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Imagining the Spaces of Regional Action: Framing Youth Problems and Solutions

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Persistent inequalities in the well-being of youth are widely recognized, yet too rarely does strategic action narrow the gap between this reality and the promise of equal opportunity for all. In political discourse conservatives and liberals have historically sparred over whether inequalities stem from individual or social failures, but both tend to view the patterns as chronic, inadvertently feeding the quiescent acceptance of inequality rather than a forceful policy and community response (Edelman 1977). What is needed are ways of construing youth problems and their potential solutions in more helpful and animating ways.

Our search for such ideas has led us into conversations with representatives of the institutions that serve youth in the Capital Region. We wanted to understand three types of cultural frames used by these individuals: diagnostic (what is the problem?), prognostic (what should be done?), and motivational (what is most likely to motivate action?). The purpose was to take a snapshot of different perceptions that could inform subsequent phases of regional action, rather than draw generalizable conclusions about which specific problems, solutions, or motivations for action are the most appropriate for regional engagement. Therefore, the proceeding summary is meant to identify the many, and often varying, responses we heard from interview participants. In the final section of the paper, we make recommendations that are informed by the data collected but that also incorporate knowledge of best practices in regional policy, governance, and mobilization.

Consistent with the overall purposes of the Healthy Youth/Healthy Regions study, we pay particular attention to whether and how equity and regional scale figure in respondents' thinking about youth. Three broad questions guided our inquiry:

1. Do respondents typically frame youth issues in terms of equity? What alternative frames do they articulate?
2. To the extent that they do frame issues in terms of equity, how consistent and specific are their diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational framings? Can they state what they believe is causing inequity, what should be done about it, and how can others best be rallied to social and political action?
3. Is the regional scale explicit or implicit in how youth issues are framed and—to the extent that it is—how is the region defined?

Geographic Inequities Recognized, but Regional-Scale Solutions Not Emphasized

Geographic inequity is a widely shared presumption of our respondents, but the solutions they imagine rarely emphasize action at the regional scale. This is not to suggest that current or future regional efforts are irrelevant, but when youth issues are framed in broad terms there appears to be no consensus about what level is the appropriate scale for collective action. When asked "Is this region a good place for youth to grow up?" most without hesitation respond, "It depends on where."

Respondents tend to view youth as victims of geographically linked circumstances that do not enable them to reach their full potential, rather than bad apples that are primarily or solely responsible for the problems they confront. Some of the primary geographic inequities mentioned center around the ability to access quality programs and services (particularly due to transportation barriers) and the condition of community facilities, parks, and recreational opportunities. The distinction often centered on low-income and under-served neighborhoods as compared to wealthier and well-resourced neighborhoods.

As might be expected, prognostic and motivational frames tend to be focused on the issues of most direct concern to the work that respondents do directly, reinforcing their own roles and emphasizing the issues facing particular subpopulations of youth. When respondents talk specifically about solutions or motivations for regional action, geographic or other broad class or race-based inequities move off center stage, replaced by a focus on particular subpopulations for which specialized services are required (youth in housing complexes, LGBTQI youth, foster youth, migrant youth, etc.). This specialization is understandable, yet it can inadvertently distract from a broader analysis of racial, ethnic, geographic or class based disparities that impact access to quality education, job training, employment, health care, etc. It also diverts attention from the potential benefits of regional alliances and coalitions that address underlying or shared problems.

The majority of respondents do not invoke the regional scale as they articulate problems and potential solutions. When using the pronoun “we” they usually refer to people in their own organization, or people who share an interest in a given policy area (workforce, health, transportation, etc.) or in terms of collaborative efforts on a local scale (small scale partnerships among a few service providers). With a few notable exceptions, they almost never articulate solutions at the regional scale, talking instead in terms of local, state, and national scales. Asked specifically to assess the value of regional scale solutions, many express skepticism, believing not only that locally based collaboration is where the current action is but that this is where it should be, since collaboration requires trust, relationship building, and commitments to particular places and programs. “Don’t think too big to be practical,” said one respondent; another equates regional with “endless planning with little or no tangible action or results.”

Given the paucity of regional motivations or change levers, it seems likely that strategies for creating a “regional youth equity and well-being agenda” may not be able to count on *regional action* as the primary change strategy in the immediate future. Instead, we may make more progress through moving youth strategies at the local level, targeted at local institutions, and build towards a regional conversation about these efforts for leverage and learning. At the same time, it is possible to imagine how many of the respondents’ proposed solutions can be supported by regional initiatives. Thus, while there are opportunities to the frame youth issues at the regional scale, there is considerable work to be done to encourage the perception that ‘regions matter’.

Emerging Themes

Below is a list of the major themes emerging from our analysis of respondents’ diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational frames. They range from a more narrow focus on a concern for the operations and interconnections among key youth serving institutions and organizations, to the uneven geography of disparity and the need for greater advocacy on behalf of vulnerable youth. Together these

frames suggest important drivers for regional change strategies.

Scales of Attribution (What is the problem?)

- *Lack of support* (e.g. mentoring, systems navigation, program funding)
- *Practices, policies, and politics* (e.g. silos, turf, jurisdictional boundaries)
- *Place* (e.g. transportation access, parks and facilities, poor neighborhoods)

Scales of Association (What are solutions?)

- *Integrated services* (e.g. school-based services, workforce curriculum in K-12; focus on key trigger points for intervention such as absenteeism, parental arrest, or school change).
- *Community partnerships* (e.g. expand mentoring, safe places and activities, parent engagement)
- *Advocacy and community organizing* (e.g. youth voice, shift \$ to prevention, more funding)

Scales of Agency (What can motivate public action?)

