Youth Engagement Framework

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BACKGROUND

There is a need for organizations that partner with young people to authentically engage with them in culturally responsive, context-appropriate ways. This is particularly important when working with young people who hold identities that have historically been marginalized with regard to race, gender, orientation, and disability, etc. Furthermore, research and design organizations have a responsibility to ensure that their methods are both scientifically rigorous and grounded in mutual learning and co-realization, rather than extractive in nature. After a scan of existing literature, the Center for Interdisciplinary Inquiry and Innovation in Sexual and Reproductive Health (Ci3) at the University of Chicago adapted the P7 model (Cahill and Dadvand, 2018) to develop a framework for youth engagement that incorporates these best practices.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

This framework is inspired by Positive youth Development (Catalano, Gavin & Markham, 2010) approaches as well as the Scandinavian Participatory Design tradition (Bratteteig, Bødker, Dittrich, Mogensen, & Simonsen, 2013) including the following:

- **Mutual Learning Leading To Co-Discovery**
  This principle ensures that young people and adults work together to attain shared understanding and new insights, rather than adults leading young people toward a specific predetermined goal.

- **Disrupting Youth/Adult Power Dynamics**
  Power imbalances between young people and adults can lead to an environment that stifles creativity and out-of-the-box suggestions from young people. To build a space where young people feel able to freely express themselves, it is necessary to work to disrupt that power imbalance.

- **Young People Having A 'say' Rather Than Just A 'voice'**
  In this context, having a 'voice' means that young people's perspectives are being listened to, but not necessarily acted upon. In contrast, having a 'say' means that young people's perspectives are taken seriously, and their feedback is incorporated into the final product in a way that authentically speaks to their perspectives and experiences.

- **Skill-Building -- Young People Are Equipped In A Meaningful Way By Our Work**
  It was important to us to ensure that young people gain something from their involvement beyond a simple monetary incentive. Just as they make valuable contributions to the work, organizations should ensure that partnership helps them achieve their personal and professional goals.

WHAT WE MADE

Created by an interdisciplinary team of designers, researchers, and community engagement specialists, the Ci3 Youth Engagement framework provides a step-by-step guide to implementing these guiding principles in practice.

CI3 YOUTH ENGAGEMENT FRAMEWORK
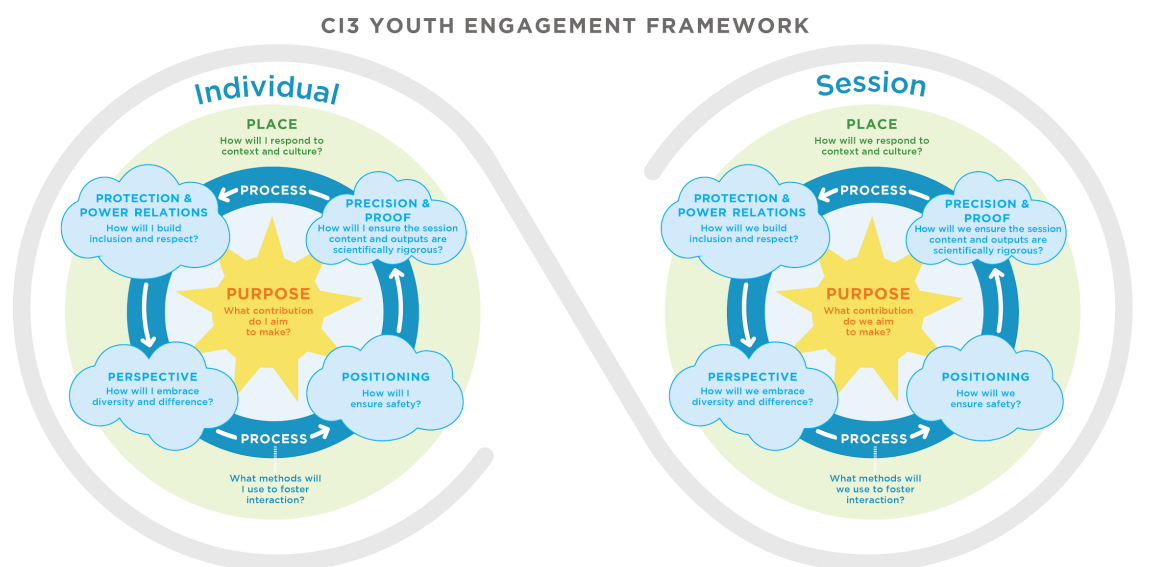
Adapted from The P7 Model, Cahill & Dadvand (2018)

