

ENGAGING YOUTH IN NONPROFIT GOVERNANCE

**A GOOD
PRACTICE
GUIDE**



Funded by the Government of
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Service Corps program





TABLE OF CONTENTS

- 4** ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS
- 5** LETTER FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
- 6** THE YOUTH
- 7** PARTICIPATING ORGANIZATIONS
- 8** BACKGROUND
- 9** ABOUT THIS GUIDE
- 10** METHODS
- 11** PROCESS AND TIMELINE MAP
- 12** SESSION BREAKDOWN
- 13** NOVEMBER GOOD PRACTICES
- 14** JANUARY GOOD PRACTICES
 - 14** CALGARY
 - 15** REGIONAL
 - 16** EDMONTON 1
 - 17** EDMONTON 2
- 18** KEY GOOD PRACTICES
- 22** LIMITATIONS



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LETTER FROM **THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR**

We are excited to introduce this Good Practice Guide about how to engage youth in leadership to non profit, charitable and voluntary organizations across Alberta and beyond. Over the past year, Volunteer Alberta has watched the Youth @ the Table program take the term “youth engagement” from a buzzword to a program making ripples in communities throughout Alberta. In this guide you’ll find the stories about the 25 young people and 23 organizations who helped co-create this guide, and how they chose to address the task of engaging youth in their own unique ways.

As a capacity building organization, we hear and see stories from our sector daily. It only made sense that the Youth @ the Table program emphasizes the value of lived experience. Stories are so important in systems change work, because it’s from stories that we find the inspiration and fuel to continue to move the needle, despite hurdles along the way.

Youth @ the Table does not happen without a lot of effort. I applaud the Youth @ the Table team, Lauren, Melody, Eunice and Darryl, who go above and beyond every day to make this project so successful. I would also like to thank our partners:

- Canada Service Corps who believed in the possibility of getting youth to the table;
- Apathy is Boring and Youth Central, our program partners who encouraged us to critically think about meaningful youth engagement, and to create intentions for this program; and the
- Edmonton Chamber of Voluntary Organizations, who helped us provide governance resources to our program participants.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Karen Link', with a long, sweeping underline.

KAREN LINK
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

THE YOUTH



CALGARY

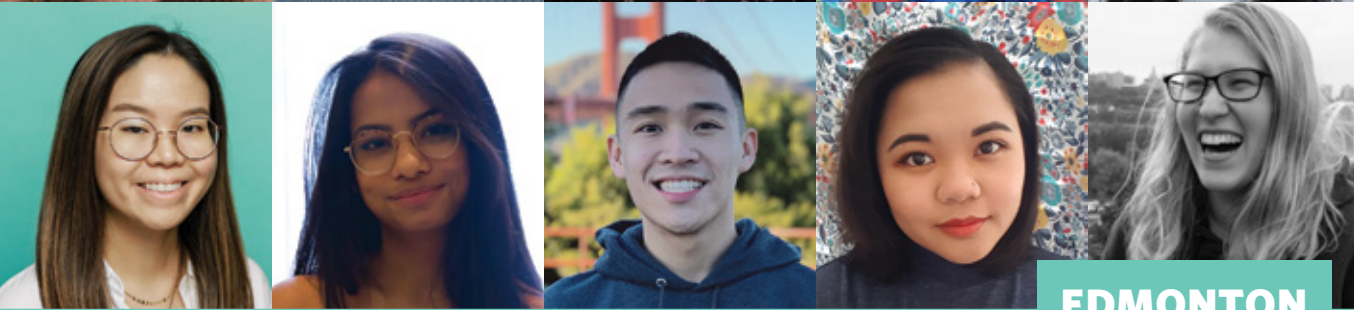
Calgary Youth: Monique Sereneo , Paul Siska, Peony Wong, Taylor Behn-Tsakoza



Edmonton Youth:

Row 1: Celina Hulm, Tylor Galutira-Murray, Sabrina Fabriss
Row 2: Allie Goselwitz, Amanda Giang, Anagha Devkota,
Andrew Abey, Av Mangat

Row3: Bonnie Chiu, Parul Singh Kanwar, Alex Wong,
Joyce Daroni, Kailey Ouellette, Roxanne Auger



EDMONTON



REGIONAL

Regional Youth: Aisley Miles, Alexis Holmgren, Chantel Walmsley, Nicolas Hurtado, Kate Potts, Moriah Hickey

PARTICIPATING ORGANIZATIONS

CALGARY



EDMONTON



REGIONAL





BACKGROUND

Youth @ the Table (Y@TT) is a youth leadership and engagement program under Volunteer Alberta. Through Youth @ the Table, 25 young Albertans (ages 18-30) work closely with nonprofit and charitable organizations at the board governance level by co-creating community service initiatives and projects with board representatives.