- *Vision, relationships, passion* (that unite youth service providers and advocates)
- *Public awareness* (that elevates youth issues in light of concern for the future)

Targets of Opportunity

Drawing from respondent frames, and on our own knowledge of best practices in regional policy, governance, and mobilization, we propose the following five targets of opportunity in shaping and realizing a youth agenda for the region (see details later in this chapter):

- Disseminating a coordinated communications strategy
- Moving beyond traditional understandings of mentoring
- Infusing workforce development approaches into K-12 education
- Expanding physical access of youth to programs, services, amenities
- Enabling youth voice as citizens

In this working paper we: 1) summarize major themes emerging from the diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational frames of our respondents; and 2) make our own recommendations that draw on this analysis but also consider best practices elsewhere—action strategies with particular promise to break through the quiescent acceptance of youth inequalities and to promote needed social change. Particular attention is given to how the region and disparities were represented in each of the three frames.

The data for this analysis come from interviews with sixty regional leaders representing youth serving institutions as well as policy and advocacy organizations in sectors related to education, health, civic engagement, built environment, and workforce development (See Appendix A). Focusing on the perceptions of regional leaders is critical inasmuch as these individuals are responsible for setting the policies and priorities of youth-serving programs and services at the county level and beyond. They also provide a comparative perspective from the perceptions of youth and adult allies that directly mentor and support youth. Therefore, adult allies were not included in this analysis as they do not participate in policy networks and differ somewhat from the perspectives of regional leaders.

Interviews with regional leaders were conducted in two phases:

- An initial set of thirteen exploratory interviews lasting between one and two hours that was meant to assess the region as a place for youth and to map the institutional landscape of youth-serving organizations in the nine-county Capital Region. Interview participants were identified through existing contacts using a snowball technique. An interview protocol was developed for phase one interviews and consisted of semi-structured questions focused on collection of descriptive data and identifying key stakeholders (See Appendix B).
- A second set of forty-seven interviews lasting between one and two hours that explicitly addressed the three broad research questions above. Sample selection criteria for these interviews combined a snowball technique with a stratified sample based on sectoral representation with respect to education, health, workforce, civic engagement, and the built environment. Selection of participants also considered geographic diversity of Capital Region, although this was unachievable due to the concentration of institutional representatives in Sacramento County. A separate interview protocol was developed for phase two interviews and consisted of semi-structured questions focused on collection of data related to primary research questions (See Appendix C).

Phase 1 and Phase 2 interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Interviews were transcribed into a Microsoft Word document using the services of a professional transcriber. To aid in organizing, coding, and analyzing the data, digital records of interviews were imported into NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software package. With the aid of other members of the qualitative data team, each interview transcript was coded for future analysis.

This working paper draws on coded data with respect to diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational frames. One limitation of the analysis discussed in this paper includes the use of data that was coded by different research team members. However, every effort was made to ensure consistency; each

coding category, their respective definitions, and overall coding strategy was discussed during several meetings. Another limitation to the paper is how we present the major themes emerging from our analysis, which relied on the frequency of themes mentioned by interview participants rather than other types of categorizations based on sectoral representation or geographical location, for example. The decision to 'lump' together these data was meant to identify themes and sub-themes that, in some cases, contradict one another—the purpose of which was to foreshadow challenges that lie ahead concerning the framing of youth issues.

At stake is a vision for youth in the region's future. As many of our respondents noted, while there is widespread support for youth there is also an absence of a coherent vision of youth in society—their roles, what we want from them and for them, and how public policy should treat them. Generating a coherent policy framework that people can rally around and under which a variety of specific action strategies can take shape is a key unmet need in the region.

The following uses an analytical framework to identify the scalar framing of problems, solutions, and motivations concerning youth well-being, development, and equity (Table 1). Policy networks, coalitions, and industry groups, among others, use “frames” to fashion shared understandings, or representations, of the world and of themselves that legitimate and motivate action toward shared goals. The purpose of framing is to produce and maintain meaning for social actors and society at large (McAdam & Snow, 1997). Framing is a central focus in social movement approaches to collective action. This includes the purposeful framing of problems and issues, and the construction of an identity around movement activities (Buechler, 2000; Melucci, 1996). Some of the more common collective action frames include diagnostic frames based on problem and justice/ grievance arguments, prognostic framing that proposes strategies and solutions to a problem, and motivational frames purposively created to mobilize individuals and groups into action (Benford & Snow, 2000). Acknowledging considerable variance in each of these categories, Benford and Snow state, “Collective action frames may vary in the degree to which they are relatively exclusive, rigid, inelastic, and restricted or relatively inclusive, open, elastic and elaborated in terms of the number of themes or ideas they incorporate and articulate” (p. 618).

We believe that any collective action around regional equity will need to purposefully and strategically frame problems and issues facing youth, and to identify motivations for action. Our choice to use collective action frames as a basis of studying youth-serving institutions in the Capital Region was to test the legibility of broad youth frames at the regional scale and to collect baseline data concerning the multiple and, often divergent, perceptions among institutional actors concerning the problems and solutions facing youth; motivations that might impel people to act (including youth) on these issues; and the opportunities, constraints, and affordances in navigating regional and local systems focused on health, education, civic engagement, workforce, and the built environment. In what follows we identify emerging themes under the headings of “scales of attribution,” “scales of association,” and “scales of agency.” This analysis is not the final word on the framing of youth issues in the region—more work needs to be done to develop and test different framings as part of any regional equity strategy.

