variety of literature reviews, an expanded version of the framework, and a series of papers on youth engagement. See www.engagementcentre.ca. The Centre is a consortium of academics, youth organizations and youth working in the area of youth participation, engagement and empowerment.

Centre of Excellence for Youth Engagement

www.engagementcentre.ca

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