Youth @ the Table embraces the idea that young people have valuable contributions to make in the nonprofit community, especially at the decision-making level. Young people bring passion and new perspectives to boards. When channelled in the right ways, youth involvement can energize board operations. It is, of course, essential to acknowledge that youth engagement work can be challenging. An environmental scan conducted by Volunteer Alberta before the program's start identified some of the concerns that organizations across Alberta face. Reported issues include:

- Finding a balance between satisfying the board's priorities and accommodating young people's busy schedules
- An assumption that young people are not committed to nonprofit work
- Concerns that young people do not know about the opportunities nonprofit work offers
- Fears that young people do not have the skills needed or interest in board governance
- Organizations not being equipped with the knowledge to engage and reach out to youth effectively
- Structural and systemic challenges for underprivileged youth to participate in board governance

With this guide, Y@TT hopes to provide solutions to these issues by directly addressing the question: How can nonprofit boards better engage young people?

This guide suggests that meaningful youth engagement requires intergenerational knowledge sharing and collaboration. Seasoned board members and younger participants can benefit from each other in multiple ways. While young people bring passion, energy, and innovative ideas into the work that boards do, being part of a board provides youth opportunities for personal growth. Our learnings show that young people benefit greatly from constant dialogue and cooperation with experienced board members. For youth to meaningfully participate and provide valuable contributions to boards, they require opportunities to learn, grow, and succeed.

ABOUT THIS GUIDE

Drawing from our participants' reflections, stories and conversations with each other, this guide outlines good practices for how nonprofit boards can connect, work and collaborate with young people. This guide sums up four months of facilitated discussions. It covers our participants' reflections and their dialogue with each other about their board experiences, as well as their conversations with board representatives about meaningful youth engagement. This guide is a reflection of our participants' ideas, experiences and thoughtful examination of what nonprofit boards can feasibly do to engage youth.

OBJECTIVES

The purpose of this guide is to:

- Demonstrate our overall vision and process behind the creation of these good practices
- Show the rationale and methods used in our monthly sessions to develop these good practices
- Demonstrate our youth participants' work in co-developing this guide's good practices
- Outline the key themes and discussions that arose in our monthly meetings about youth engagement
- Provide a comprehensive list of good practices that boards can feasibly implement

"The work isn't just adults working for the youth or youth working for adults. It's working towards a goal where we can learn from each other."





METHODS

FOUNDATIONS

Our sessions were specifically designed to create safe and inclusive environments that encouraged participants to be open with each other. In these sessions, youth connected deeply with their peers through interactive activities and discussions. They reflected on the good, the challenges, the surprises, and ultimately, they contemplated on what meaningful youth engagement looked like. Through conversation, our youth worked through the meaning of their board experiences together.

DESIGN

We designed and implemented the sessions reminding ourselves of the following:

- **The youth participants and the Y@TT team are co-authors of good practices:** With the understanding that everyone holds unique knowledge and experiences, we created meetings where participants could feel empowered to speak up and be encouraged to listen. The participants brought their stories to the meetings and co-created this guide through their reflections and discussions.
- **Stories are powerful:** We wanted the Youth @ the Table program to be relational, which is why we placed a high value on the lived experiences of the participants by creating safe spaces for them to share those stories.
- **Interactive meeting structures allow for creativity:** Everyone retains information in different ways, so we made good use of chart paper, sticky notes, and colourful markers to allow participants to express their ideas in multifaceted, dynamic, and creative ways.

PROCESS AND TIMELINE MAP

THE JOURNEY

- Once a month starting in October 2019, the Youth @ the Table team convened with the participants in their respective regions. Based on the regions they belonged to, the participants were divided into teams: one in Calgary, two in Edmonton, and one Regional group that met for their sessions virtually through Zoom.
- The participants began their four-month journey towards developing good practices by first getting to know each other in October. To create a safe environment for discussions, the teams created group norms to keep each other accountable in their interactions and for the work they would do together.
- In the following three months, work began to develop good practices. The November and December sessions equipped the participants with skills for reflection and active listening. In November, youth reflected on their experiences together and developed their initial ideas about nonprofit board youth engagement and good practices. In December, the participants learned to practice active listening and conducted interviews with their board representatives to gain a sense of their board's perspectives on youth engagement.
- The following section highlights the key themes and discussions that arose in the sessions, including the different sets of good practices the teams developed. Our final list of good practices captures key learnings over these four months.