Table 1. Scale and Collective Action Frames

Scale Typologies	Core Framing Tasks
<i>Scales of Attribution:</i> Representations that identify a problem, grievance, or injustice	Diagnostic frames based on problem and grievance arguments
<i>Scales of Association:</i> Representations that resonate between different social groups to create a shared understanding, identity, or ideology	Prognostic framing that proposes strategies and solutions to a problem
<i>Scales of Agency:</i> Representations that bound an environment in which collective action is to occur	Motivational frames used to mobilize individuals and groups into action

Based on Rios (2006)

Scales of Attribution

Thematically, diagnostic framings respond to the question of “what is the problem?” While there was no consensus about the problems that youth (and their families) face, there were a number of broad and often overlapping themes that were mentioned most frequently. These include the following (in order of significance):

1. Lack of Support
2. Practices, policies, and politics
3. Place

Lack of Support

(W)ithin our health system we do a pathetic job taking care of teenagers. I went to (a) teen clinic and left in tears because it is only open on Thursday afternoon... There is no way any teen would actually utilize these services... We have very few youth development places for youth to hang out... We don't even have safe places for kids to hang out much less any kind of structured scaffolding for youth to be able to maximize their strengths. (Program Manager, Public Health)

Supports for youth and their families are critical to youth development and can be the difference in whether youth stay in school or not. In some ways, supports are the compass that guide youth in navigating their journey to success. It is not surprising then that a lack of support for both youth and families was cited as warranting more attention. Of the problems identified by respondents, there was greater consensus about support deficits than any other problem. These include:

- *Mentoring and life skills.* Imparting life skills was viewed by many as crucially important for youth in terms of expected behavior as well as transitioning into to adult life immediately after high school. Other forms of mentoring that were mentioned include one-on-one relationships between adults (including parents and community members) and students, and between parents and teachers regarding guidance and expectations.
- *Navigating the system.* Difficulty in navigating the various systems related to educational support for youth was viewed by many respondents as a critical area. This not only included the difficulty of youth moving through the system, but their families as well. Navigating the system was often discussed in relationship to mentoring and bureaucratic obstacles.
- *Funding.* Many respondents cited the current financial climate as the main reason programs and services were being eliminated or reduced in scope. There was concern among some respondents that many programs would not return and that organizations would continue to do more with less. By contrast, other respondents did not feel that the current budget cuts were a bad idea and that reductions would eliminate under-performing programs, redundancies, and organizations that lack the capacity to serve youth adequately.

Practices, Policies, and Politics

I don't know what it is but I am just constantly amazed at how different agencies have no idea what other folks are doing. I think some of that is funding. I think another piece of it is when you don't have leadership from, you know you don't have a sort of countywide or even region wide leadership to say we are going to be a model for taking care of youth. When that is not happening, there is

really very little incentive for any particular community agency to really try to put their wedge in that area. (Physician/Youth Health Care Advocate)

A major diagnostic frame focuses on the confluence of practices, policies, and politics involving instructors, schools administrators, policy-makers, and elected officials. There was a significant overlap between these areas as respondents identified a set of reinforcing factors that influenced problematic practices by individuals, institutions, and government. The areas mentioned most frequently by interviewees include:

- *A region of silos.* Among respondents there is a common perception that schools, organizations, and government agencies have not addressed youth problems in a coordinated fashion to make a significant impact. For example, many public agencies representatives find it difficult to collaborate with non-profit organizations due to government-funded mandates and a need to focus on remedial service delivery at the expense of prevention. Similarly, the competition between non-profit organizations (especially in the Capital Region) has increased as funding has decreased. This has perpetuated a climate of guardedness among these groups and a conservative tendency to focus on what will bring in resources rather than take risks with new partners. By contrast, several respondents claim the current funding climate has forced organizations to work together and share limited resources.
- *Jurisdictional boundaries.* Reinforcing the perception of silos is the existence of jurisdictional boundaries that prohibit the sharing of resources, coordination of services, and other positive spillover effects to address youth issues at a scale commensurate with the problem. Sectoral boundaries further restrict individuals, organizations, and agencies from working together across particular territories. For example, many school districts do not conform to other juridical delineations such as county and municipal boundaries.
- *Bureaucracy and inertia.* Compounding the existence of silos and restrictive jurisdictional boundaries are the multiple layers of bureaucracy that prevent youth and their families from accessing quality programs and services. There were numerous instances where respondents expressed frustration with restrictive regulations and the time it takes to gain approval to participate in certain programs and services. Related, a narrow focus of school administrators and policymakers on outcomes such as tests, quantitative assessments, and an emphasis on college preparation make it difficult for teachers to focus on student learning, especially with particular youth populations. In addition, bureaucratic red tape and other obstacles make it difficult for youth and their families to navigate what many respondents perceive as a broken system.

Place

I think transportation is an issue, I think people getting from one place to another is problematic and I don't know if that's a resource gap but you know to be able to participate sometimes you have to go to places. (Director, Non-Profit Organization)

Given the regional focus of the Healthy Youth/Healthy Regions study, there were a number of interview questions that prompted responses about the places where youth lived and went to school. Most respondents discussed place in terms of locality rather than the region. There were a number of references between the problems youth face and the community in which they live.

