

Handbook for Youth Engagement

Purpose

This handbook is intended to provide advice and guidance for the meaningful inclusion of youth within professional convenings, and specifically environmental conferences and forums. This handbook is intended for individuals planning these conferences and forums. This includes best practices and lessons learned based on the youth track of the [2021 Coastal Communities Forum](#), a virtual conference hosted by the Qawalangin Tribe of Unalaska, with the youth track led by the Alaska Conservation Foundation.

Topics covered:

1. Questions to consider in planning youth engagement
2. Considerations and recommendations in planning
3. How to prepare youth
4. Organizations to partner with for planning and supporting youth engagement
5. Additional considerations for events that will be in person or involve travel

1. Questions to consider in planning youth engagement

- A. Why do you want to involve youth? What is the value to your event, and what is the value to the youth?
- B. Who is your audience of youth? How will you reach them, what is their relevance and motivation to work with you?
- C. What is your motivation to involve youth?
 1. Why is it that you want to include them? If you are not sure, you should develop this further before reaching out and coordinating engagement.
 - a. Once you understand why it is that you want to involve youth, you can determine how to involve them in a meaningful way.
 - b. Example: If the goal is to have youth presenting at an event alongside professional speakers, planning should include significant time assisting the youth in developing and practicing their presentation as well as

understanding the other presenters, topics, audience, and expected questions. Less support and preparation is needed if the goal is to have youth learn more about a topic and opportunities as active audience members, not presenters.

2. Youth that understand why you want them to be involved and that they will be valued and have influence are more likely to engage.
3. Without this understanding you risk tokenizing youth.
4. With proper support youth rise to high expectations.

D. How will the youth benefit from this opportunity?

1. Youth should have a level of benefit from opportunities that they engage in. How will this contribute to their community? How will this provide opportunities for them to network? How will this allow them to explore their interests? Are they being compensated? Will this opportunity provide skills development?

E. What age group is appropriate for your goals and expectations?

1. The younger the youth you work with, the more support they are likely to need to understand complex technical presentations, actively engage with professionals, navigate conferences, network, and speak publicly.
2. Often it can be easier to work with high school youth as they generally have more foundational knowledge, flexibility with school, may have public speaking experience or an interest in gaining the skills, and are typically more mature.
3. Middle school youth can also excel in engagement opportunities, but need a more structured environment for active participation.
4. If you hope to have youth actively participate in and contribute to dialogues, work with professionals, and build networks, older high school and college students, and similar age would be the appropriate youth audience.

F. Are you looking for youth that are already involved, or will you be reaching out to a new audience of youth?

1. Using different existing networks can help you to reach them
 - a. [Alaska Association of Student Governments](#), [Alaska Youth for Environmental Action](#), [Arctic Youth Ambassadors](#), school clubs, summer youth programs, Mt. Edgecumbe, organizations that work with youth, etc.
2. There are options to reach youth that may not be engaged with youth organizations or leadership programs
 - a. Schools-- contact can be made with individual teachers, support staff, or higher level administration.
 - b. Tribal Councils-- many tribal councils across the state have dedicated youth coordinator positions that can help reach youth in their regions.

2. Considerations and recommendations in planning

- A. Include a young person on the planning team who has relevant experience.
- B. Be clear about expectations from the outset.
 - 1. Purpose of youth engagement that will be meaningful to youth
 - a. What is in it for you? What is in it for the youth?
 - b. In what capacity do you want youth present to be involved?
 - c. Do you just want them to attend? Would you like for them to contribute to conversations? Would you like for them to be involved in presentations? Would you like for them to help with planning or facilitation?
 - d. Youth that are more engaged in the conference will feel more empowered to stay involved and contribute.
 - 2. What are your organizations (or the planning team's) goals, expectations and desired outcomes
 - a. How many youth do you hope to have involved?
 - b. Are there communities you want involved that you should recruit youth from?
 - c. What roles would you like youth to play and are you prepared to provide the support for them to be successful?
 - i. Is your goal to have youth be a part of solution based or other active discussions?
 - ii. Would you like youth to present a session?
 - iii. If youth are simply participants, are you providing a space and support to discuss and ask questions to better understand what they are learning?
 - iv. Do you want the youth to spread out in conversations with adult participants, or remain in their own group?
 - 3. Clarify individual roles and responsibilities for planning team members.
 - a. A youth subgroup of 2-3 people to organize youth involvement works well. When you involve more people it can impede communication and slow the organizing process.
 - b. Youth-focused member of the event planning team
 - c. Point communication person (with partners and with youth), ideally as part of the event planning team
 - d. Recruiter and point of contact for teachers or others working directly with youth (could be the same person as above)
 - e. If credit is offered: instructor on record (to facilitate credits and work with students)
 - f. During the event:
 - i. facilitator(s) for sessions who also helps mentor youth,
 - ii. Note-taker and photographer to document
 - iii. For virtual events: technical host/support
 - iv. For in-person events: chaperone, mentor, and travel logistics