OCTOBER 2019

The Youth @ the Table team convene with participants in Calgary and Edmonton. Teams get to know each other with a plan to keep each other accountable.

NOVEMBER

Youth reflect on their experiences, developing initial ideas about good practices. Sessions equip participants with skills for reflection and active listening.



DECEMBER

The participants conduct interviews with their board representatives. Sessions equip participants with skills for reflection and active listening.

JANUARY

Youth collect their data and put together a plan for youth engagement and Good Practices





SESSION BREAKDOWN

- a. **Our Good Practices** - With the use of inclusive, interactive and introspective activities, the youth underwent a robust process of experience-based analysis and reflection. The participants' final ideas about good practices drew from their personal experiences, interviews with board representatives and their conversations with each other. They discussed examples of good practices that their boards already exhibited and other ideas that addressed blind spots or opportunities for growth. Our good practices suggest that youth engagement by nonprofit boards ultimately involves open dialogue, mutual understanding and respect.
- b. **Reflection on Action** - In November, the participants got together with their respective teams and reflected on their initial observations regarding youth engagement. The sessions started with the participants sharing stories and insights about what it was like volunteering with their respective organizations for the first two months. They identified positive experiences, challenges, 'aha' or surprising moments, and changes they might like to see in the future. To make sense of their experiences, the participants categorized their thoughts into themes. They then identified their initial set of good practices.
- c. **Empathizing with board representatives** - In December, we focused on the concepts of empathy and generative listening. We aimed for our participants to understand other people's perspectives through active listening so they can learn to build collaborative and productive relationships. The participants applied their learnings by conducting interviews with other board members to explore their boards' perspectives on youth engagement.
- d. **Final Reflections and Peer Discussions** - These activities centred on revisiting the participants' experiences from the beginning of the program up to January. We started the activity by allowing participants to individually look back on their board experience and identify their top five learnings regarding youth engagement. They then brought these learnings to the big group and self-facilitated their conversations. By the end of the session, all the participants chose a good practice to reflect on personally.

NOVEMBER GOOD PRACTICES

These preliminary good practices are the youth participants' first thoughts about effective youth engagement, based on their experiences. Although each team worked separately and came up with their own set of good practices, these good practices capture vital themes from discussions across the four different groups.

GOOD PRACTICES

- ✿ Provide comprehensive orientation & board training
- ✿ Provide safe spaces for youth to give input
- ✿ Be inclusive
- ✿ Be flexible and accommodating of schedules
- ✿ Offer support and constant communication

"The communication with my mentor is great! She's very consistent in reaching out to me and this helps me keep on top of things."

"I think having... the orientation meeting helped my transition into being a board member feel very smooth and organized."



JANUARY GOOD PRACTICES



“If a group has a really up-to-date and relevant website and they have good presence, youth are more likely to get involved with that organization.”

Calgary

The Calgary team’s discussions in January suggested that understanding, considering and respecting young people’s needs were crucial for intergenerational collaboration. The team agreed that boards and their youth members could learn a lot from each other. Youth engagement for them was a two-way process that involved mutual respect and transparent dialogue.

GOOD PRACTICES

★ Communicate with your youth board member efficiently and effectively

Be succinct in your communications, and involve your youth board member when appropriate and necessary

★ Provide feedback on what is needed

Offer periodic and frequent feedback so your youth board members know how they can contribute

★ Use up-to-date and relevant means of communication when reaching out to young people

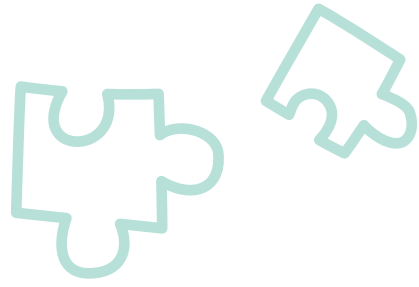
Stay updated with current forms of communication

★ Develop engaging and interactive meetings

Look for ways to diversify activities in your sessions to keep members actively interested

★ Demonstrate to young people that they are valuable board members

Youth board members should not be considered valuable just because they are young and can give the “youth perspective.” Explore possibilities for giving them roles that reflect their skills and attributes.