- *Transportation.* Access to transportation was cited as the most significant problem. Respondents mentioned a dissonance between transit schedules and the times when youth-serving programs were scheduled as well as the inability of youth to travel to specific facilities outside their immediate community to access special programs and services (Kuhns, 2010; Owens et al., 2010; Erbstein et al., 2010; Benner et al., 2010.).
- *Access to community facilities, parks, and recreation.* Access to parks and recreational facilities was viewed as a problem, particularly given the lack of quality recreational facilities in many low-income neighborhoods (Owens et al., 2010).
- *Neighborhood factors.* In assessing the region as a place to grow up for youth many responses said that it depended where youth live. The distinction often centered on low-income and under-served neighborhoods as compared to wealthier and well-resourced neighborhoods (London et al., 2010).

Scales of Association

Thematically, prognostic framings addressing the question of “what should be done?” fall into one of three broad categories that are consistent with those found in other community change or policy reform work during the past two decades, such as welfare reform planning (Campbell, 1999). These three are:

1. Integrated services
2. Community partnership
3. Advocacy/ community organizing

Integrated Services

Relationships aren't being built in communities because institutions are siloed, so maybe what we need to do is find some of their leaders, some of what we see as kind of up and coming leaders, and bring them together so they can develop relationships and then they can build a stronger network across the region. (Director, Non-Profit Organization)

Integrated services refers to improved collaboration between sectors, jurisdictions, and service delivery silos whether at the policy, management, or front-line service provision levels. Specific strategies suggested by respondents include:

- *School-based services.* bringing social services into schools, housing complexes and other settings where youth are found;
- *Workforce education.* building on ongoing work that is seeking to infuse workforce development emphasis into K-12 education (see more on this in targets of opportunity section below);
- *Health and healthy living initiatives* that emphasize prevention and the social determinants of health; specific strategies often mentioned include universal health care for youth, expanding mental health services for youth, improving school lunches with healthy food and improving access to fresh fruits and vegetables in low income communities, anti-tobacco, drug and alcohol work, programs that fight obesity and get youth exercising regularly (Geraghty, 2010).
- *System navigators.* establishing case managers who work for kids rather than specific

programs, helping youth navigate service networks (Burciaga & Erbstein, 2010; Erbstein et al., 2010);

- *Peer support for youth workers*: establishing peer support networks that facilitate information sharing about “what works,” identifying up and coming leaders, and bringing them together by convening events that nurture collaboration;
- *Early intervention*: focus on key intervention points/early warning triggers for comprehensive social service interventions, in some cases intensive case management by professionals or in others simply someone to walk alongside the family to help and guide them, (Breslau et al. 2010) including:
 - school absenteeism
 - low test scores in 3rd/4th grades
 - arrest of parent or other family member (should trigger contact with schools to alert them)
 - child abuse reports
 - major transitions (between elementary and middle school, middle school and high school, foster care and emancipation—in all cases helping to ensure that problems and difficulties don’t snowball)

Community Partnership

Youth do better and are better apt to make positive life decisions if they have interaction with positive adults, either mentors or usually someone that’s not their parent. We need to listen to youth and youth needs to be driving it. They need to be working on issues that are close to their lives, they need to have programs that speak to them. (Director, Non-Profit Organization)

Relationship building within and between communities is identified as a key dynamic to support youth (Owens et al., 2010; Erbstein et al., 2010). Specific ideas mentioned include:

- *Youth-adult relationships and mentoring* (see targets of opportunity section below for more detail);
- *Public recognition*: finding ways to honor adults and youth for their efforts, so they are recognized for making a difference;
- *Community/neighborhood development*: for example creating sports leagues, arts programs, community beautification efforts, and places/occasions where families can engage in activities together (Romero, London, & Erbstein, 2010);
- *Creating safe places for youth*: this is a common theme but means something very different depending on the community setting; framing the issue as gangs may exclude potential allies who can be attracted by a youth safety framing; includes attending to the built environment such as playgrounds, parks, as well as to the human infrastructure needed to maintain and defend these places and be present as adult allies for youth (Owens et al., 2010);
- *Family/parent engagement*: particularly with schools and with a renewed emphasis on home visits or other activities that meet parents where they are rather than expecting them to fit into predetermined roles in school activities or other youth serving organizations; parent training or mini-grant programs for parent initiated community projects are potential strategies;
- *Resiliency*: a few respondents noted that youth themselves bring strengths in overcoming obstacles and thus play their own roles as partners in the community building effort, via

- self-help efforts and contributions to their fellow youth;
- *Redefining indicators of success*: such as the willingness of youth to move back into communities after college/schooling as a key indicator of community health; or evidence that more people see youth as assets and link their own self interest to programs and activities that serve youth and families.

Advocacy and Community Organizing

More youth and teen involvement, real involvement. So instead of saying as the adult, this is what the kids want, it's actually the kids getting up there and saying this is what we want, this is what we did, this is the research we came up with, these are our results. So the adults need to start stepping back and allowing and trusting the kids to perform for themselves. (Director, Non-Profit Organization)

Respondents articulated a number of targets of opportunity for advocacy and community organizing efforts focused on youth issues:

- *Expanding youth voice*: in a variety of forms, from spots on governing boards, commissions or committees to roles in developing or evaluating youth or other community programs, to participation in school or community change efforts, etc (Owens et al., 2010);
- *Seeking greater funding*: acknowledgement that current funding environment is difficult; while some improvements can be made with how existing funds or existing community assets are used, many things can't happen without enough dollars to maintain staff, facilities, and programs; among the fiscal reforms articulated were providing funds to staff collaborative activities—something not often supported by grant dollars, rescinding Prop 13, creating a flow of resources into neighborhoods, and regional tax sharing. The idea of using micro-loans or small grants to seed youth-led or community-based projects was also advocated. “We should see what percolates rather than forcing big things to happen”;
- *Redirecting existing funds to early intervention and prevention*: presumed by respondents to be preferable to spending greater dollars to correct problems later;
- *Shifting media coverage*: seen as focused on “youth as problems” when instead it might focus on “youth as assets”; need to generate positive youth news that begins to shift adult perceptions of youth (Burciaga & Erbstein, 2010);
- *Using research to build the case for investments in youth*: including both youth-led research and traditional studies;
- *Advocating for public transportation*: many youth are dependent on public transit for access to programs and services but cutbacks threaten services (Kuhns, 2010).