- C. Consider youth schedules before finalizing dates and times of your event
1. Ask schools in the communities you hope to engage for advice about best and worst dates and times of day for youth participation, considering school schedules including vacations, testing and graduation dates, school sports schedules.
 2. Key harvest times throughout the year- depending on what communities you work with, many youth will be unavailable during hunting, fishing, and whaling seasons.
 3. It is easiest to recruit, stay in communication with, and work with youth during the school year, and can be very difficult during the summer.
 4. Allow for extra time with youth in your event agenda. It will always take longer to work with you because of their schedules and because of their learning curve
 5. Set a final date for your event and work backwards with key milestones including finalizing agendas and outreach materials, recruitment deadlines, school permissions, preparation time and mentoring support, and finalizing any credit offered.
- D. Communicate with youth in the ways they will respond, including a mix of email, social media, text, and other means. Teachers and youth program leaders can be very helpful in figuring out how to best communicate with youth.
- E. Offering college credit can be a great incentive and value for the youth as well as help ensure approval for students to miss school. However this requires significant additional logistical planning that should be figures out months or weeks prior to the event:
1. Who will be the instructor on record, and who will cover their time?
 2. Who will pay for tuition? (the cost of tuition will be a barrier for many)
 3. Who will take care of required paperwork to create the course and complete requirements and grading?
 4. Contact the partner university staff early in the process.
- F. Considerations
1. Limitations and challenges for rural students that may need to be overcome include connectivity/internet access, meeting space, materials, and subsistence schedules.
 2. Will this event be part of the school schedule or outside of school as an additional commitment for youth?
 - a. Attendance policies vary between schools, working with schools can allow flexibility in this. Most schools require advance permission for excused absences, and unexcused absences may impact grades.
 - b. If you want to work with teachers to have participation included in their curriculum, reach out early. August/September and December/January are the start of semesters and are when many teachers plan out their curriculum schedule for the term. We recommend reaching out at least three months in advance.

3. Youth will be entering your space with varying levels of knowledge and experience with public speaking, research, and working with professionals. Keep this in mind when organizing and be prepared to provide support for participation in a professional setting.
4. Will you compensate youth for their time? Most professionals in this space are likely being compensated for their participation. If feasible, consider compensating youth for their participation with school credit, stipends, certifications, or other valuable means.
5. Funding: youth will need funding to cover their travel, stipends raise the bar for expectations and professionalism, the cost of tuition for credit is a barrier for many youth, some youth will need help with internet access for virtual events, supporting a dedicated youth coordinator will help.

3. How to prepare youth

- A. Include a young person in a leadership position to be closer to the age of participants and more relatable.
- B. Connect the cohort of youth participants early, to start building trust within the cohort
 1. The more time that the cohort can spend getting to know each other in the beginning, the better.
 2. Provide a space for youth to meet on their own to get to know each other.
 3. The closer relationship the cohort has, the more confident they will be in actively participating in the event.
- C. Provide foundational background information to help youth join from a shared starting point of understanding
 1. If youth are coming from separate schools, their existing levels of knowledge regarding the content to be discussed will differ. There are a couple options to prepare youth to enter the discussion with a minimized information gap
 - a. Offer pre conference training to youth participants to background and foundational understanding of the subjects of the conference
 - i. This provides a space for them to learn and ask questions in front of their peers and not in a large professional setting
 - ii. This training should be presented at the level of the general public, not a professional community
 - b. Send out training materials and background content for independent review prior to the conference (at least a week)
 - i. Set a time where youth can easily reach you to ask questions (ie they could pop onto a zoom link or conference call). Do not expect most youth to reach out to you themselves by email or phone, this is uncomfortable and intimidating for many youth.
 - ii. Ensure you are sending materials in a format that youth can easily

access (not all youth have internet or computers at home, but most have smartphones). Ask them what will work best for them.

- iii. Content should also be targeted towards the general public
 - a. NPR articles, online videos, news clips, and simple powerpoints are all great formats
 - b. Journal or peer reviewed articles are not a reasonable option for this and it should not be expected that many youth are able or willing to read through them

D. Provide time and space for youth to meet on their own throughout the event.

- 1. Provide time at the beginning for team building with the youth and their facilitators or mentors.
- 2. Build into the schedule a small amount of time each day for the youth to debrief with each other and ask questions
- 3. Include time at the end of the event for reflection, debrief, and exploring next opportunities. This will provide you an opportunity to assess youth engagement and impact, and a space for the youth to share and process their firsthand experience.

E. Youth that have a positive and meaningful experience are likely to seek out ways to continue being involved. Share opportunities for continued engagement that can be shared with them either through a meeting or follow-up email.

- 1. The 2021 Coastal Communities Forum had a closing session where organizations that had representation on the planning team and presenters were invited to share their available opportunities with youth. This leaves the youth with a sense of tangible actions they can take toward becoming or remaining involved.
- 2. Facilitate youth exchanging contact information with organizations and programs they want to stay involved with or learn more about.
- 3. Some programs maintain a contact list to continue sharing opportunities with youth participants (e.g. an email list or social media group).

4. Organizations to partner with for planning and supporting youth engagement

Several organizations work as partners in planning and coordinating youth engagement, offering extensive experience and success to build on. Partnering with a youth-focused organization can help immensely so you're not starting from scratch.

- Alaska Youth for Environmental Action (ayea@akcenter.org)
- Organizers of the Youth Track for Alaska Forum on the Environment, Kendra Calhoun (klcalhoun@alaska.edu)
- Native Movement

- Alaska Conservation Foundation (mkenworthy@alaskaconservation.org and amayokiely@alaskaconservation.org)
- Student governments or clubs at local schools
- Youth programs and culture camps run by Tribes and tribal organizations in local communities

5. Additional considerations for events that will be in-person or involve travel

Youth participation in in-person events requires additional consideration and logistical planning.

Additional considerations for in-person events include, but are not limited to:

- A. Traveling with youth under 18 requires significant planning for unaccompanied minors, including parental permissions, complex risk management and liability, and chaperones. Partnering with an organization that has experience and a strong reputation with youth programs can make this manageable.
- B. In most cases having a chaperone or mentor as a trusted point of contact to focus on the youth, provide support and mentoring, and manage travel logistics will be key to success.
- C. The high cost of travel will be a barrier to many youth. Youth participation will likely require funding to cover all costs, including travel delays which are common with rural communities in Alaska.
- D. Provide guidance and if needed, funding, for appropriate attire for the event.

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