Regional

The Regional team's conversations and the good practices they developed revolved around ideas for how boards can become more youth-friendly. Some of the participants observed that although their boards hoped to engage young people effectively, they were not always sure about how to do so.

GOOD PRACTICES

★ Give sitting youth board members the capacity to run youth-based projects

Collaborate with your youth board members to develop youth-oriented programming and activities

★ Give members role-based opportunities

Consider ways to establish roles with set tasks. Doing so helps with developing capacity for personal growth and with knowing that contributions are valuable.

★ Set intentions when engaging young people

Be clear in your expectations of what you would like to see from your youth board members.

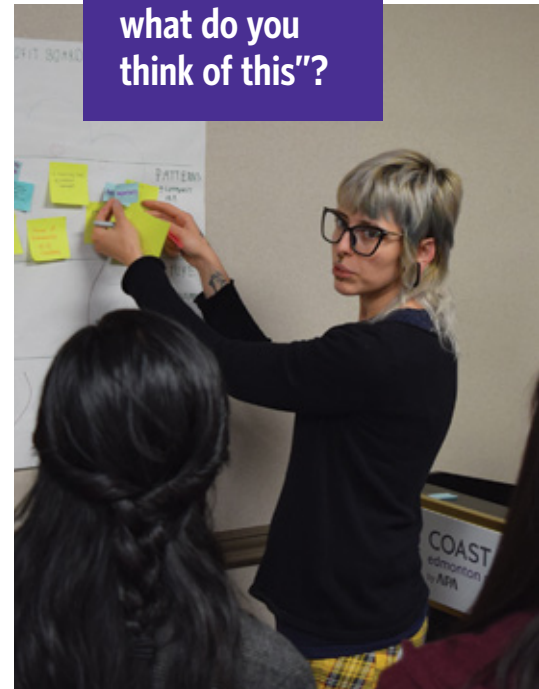
★ Encourage youth board members to share their perspectives and ideas

Give your youth board members the time and space to provide their input.

★ Diversify opportunities and activities where possible

Consider developing diverse programming, especially those that are more youth-oriented

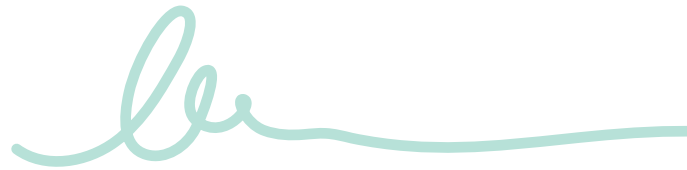
“The practice I'd love to see in action before the board does anything [is] asking [the youth], do you have anything to add? I noticed you haven't spoken in a while, what do you think of this”?



“My mentor always runs things by us asking if our demographic would be interested in it. [She] takes advantage of us while we’re there. It’s good to feel heard and be asked.”



Edmonton 1



The first Edmonton team identified meaningful engagement as young people being given a chance to grow as active board members based on their identities, interests and personal strengths. Most of the good practices showed that youth board members needed to be given the proper means to make valued contributions, either by being consistently asked for their input or by being assigned meaningful tasks and roles.

GOOD PRACTICES

★ Give youth board members meaningful tasks

Offer opportunities and tasks that will allow your youth board member(s) to grow personally and professionally.

★ Directly ask the youth board member for their input

Be active in acknowledging your youth board members’ perspectives and ask them for their thoughts.

★ Create safe spaces for youth board members

Provide your youth members with the opportunities to express their unique identities and talents.

★ Aim for diversity

Recruit for a more diverse board to represent varying perspectives and identities.

“Intentions help us achieve objectives while honouring...time.”



Edmonton 2

The second Edmonton team acknowledged that having the opportunity to sit on boards greatly benefitted young people, but they did not want to be tokenized. As young people, they did not want to be seen as advocates of the “youth perspective” on boards, but as young people with distinct skills and talents. This team recognized that sitting board members could help resist tokenism by supporting young people to become active and valued participants on boards.

GOOD PRACTICES

★ Welcome new board members

Provide onboarding training and orientation packages that help youth members adequately integrate into boards.

★ Ask youth board members for their input

Ask for your youth board member’s perspectives from the beginning, and as frequently as possible.

★ Give youth meaningful roles

Offer tasks that allow your youth board member(s) to provide valuable contributions.

★ Genuinely engage youth board members by avoiding tokenistic actions

Engage your youth board member meaningfully by recognizing the value of their attributes.