Scales of Agency

Motivational frames answer the question “What will motivate sustained social and political action?” The most significant finding from this analysis is the absence of consensus about what would motivate people to action on behalf of youth in the Capital Region. Instead, respondents suggest a complex array of frames, often requiring different approaches and strategies based on audience (e.g. youth service providers, general public, youth themselves) and goals. Respondents’ motivational frames tended not to focus on the regional scale or to explicitly invoke equity as either a concern or a goal. The following are the most referenced frames, grouped by type of actors or populations that

might be motivated.

1. *Vision, relationships, passion* (that unite youth service providers and advocates)
2. *Public awareness* (that elevates youth issues in light of concern for the future)

Vision, Relationships, Passion

I think we need some form of a central coordinating organization, group, individuals, and staff and some communications tools that would help regional collaboratives connect. (Director, Regional Non-Profit Organization)

To motivate existing service providers and youth advocates to strategic action, respondents identified the following key elements:

- *Shared Vision*: the power of a common vision on which formal or informal collaboration can focus; the vision provides clarity to the purpose of the collaborative, as well as a target for its combined resources; there was disagreement on the time horizon for the vision, with some respondents emphasizing that short-term goals with more immediately seen results are more successful at fostering member commitments that sustain collaboration;
- *Bringing People Together/Building Relationships*: respondents feel a necessary step toward establishing a shared vision is the act of bringing people together to communicate ideas, negotiate compromises and find common ground; these relationships build trust, facilitate communication, and encourage the sharing of resources;
- *Passion/Personal Experiences*: many respondents cited passion and/or personal experiences as key motivators for individuals to work for change on behalf of youth; with passion comes excitement, dedication and a willingness to sacrifice resources for one's goal.

Public Awareness

I think that the youth need to be viewed as actually a resource in our communities and often the conversation around youth has been about the burdens they impose on society... youth are actually an investment because these are our future workers or future leaders. (Youth Health Advocate/Director, Non-Profit Organization)

To motivate the public at large, respondents suggested:

- *Expanding awareness of youth issues*: Key to developing awareness is the dissemination of information, both "hard data" and well as personal stories that can generate emotional interest in the issue. Media framing and social marketing are seen as effective methods to use (Owens et al., 2010).
- *Emphasizing concern for future*: promoting the connection between a concern for a better future and addressing the problems of youth today; most respondents specifically framed the work done on behalf of youth as an investment in the future; indicating that additional third parties (e.g. non-parents, non-youth organizations) would be motivated to action if they held this view of the needs of youth.

Differences between Institutional Representatives and Adult Allies

Although not the focus of this paper, it is important to note the dissonance between the frames as articulated by institutional representatives and the particular problems and motivations for action as identified by adult allies. More so than institutional representatives, adult allies identified interpersonal skills and relationships as a problem to be addressed, as well as a focus on youth themselves as a motivational starting point for action.

A number of problems identified by adult allies have to do with the relationships between individual youth, their families, and other individuals that youth interact with on a frequent basis, most often in school and educational settings. For example, a manager for a youth program noted:

(Youth) don't really have a vision of what their life could be. They know what their parents have, they know what the people around them have but they don't, some of them haven't ever been out of our communities. They don't know what the world is like outside of here. So they really don't have any vision for where they could go.

Regardless of whether the blame falls on society or individuals, many interviewees view youth as lacking interpersonal skills to navigate a range of social settings including family, school, work, and community. Also of note is that many respondents included the family of youth when identifying problems of interpersonal skills and relationships, often linking these to socio-economic circumstances; levels of education; race, ethnicity, and language; and unhealthy behaviors.

Adult ally interviewees also recognize that youth both need motivation themselves and can serve as examples that motivate others to act, noting the importance of personal characteristics, relevant education, and youth involvement as motivators. Characteristics such as passion and internal motivation provide that additional drive for students to move beyond their circumstances and succeed, leading them to make dramatic changes that result in more positive pathways to adulthood. Many also stated that reforming the educational institutions to be more relevant to student's interests and future pathways is key to their overall success in school (and to avoid dropout and disconnection). Students are motivated to stay in school when they can engage with material and when they see the connection between what they are taught and life after high school. Adult allies also noted the ability of youth themselves to be motivators of others to action; meaningful engagement of youth in programs and events was cited as highly effective in engaging other youth, as well as adults (Erbstein et al., 2010; Breslau et al., 2010; Owens et al., 2010; Romero, London & Erbstein, 2010).

