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Commentary

Youth Advisory Boards: Perspectives and Processes

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The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child requires researchers to give due weight to youth voices on matters that impact them [1]. Furthermore, global events in the past year have led to calls for increased youth engagement in revisiting policies, systems, and communities impacted by COVID-19 [2]. However, most adolescent-centered research studies involve adolescents only as participants. A study that reviewed community-based participatory research publications found that only 15% of studies described partnering with youth in some phase [3]. Previous work has illustrated processes to incorporate youth into civic planning [4], patient advisory boards [5], and educational environments [6]. Publications describing adolescents as research advisors are notably missing from the empirical literature. This commentary describes key considerations for researchers interested in integrating adolescent advisors into their work and shares our team's experience developing and maintaining two youth advisory boards (YABs) with distinct purposes.

Benefits to Youth

Previous work has described benefits of youth involvement in scholarly programs such as career exposure, fostering youth-adult partnerships [7], and promoting social inclusion [8]. Youth may also derive epistemological benefits through research involvement by evaluating findings and contributing interpretations. Research and theory support the role of experiential learning in developing efficacy and expertise [9,10].

Purpose and Values

The first critical consideration in developing a YAB is the goals for involving youth. An investigator may develop a YAB to inform a single research project. Alternatively, researchers may engage

youth as advisors across their programmatic goals and activities. Another research group may seek a long-term investment in building and maintaining a YAB.

A second area to consider before starting a YAB is the values that will guide the processes. One value to consider is openness. Investigators should ask themselves how open they are to receiving feedback from adolescents and respecting adolescents' unique perspectives and experiences. If adolescents suggest input that differs from initial project ideas, is there willingness to adapt plans to incorporate their feedback? A second key value our team has incorporated into our two YABs is reciprocity. We explicitly use a "quid pro quo" approach in which we expect to give as much as we gain from our interactions with youth. We plan professional development opportunities based on each group's input on topics and learning goals and design activities based on their interests. This quid pro quo approach is used any time we design a process, such as planning a meeting agenda.

Planning Your Group

Purpose and values that define a YAB can also assist in guiding the group size and composition. A researcher who plans to fully engage youth in research advising and providing training may select a smaller group size to invest in each person, such as 5–8 adolescents. Values that include fostering relationships between youth may lead to a medium-sized group of 8–12 adolescents. A one-year project that requires a variety of perspectives may benefit from a larger group of 15–20 adolescents.

Attention to whether youth represent the target population for a specific project, if applicable, is important. Furthermore, diverse YAB members bring unique and critical perspectives to research. A final consideration is term length. We have had success in defining term length as one year, with an option to renew. This timeline allows youth to be present long enough to make contributions across a project or program. They can then step away to pursue other activities, or continue on if they love the work. We have sought out colleagues and partner organizations who involve youth so that we can offer our graduating YAB members information to continue to explore their interests.

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Recruitment and Selection

Recruitment involves creating and disseminating materials as well as planning a selection process. To reach local youth, recruitment via schools can involve guidance counselors or invested science or health teachers. Partner organizations who serve youth such as the YMCA or Big Brothers/Big Sisters may also be willing to assist in disseminating information or nominating youth. For schools and organizations, it is important to consider developing relationships that are *quid pro quo* rather than approaching with a one-sided ask. For an established YAB, seeking input from current members in the recruitment and selection process is a valuable approach.

A one-page information sheet that can be downloaded, printed, or attached to emails is a versatile recruitment tool. Flyers with colorful images of adolescents and text that welcomes diverse applicants are key to successful recruitment. Consider putting a link to the researcher's website to allow youth and families to learn about the investigator or institution sponsoring the YAB. For virtual YABs, reaching youth may involve social media [11], professional listservs, or colleagues in adolescent health. In many cases, investigating how to reach diverse populations through institutional resources can inform best practices.

The application process for a YAB may vary, but it is recommended to have a process to ensure applicants are informed about what participation entails. We have designed our selection processes to ensure youth are committed without creating a burdensome process. We have found success with requiring a brief written application, including a paragraph expressing their interest, and an adult reference. A brief interview with finalists ensures they understand the commitment and allows discussion of their learning goals. Sometimes we find that youth who wrote a bland essay sparkle in the interview, or a quieter youth shows their passion through writing. Thus, we try to provide more than one way that youth can showcase their strengths.