★ Give youth board members meaningful opportunities to participate

Being given substantial contributions is validating. Look for ways that your youth can be meaningfully involved.



“Youth involvement creates a sense of identity, an opportunity to provide youth with more knowledge and leave a legacy for them to continue [working on boards].”





KEY GOOD PRACTICES

“A lot of organizations have different programs, but they weren’t reaching youth. The youth didn’t have a way to engage youth. **They just needed to start talking to youth so they could target what youth actually relate to or what they need.**”

This final list sums up the key themes, observations and good practices that our youth discussed over the first four months of the program. This list is not exhaustive, but it captures our participants’ experiences. This list encompasses effective youth engagement practices that our participants identified on their boards as well as their conversations about what more can be done to complement what already exists. Intergenerational knowledge sharing and collaboration is a common thread among these good practices as we hope to show meaningful youth engagement requires.

“Working on our project, one of our mentors was like ‘is there anything that I can help you with, resources, anything we can answer?’ I think that really helped us feel more confident and supported getting the project off of the ground.”

Make youth feel welcome

WHY THIS IS IMPORTANT

Sitting on boards with more experienced and knowledgeable colleagues can be intimidating. Younger board members may feel anxious about fitting in or are unsure of what they offer. Feeling welcome helps them become more comfortable and open to engaging more purposefully in board activities.

WHAT BOARDS CAN DO

- Provide onboarding training and orientation packages that explain board structures, processes and organizational culture.
- Introduce youth board members to board and staff.
- Include youth board members in mailing lists and keep them looped in.
- Invite youth board members to celebrations, team-building activities and networking opportunities.

“I felt that my board was really welcoming straight off the bat, they added me to the email list, and all of the communications, and [they] actively asked me for my input. They took the time to say ‘Hey, what do you think of this,’ or ‘do you have anything to add’ so I really appreciated that.”

Practice youth-friendly outreach

WHY THIS IS IMPORTANT

Using updated forms of communication is essential when reaching out to youth. Young people might not know about the opportunities that non-profits offer. An effective way to get their attention is to be more visible on relevant social media platforms and youth-oriented spaces. Including them in youth outreach strategies is also crucial. Because younger board members often have insight into where and how other young people consume information, they can help attract younger demographics to your organization. If anything, this shows the importance of including the youth on boards in the first place!

WHAT BOARDS CAN DO

- Use up-to-date communication platforms that easily reach young people.
- Apply relevant and updated branding that makes your organization more visible and attractive to young people.
- Promote your organization in youth-dominated spaces such as post-secondary institutions and public events.
- Give youth board members the lead in organizing outreach strategies, and give them the flexibility to develop youth-based projects that draw in youth involvement.

Explore opportunities for supporting each other

WHY THIS IS IMPORTANT

Fostering continued youth engagement is a process of mutual support. For young people to meaningfully take part in their boards, they require guidance from their more experienced peers. With support, youth can help solve problems, become more prepared in expressing their ideas and be more confident in offering new ways of thinking that can help boards grow.

WHAT BOARDS CAN DO

- Mentor young people and provide them with guidance and advice on how boards work and how they can best be involved.
- Collaborate frequently with your younger colleagues.
- Support your youth board member in accomplishing tasks and projects.
- Solve problems together with your youth board member and engage in the process of mutual support and learning.

✿ Foster dialogue

WHY THIS IS IMPORTANT

Dialogue is key to fostering mutually supportive relationships. For youth to succeed on boards and become valuable contributors, they need to understand how to do so. Especially considering that many young people may not have much board experience, constant communication with other board members can help clarify expectations, reveal their positive attributes (e.g. good work they did, their talents and skills, etc.), and identify growth areas.

WHAT BOARDS CAN DO

- Make time to check in on youth board members, and ask if they are doing okay, or if they need help.
- Be transparent and provide your youth with well-rounded feedback or progress updates on how they are doing as board members.
- Have occasional one-on-one debrief meetings with your youth board member to make sure that they are following along with board operations.
- Communicate expectations to your youth board member, so they understand their roles and tasks.

"I have so many different people to talk with in addition to my mentor. All the staff and other board members have been so helpful when I have a question, or I want to explore something beyond board governance."

✿ Provide opportunities for flexibility

WHY THIS IS IMPORTANT

Due to varying commitments, young people often manage busy lives. Their schedules can often be tight with commitments conflicting with each other, but acknowledging these needs and having the willingness to work through some possible accommodations can help resolve scheduling issues.