Discussion: Identifiable Targets of Opportunity

Drawing from this analysis, but acknowledging the lack of unified and specific regional solutions among respondents, we propose the following “targets of opportunity” based on our knowledge of best practices in regional governance and policy, and youth development (Table 2). These recommendations are possible starting points that should be considered in shaping and realizing a youth agenda for the region, and include:

- Disseminating a coordinated communications strategy
- Moving beyond traditional understandings of mentoring
- Infusing workforce development approaches into K-12 education
- Expanding physical access of youth to programs, services, amenities
- Enabling youth voice as citizens

Coordinated Communications Strategy

Currently, there is no unified future vision for youth in the Capital Region. As a region is comprised of different communities of interest, it is vital to create a regional frame on youth that will impel different communities to collectively act to enhance the well-being of all youth in the region. However, whatever form the vision takes, it needs to be commonly understood, strategic, catalyze regional leadership and impel people to act. It needs to include an achievable goal and focus on an actionable agenda to build and sustain momentum. One challenge is to overcome a commonly held perception that Sacramento is a region of organizational silos reinforced by jurisdictional and sectoral boundaries, and bogged down by bureaucratic inertia. Other efforts to change institutional behavior acknowledge the importance of media framing and a social marketing approach to change policies, environments, and practices. These lessons should be applied to a coordinated communications strategy for the Capital Region.

A regional vision supported by an evidence-based communications strategy can open up new institutional spaces for decision-making. The region is an appropriate scale for policy reform and better coordination of resources, services, and programs. A communications strategy will benefit from moving the scale of problems and, by extension, solutions to the regional level. A coordinated communications strategy would shed light to trends and disparities related to youth. Ultimately, any solution to address structural problems will require the redistribution of resources, a citizenry that supports changes, and leadership that will forge consensus between different regional interests.

Table 2. Linking problems with targets of opportunity

WHAT IS THE PROBLEM?	WHAT ARE TARGETS OF OPPORTUNITY?
<p>Fractured practices, policies, and politics</p> <p>A region of jurisdictional, sectoral, and service silos.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Jurisdictional boundaries that prohibit the sharing of resources and coordination of services. ▪ Multiple layers of bureaucracy that prevent youth and their families from accessing quality programs and services. 	<p>Coordinated Communications Strategy A regional vision supported by an evidence-based communications strategy can open up new institutional spaces for decision-making. The region is an appropriate scale for policy reform and better coordination of resources, services, and programs. A communications strategy will benefit from moving the scale of problems and, by extension, solutions to the regional level.</p> <p>Empowering Youth Civic Leaders Enough experimentation of this type exists to make some respondents identify the possibility of regional convening such as the Youth Social Media Forum of youth who are participating in local civic activities (in schools, community programs, local commissions), along with their adult allies. The regional scale also makes sense as a setting for youth-led research and for comparative case studies that identify and refine promising strategies to promote youth voice and citizenship (Owens et al, 2010; Romero and London 2010).</p>
<p>Lack of supports to youth and families</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Difficulty in navigating the various systems related to educational support for youth. ▪ The elimination and reduction of programs and services due to current financial climate. 	<p>Moving beyond traditional understandings of mentoring Effective adult allies typically share life experiences or cultural affinities with the youth with whom they are in relationship. To expand these opportunities will require:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> (a) Adults who really want to be there for youth in the most distressed communities, where needs are high but difficulties/dangers are also high. (b) Adult professionals/role models who are willing to spend time with especially vulnerable youth and who present themselves in ways that inspire youth confidence and trust. (c) Informal mentoring in neighborhoods, on front porches, in garages as adults reach out to kids, share resources, instill skills and attitudes, etc. (Burciaga and Erbstein 2010; Breslau et al. 2010) <p>Infusing Workforce Development Approaches into K-12 Education The region as scale for action makes particular sense given the necessary connection between effective workforce development strategies and the regional economy. Of particular interest are strategies focused on industries or economic sectors with career ladders leading to living wage jobs, such as health care or construction (Benner et al.2010).</p>
<p>Uneven geographies of accessibility</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Access to transportation and lack of sync between locations, transit schedules, and when youth-serving programs are offered. ▪ Existence of, quality, and access to parks and recreational facilities. ▪ Physical and social isolation of low-income and under-served neighborhoods. 	<p>Expanding physical access of youth to programs, services, amenities Given that transportation, public facilities, parks and recreation are coordinated at the county and municipal levels, any effort toward creating accessibility should focus at these multiple scales, but also require coordination between municipal and county entities (Kuhns 2010; Owens et al, 2010).</p>

Moving beyond traditional understandings of mentoring

Mentoring was the single most frequently mentioned frame offered by respondents, but its nature and meaning was articulated in ways that move beyond traditional understandings. Although mentoring is often associated with volunteerism, in reality school counselors, social workers, probation officers, etc., are the most significant players in the mentoring network serving youth; cuts to these positions and high caseload ratios pose major threats to youth getting the one-on-one attention they need. The deep underlying task in many mentoring relationships involves two elements that can be hard to reconcile: bolstering the unique cultural, social, sexual or other identities of youth to support their sense of pride and self-empowerment while simultaneously helping youth navigate the dominant culture and institutions.

Effective mentors typically share life experiences or cultural affinities with the youth with whom they are in relationship (Burciaga & Erbstein, 2010; Breslau et al., 2010). Yet regional patterns suggest:

- The importance yet relatively scarce supply of informal mentoring in neighborhoods, on front porches, on street corners, in congregations, as adults reach out to kids, share resources, instill skills and attitudes, etc.
- A shortage of adults who are available for youth in the most distressed communities, where needs are high but difficulties/dangers are also high.
- A shortage of adult professionals/role models who are willing to spend time with especially vulnerable youth and who present themselves in ways that inspire youth confidence and trust.