HOW WE USE IT

At Ci3, we use our Youth Engagement Framework as both a tool for activity planning and a guide for internal reflection. On the "Session" side, answers to the provocation questions aid in designing session activities that reflect the principles of co-realization, skill-building, youth having a say, and disrupting youth/adult power dynamics. On the "Individual" side, the answers to the questions inform adult actions and behaviors in youth-facing spaces. Taken together, the Ci3 Youth Engagement Framework presents a roadmap for how to design an affirming, generative space with and for young people, as well as how to show up in it.

IMPLEMENTATION & PRACTICE

"My long-term goal is to be more active in helping my communities. Being a teenager often we are misinformed about health topics or not given the resources to learn about health topics. I want to be able to change that so that all students in Chicago are able to learn about health."

- 2020-21 Ci3 Youth Council Member

The Ci3 Youth Council is a paid cohort of young people ages 14-18 from across Chicago. Its mission is to ensure that Ci3 research and interventions center the lived experiences of the populations we serve—primarily young people of color. The council meets regularly throughout the academic year to consult, comment, and collaborate on existing Ci3 projects as well as generate direction for new ones. Council members are key thought contributors throughout our project design and development process, and are encouraged to be vocal and active participants during meetings.

What did you like best about participating in Ci3's Youth Council?

> *"The community, I felt like we'd already known each other for so long and everyone was welcoming and fun and it was never judgmental or tense."*
>
> *- 2020-21 Youth Council Member*

> *"The ability of having a welcoming, nonjudgmental community that I can talk to."*
>
> *- 2020-21 Youth Council Member*

> *"I liked that we had space to share-out, talk about how we felt about certain topics, and express our opinions."*
>
> *- 2020-2021 Youth Council Member*

In practice, the Ci3 Youth Engagement Framework serves as the foundation for creating a positive, affirming environment during Youth Council meetings. At the beginning of each council term and throughout the year, Ci3 staff engage in discussions around the 'Individual' side of the Ci3 Youth Engagement Framework. Discussing answers to the provocation questions and engaging in these sometimes-uncomfortable reflections together creates accountability among team members, and helps staff come to a shared understanding around how to show up in these spaces.

We use the 'Session' side of the Ci3 Youth Engagement Framework to help plan council meeting activities that meet Ci3 project objectives in alignment with our Guiding Principles. Answers to the provocation questions on the 'Session' side inform all aspects of our session setup -- everything from activity design to the exact wording of discussion prompts. By using a systematic framework for adhering to our organizational values, we aim to develop a shared vocabulary for authentic engagement with young people; center youth voices in our work; and create a valuable, affirming experience for Ci3 Youth Council members.

> *"I felt that our meetings were very youth-led, we were allowed to be open about our opinions and experiences with no judgment, and at the same time the staff were as well. With their expertise also our ideas were able to spread and possibly [be] executed with the connections the staff has."*
>
> *-2019-20 Youth Council Member*

This consistency in approach has yielded fruitful results. Below are some examples of the ways in which Ci3 has worked with our Youth Council on projects from our design, narrative, and game portfolios.

The 2019-20 Youth Council cohort created *This Ain't It,* an e-zine in which council members documented their experiences during the pandemic and civil unrest of spring 2020. Two of the entries from that e-zine went on to be published in the November 2021 issue of the *Journal of Adolescent Health.*

With the 2019-20 Youth Council cohort, we generated content for Frankly., Ci3's podcast centered on findings from our Adolescent X study. The 2020-21 cohort then offered further feedback on the podcast's production and marketing outreach.


We conducted co-design sessions for Let's Chat, a healthcare intervention designed to facilitate conversations between adolescent and health care providers, with the 2019-20 council cohort. The 2020-21 cohort then built on this work by offering iterative feedback on patient support materials and accompanying graphics.