YAB Meetings

Working with a YAB requires ongoing communication; thus, an early step is to determine frequency and channel. Adults

typically assume they should use email. To meet youth where they are and where they communicate, ask them for preferences. We have found that many youth prefer other approaches for rapid communication, such as text messaging.

YABs typically involve group work in meetings, so setting the meeting length and frequency is a critical initial step. In one of our YABs, youth preferred less frequent and longer meetings, so we meet quarterly for 90–120 minutes. Our other YAB requested monthly meetings for an hour. Using online scheduling tools to determine times that work for most youth and scheduling meetings in advance helps youth attend meetings around their busy schedules and family events. An absence policy is another important consideration; we are transparent in our requirement that YAB members attend 75% of meetings.

Working with a YAB

The essence of working with a YAB is the magic that happens in the group meetings. Thus, researchers should give careful consideration to what they hope to gain from each meeting and what they hope to give. In the area of gains, YAB members may be asked to discuss new project ideas toward understanding feasibility and acceptability from youth themselves. Unanticipated problems during a research study may be brought to the YAB to troubleshoot. Surveys or measurement tools can be reviewed during a meeting for feedback on content or length. After data analysis, findings can be presented to the YAB for discussion and interpretation. Finally, engaging a YAB to disseminate research to lay audiences and reach other youth is another valuable consideration.

Providing professional development to YAB members can take a variety of forms. Across our YABs, popular topics include resume creation, including documenting research experiences. Other requested topics include networking skills, professional interviews, and handling difficult conversations. Inviting near-peers such as college students or graduate/medical students to share their experiences can be valuable to students who aspire to these next steps. Incorporating didactic, interactive, and

Table 1
Example youth advisory boards in the United States

Organization	Membership	Structure	Website
The Fenway Institute	12–29 years	Monthly meetings and 3 retreats per year	http://fenwayhealth.org/the-fenway-institute/research/ycab/
Prevention Research Center (UCLA/RAND)	14–18 years	Meetings occur in evenings multiple times per year.	http://prc.ph.ucla.edu/youth-community-advisory-board
Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health Center for Adolescent Health	13–21 years	Twice per month	http://www.jhsph.edu/research/centers-and-institutes/center-for-adolescent-health/about/YAC.html
Society for Research on Adolescence	14–18 years	Monthly	http://www.s-r-a.org/announcements/blog/2013-09-19-introducing-sra-youth-advisory-board
Children's Hospitals and Clinics of Minnesota	10–18 years	Monthly between September and May	https://www.childrensmn.org/support-childrens/volunteer/patient-family-councils/youth-advisory-council/
Children's Hospital of Pittsburgh Youth Research Advisory Board	15–26 years	Monthly meetings	https://www.chp.edu/research/research-excellence/teens/ywab
Social Media and Adolescent Health Research Team (SMAHRT) YAB	15–19 years	Quarterly meetings	http://smahrtresearch.com/smahrt-youthadvisoryboard/
Technology and Adolescent Mental Wellness (TAM) Program YAB	15–19 years	Monthly meetings	https://tamprogram.org/tam-youth/

YAB = youth advisory board.

discussion elements provides varied learning opportunities and fosters engagement from youth themselves in teaching each other.

In Person or Virtual?

While our early YABs were all conducted in person, we have found decisive benefits to our newer experiences with virtual YABs. We expanded to national recruitment and were able to recruit a group with diverse backgrounds and interests in adolescent health. Video meetings have reduced burden of travel time and concerns around weather and traffic. Youth, as digital natives, are both comfortable and skilled in navigating the virtual format.

We have adapted some processes for remote meetings to ensure all voices can be heard. Some approaches we have tried within our video meetings include incorporation of the chat function, emoji reactions, breakout rooms, and within-meeting online polls. A new challenge with our remote and national YAB is coordinating meetings across time zones and considering how to support youth whose internet connection is not stable enough for a video meeting.

Learning More

An invaluable learning process for our team has been learning from colleagues. Table 1 shows some U.S. adolescent-focused YABs for the readers to learn more about them. It is our hope that investigators may use the content of this article to consider engaging youth in their research and scholarly efforts. The outcomes will benefit investigators, youth members, as well as the field of adolescent health.

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