The availability of peer and adult mentors and allies is not equally distributed across the region's communities.

Infusing Workforce Development Approaches into K-12 Education

Jobs/employment opportunities are a key pathway to adulthood and a source of large disparities in youth opportunities, driven by unequal educational opportunities and by the larger labor market in which youth jobs are increasingly taken by adults (Benner, Mazinga, & Huang, 2010). The prevailing disconnect between K-12 schooling and workforce development strategies is cited by large numbers of our respondents as a source of the dropout problem and as a contributor to disparities between a minority of college bound youth with brighter prospects and a large majority of students with much dimmer job prospects. A variety of experiments in re-envisioning that connection (variously termed vocational education, career technical education, multiple pathways, linked learning, etc.) are among the most promising regional youth development strategies our respondents described. These provide a rich opportunity for directing future investment. The growing service learning movement also supports this direction.

The region as scale for action makes particular sense given the necessary connection between effective workforce development strategies and the regional economy (London et al., 2010; Benner, Mazinga & Huang, 2010). Of particular interest are strategies focused on industries or economic sectors with career ladders leading to living wage jobs, such as health care or construction. Significant organizational and collaborative infrastructure already exists in the region to build on and there are promising policy supports at both the state and national levels. The jobs/housing mismatch—and related transportation concerns—is a regional issue with important implications on

who gets what types of jobs.

Targeted investments in transportation are also highly likely to lead to significant redress of equity disparities in the region, given the historic connection between the availability of access to living wage/benefit jobs as an upward mobility avenue within society (Kuhns, 2010). We heard from many respondents that the current disconnect between workforce development and K-12 education leads some youth to conclude that school is not worth their full effort since it has no connection to their future prospects (but see Burciaga & Erbstein, 2010 for counter-stories in young people's educational aspirations). In contrast, social entrepreneurship is an alternative model that might be more intentionally pursued by youth development programs.

Expanding physical access of youth to programs, services, amenities

As compared to the general population, youth rely heavily on public transportation and community facilities, parks, and recreation. As a bundle of public goods, these resources are unevenly distributed across the region with wealthier communities typically having a disproportionate share of higher quality facilities and a youth population that has access to different forms of transportation. For unincorporated areas, the burden is even greater given the lack of government infrastructure to provide community services.

A first step would be to conduct an accessibility audit (as part of a larger youth impact assessment) to identify gaps in the infrastructure and services related to youth mobility and accessibility. *People Reaching Out* and *Walk Sacramento* are some examples of transportation audits that should be expanded. Critical to conducting the audit and identifying modifications and improvements will be the involvement of youth themselves, local community organizations, parks and recreation departments, public transit agencies, regional organizations such as SACOG, and transportation researchers at UC Davis. The accessibility audit would highlight gaps and deficiencies and serve as the basis for an accessibility strategy that could be coordinated between counties and between counties and local municipalities.

Given that transportation, public facilities, parks and recreation are coordinated at the county and municipal levels, any effort toward creating accessibility should focus at these multiple scales, but also require coordination between municipal and county entities. An accessible and legible system of transportation and community facilities, parks, and recreation that are evenly distributed throughout the region and among local communities can provide an even "playing" field to support the ability for youth to travel to employment opportunities and community services, while also providing settings for physical activity—an essential element to supporting healthy lifestyles.

Enabling Youth Voice as Citizens

Respondents emphasize that engaging youth as citizens is important and that this requires intentional efforts to build skills, confidence, and relationships. It means taking the time to be in conversation with youth about their needs, wants, and getting their feedback on existing programs and services. In addition, there is a growing recognition that active youth participation on county and city commissions, advisory boards, planning committees etc. (beyond silent token positions) is likely to reap benefits not only for youth but for the community. Also, youth can be effective advocates for particular policy changes (from stop signs to increased street safety, to anti-tobacco ordinances, to speaking on behalf of public youth development programs such as 4-H) (Romero,

London, & Erbstein, 2010; Owens et al., 2010).

Enough experimentation of this type exists to make some respondents identify the possibility of a regional convening of youth who are participating in local civic activities (in schools, community programs, local commissions), along with their adult allies. The regional scale also makes sense as a setting for youth-led research and for comparative case studies that identify and refine promising strategies to promote youth voice and citizenship (Owens et al., 2010; Romero & London, 2010; Burciaga & Erbstein, 2010).

California's population grows increasingly diverse as generational change occurs, so a youth voice strategy by definition reaches a more diverse population, engaging them in active citizenship. But supporting this work takes time and intensive resource commitments, especially when attempting to engage more marginalized populations.

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to analyze the perceptions of youth-serving regional leaders in order to inform subsequent phases of regional action that promote youth well-being. Specific questions were asked to determine if and how the region figures into the diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational frames used by these individuals. Our findings indicate that individuals clearly recognize that geographic inequities exist, but that regional-scale solutions were not emphasized. Ineffective practices, policies, and politics; lack of support; and place inequalities were the main problems identified. Many respondents identified integrated services; community partnerships; and advocacy and community organizing as a response to these problems. However, they also agreed that it would take a unified vision, meaningful relationships, passion and commitment to unite youth service providers and advocates. Complementing this collective action is agreement about the importance of public awareness with an emphasis on linking youth well-being with the future prosperity of the region.