WHAT BOARDS CAN DO

- Genuinely acknowledge the barriers and realities of this age demographic (e.g. school, introduction to the workforce, existing commitments).
- Identify young people's needs through constant and transparent dialogue.
- Together with your youth board member, work through their schedules and come up with clear objectives as well as reasonable accommodations when needed.

"I really appreciate it when my fellow board members take the time to accommodate me by asking which dates and times would work best for me. As a student, it can be really difficult to book times during lunch, which is when my board used to meet; they were able to accommodate me and meet in the evenings after school."

✿ Create safe spaces for young people to voice their thoughts

WHY THIS IS IMPORTANT

For young people to grow into their roles as board members, they need the space to comfortably and safely provide their input and ideas. Being encouraged to speak up gives youth board members increased confidence that their contributions are welcome.

WHAT BOARDS CAN DO

- Create norms and conditions of agreement for respectful and inclusive discussions.
- Act as safe spaces by offering young people support when needed, and being open to transparent dialogue with them.
- Give youth board members time and space to share their ideas, and ask for their input before making critical decisions.
- Encourage and allow youth board members to ask questions.



★ Be inclusive

WHY THIS IS IMPORTANT

Diversity can help expand the possibilities for what boards do by allowing for different ideas and perspectives to guide decisions. Much more than this, however, being inclusive of diversity allows for people of diverse backgrounds to succeed in boards as they are. Recruiting for, and engaging young people, cannot be separated from the need to engage with people of diverse backgrounds.

WHAT BOARDS CAN DO

- Recruit members from diverse backgrounds, including but not limited to gender, sexuality, ability, income status, and education level.
- Respect diverse needs. This includes accommodating for pronoun recognition, dietary restrictions and preferences, and accessibility needs.
- Always ask for and confirm people's particular needs to provide proper accommodations.
- Ensure that activities and operations are inclusive (e.g. organizing affordable or discounted events to youth or otherwise low-income individuals, and choosing central and accessible locations).

"If you don't feel safe in a space, you will limit yourself, so your growth will also be limited. If you feel safe in a space, you can take initiative and be creative."

★ Be genuine

WHY THIS IS IMPORTANT

Ultimately, young people want to feel included and to be meaningful participants on boards. Like any other board member, young people want to help their boards flourish and succeed. To do this, they cannot solely be counted on to share the "youth perspective." Young board members hope to be valued as key contributors and seek genuine, supportive relationships with their board colleagues.

WHAT BOARDS CAN DO

- Set intentions for engaging youth. Engaging young people should not feel like an unwanted task that needs to be checked off a list.
- Reflect on reasons for youth engagement. Ask questions such as: Why do we want youth involved? What can young people gain from working with our board?
- Give young people tasks that reflect their interests and capacities.
- Give young people meaningful roles that will allow them to create impact.
- Offer young people some flexibility in choosing their projects and tasks to signify trust.

"I appreciate that the board ask[ed] for input and made an effort to include me. My mentor would ask if I have anything to add."

"Our mentors were like 'it's really your own choice, you're the leader of this project, and it's up to you what you want to do.' They gave us authority and trust to take on a leadership role."

"Our board [lacks diversity] and there are a lot of people who are young on the board and just a few old people. I think [diversity and inclusion] is important in general especially in the society we live in. Especially on a board, it's good to represent that diversity."



LIMITATIONS

The good practices offered here are grounded in the lived experiences of our participants, rather than extensive formal research. Our methods and conclusions may, therefore, be limited by a focus on particular experiences and personal opinions. Furthermore, the stories and perspectives gathered for this guide are drawn mainly from the experiences of youth participants. In the future, more work can be done to closely engage sitting board members about their thoughts on youth engagement.

Despite these limitations, referencing our participants' experiences means that our good practices reflect the realities of nonprofit work while providing deep insight into young people's needs.

HOW THIS GUIDE CAN HELP NONPROFIT BOARDS

This guide provides a wide array of actions that nonprofit boards can undertake to engage young people successfully. We offer specific suggestions that boards can explore based on their own needs and capacities.

This guide does not assume that the good practices outlined here will work for every board in the same way. These good practices do, however, provide reference points for what meaningful youth engagement looks like from the perspective of youth board members. Boards can apply these good practices in response to the kinds of members they specifically attract and the issues or opportunities they face. This guide acts as a starting point for what boards can consider.





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