Based on stories gathered from the 2020-21 Youth Council, we co-designed *Step Up,* an interactive digital narrative to illustrate the effects of bias and harassment in STEM fields -- as well as the positive effects of bystander intervention in these situations.

We co-designed *Lineage,* a blended digital-analog game created to teach high school students about the breadth and history of reproductive justice movements. Council members from the 2020-21 cohort will co-present on *Lineage* at the 2022 Conference on Adolescent Health.
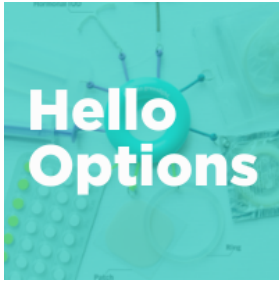
We created adolescent-centered contraception patient support materials for Hello Options, a birth control tool co-designed with young people. Members of the 2020-21 Youth Council cohort also appeared on *America By Design,* a national television competition series highlighting technology, innovations, and design breakthroughs that are changing society, in which Hello Options was ranked among the top three of the 29 innovations that appeared on the show.

"Our opinions were valued and were actually implemented into the projects that Ci3 was working on. There was never a 'wrong idea,' it was a safe place to voice your opinions and thoughts which always led to insightful discussions."

- 2019-20 Ci3 Youth Council Member

Overall, Ci3 Youth Council alums report positive experiences during their Youth Council term(s). The opportunity to do meaningful work in order to change the landscape of sexual and reproductive health has contributed to council members' personal and professional growth in a number of ways. Many current and former Youth Council members have developed mentor-mentee relationships with Ci3 staff, and we have written college recommendations or served as job references for over half of our current and former Council members.

"It impacted my long term goals by not only solidifying my choice to help others, but has given me insight on paths I could take and gain more knowledge about."

- 2020-21 Youth Council Member

With the help of our Youth Engagement Framework, Ci3 has worked to align our youth-facing practice with our guiding principles of mutual learning, disrupting power dynamics, giving young people a say, and skillbuilding.

- **Mutual Learning Leading To Co-Realization/Co-Discovery**
  Youth Council alums report feeling that "our meetings were very youth-led." As a result, council members could freely express their thoughts and opinions, leading to project outputs that genuinely centered youth voices.

- **Disrupting Youth/Adult Power Dynamics**
  Youth Council alums reported feeling that our council meetings were "a welcoming, non-judgmental community" in which they were able to share their whole selves without fear of judgment or shame.

- **Having A 'Say,' Rather Than Just A 'Voice'**
  Youth Council alums report feeling valued and listened to after seeing how their ideas and feedback had been incorporated into Ci3 projects.

- **Skillbuilding**
  Young people report that participating in Ci3 Youth Council helped equip them for their future career goals and showed them new avenues for bringing about systemic change.

"I love how Youth Council felt like a family and was by far the most non judgemental environment I've ever been placed in. A TRULY judgement free zone, it really gave me the confidence to speak out."

- 2019-20 Youth Council Member

IMPLICATIONS & LESSONS LEARNED

For organizations looking to involve young people in their work, a systematic approach to engaging authentically with young people is essential. Guided by principles of participatory design and positive youth development, we developed the Ci3 Youth Engagement Framework as a tool for translating this desired approach into practice. The outputs from this practice center the voices of young people in academic research, contribute to positive narrative shifts around young people and their capacities to engage in this work, and ultimately aim to improve the lives of the young people we serve.

For more information about the Ci3 Youth Engagement Framework or to collaborate on future opportunities, please contact Ailea Stites: astites@bsd.uchicago.edu

References

Cahill, Helen, and Babak Dadvand. November 2018. "Re-conceptualising youth participation: A framework to inform action." *Children and Youth Services Review* 95. 10.1016/j.childyouth.2018.11.001.
Catalano, R. F., Gavin, L. E., & Markham, C. M. (2010). Positive Youth Development as a Strategy to Promote Adolescent Sexual and Reproductive Health. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, *46*(3), S1–S6.

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