Taken together the various framings of youth problems, solutions, and motivations do not identify specific steps to guide a regional youth agenda. Rather the analysis highlights perceptions among regional leaders that could inform subsequent phases of regional action. Drawing from this analysis but also taking into consideration knowledge of best practices in regional policy, governance, and mobilization, we identified five targets of opportunity in support of a youth agenda for the Capital Region. These targets of opportunity include developing a coordinated communications strategy; moving beyond traditional mentoring of youth; infusing workforce development approaches into school settings; expanding physical accessibility to a range of programs, services, and amenities; and enabling youth voices as citizens. Regional leaders are well positioned to facilitate the discussion, creation, and implementation of these and other opportunities for regional change should they choose to do so. The challenge will be to create a shared narrative linking how youth see themselves, the adults that mentor and support these individuals, and the multiple publics that comprise the Capital Region.

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APPENDIX A : List of Interviewee Organizations and Agencies

American Leadership Forum - Mountain Valley Chapter
Breath California: Immigrant Trails
California Department of Education
Capay Valley Vision
Center for Civic Participation
Central Labor Council, AFL/CIO
Children's Stakeholder Committee of Sacramento - Mental Health
City of Sacramento: Police Dept.
City of Sacramento: Office of Youth Development
Coalition on Regional Equity Community and Physicians Together
Community Services Planning Council
Consumnes River College
EdSource
El Dorado County
Environmental Council of Sacramento
Harmony Health Family Resource Center
Health Education Council
Institute for Local Government
Children's Report Card
Kid's First, Placer
Linking Education and Economic Development
Legal Services of Northern California
Los Rios Community College District
Mutual Assistance Network
Nevada County Office of Education
Non Profit Resource Center
North State Building Industry Association
Parallel School Board
Parent Teacher Home Visit Project
PICO California
Physicians for Social Responsibility
Roberts Family Development Center
Sacramento City USD Career Tech Prep
Sacramento Works Youth Council
Sacramento County Public Health
Sacramento County WIC Program
Sacramento Sierra Trade Council
Sacramento Area Congregations Together
Sacramento Chamber of Commerce
Sacramento County SELPA
Sacramento Gay and Lesbian Center
Sacramento Housing Alliance
Sacramento Mutual Housing Association

Sacramento County Office of Education
Sacramento Employment and Training Agency
Soil Born Farms
Solano 4-H
Sutter/Yuba Friday Night Live
Sacramento Valley Organizing Committee
Teen Resources Network
UC Davis Children's Hospital/Health System
United Way California Capital Region
Valley High Coalition
Valley Vision
Yes to Youth/Capital Campaigns
Yolo County Office of Education
Youth Development Network
Yuba County Office of Education

About you

Name, title, responsibilities, personal philosophy or approach to youth development (to the extent they have one)

About your view of the region as a place for youth

How would you describe the region as a place for kids to grow up? [probe on access to key developmental supports for youth populations across geography, demography]

From your perspective, is it getting better or worse? In what ways?

About your organization

Please describe the role that your organization plays with respect to youth [probe on population served—particular needs/interests, geographies, demographics. probe formal and informal roles, length of time in this role].

How does your organization approach working on youth issues? [probe on mission, goal, philosophical, and/or coordinative approach]

About youth development partnerships they know about

What partnerships or collaborations is your organization part of?

What other partnerships or collaborations are you part of?

Are there others you know about but are not part of?

Can you pick one collaboration or partnership at the county or cross-county level you feel is the most promising, and go into more detail about it. [probe for linkages to other levels such as the state and national levels]

What is the purpose of this collaboration? Why did it form? How long has it been in existence?

Who are the participating organizations? Is there any lead or coordinating organization(s)?

What is your assessment of the collaboration you described? Successes? Challenges? Opportunities? Threats?

Does this collaboration, or participating organizations, involve youth directly? If so, how?

About the broader network

Stepping back to look at the bigger picture of youth development in the region, are efforts being coordinated among the various partnerships and collaborations? Is there any conflict, competition, or redundancy between various collaborative efforts? If so, what would you say is the source?

We plan to conduct in-depth interviews with individuals participating in the collaborations you mentioned. When you think about youth development and advocacy in the Sacramento Capitol Region, who would you say are the top five people who immediately come to mind? [probe for reasons why these individuals were identified, e.g., knowledge, visibility, leadership, connections, etc. make note of particular biases, e.g., gender, sectoral, geographical area]

We are interested in learning about collaborations focused on youth at the regional level (the county level or larger). However, organizations address youth issues in very different ways, so we are interested in how YOUR organization incorporates youth into its activities as well as the regional collaborations your organizations is participating—if not youth-focused, then other types of regional collaborations that may address youth issues in some way.

1. Of the following-- good, fair, or poor--how would you describe the region as a place for kids to grow up? [probe on why, as well as how they define “the region”]
2. Please describe the role that you (and your organization) play with respect to youth including any collaborations you may be involved with [probe on population served—particular needs/interests, geographies, demographics. Probe formal and informal roles, length of time in this role].
3. In which collaborative efforts do you participate? Why?

The following questions relate to the first of three primary research questions: How do regional collaborations frame problems and solutions related to youth health and well being?

4. What are the main problems, challenges, and opportunities being discussed among the collaborations your organization is participating in and how are these being addressed? [Probe on the utility of the regional scale—when/how is working at this scale useful? Also probe for utility of cross-sectoral collaboration].
5. Which collaborative strategies do you think are most beneficial? Why? Are there additional strategies that you think are needed to address these issues?
6. Where would improved coordination (amongst sectors and places) make the biggest difference? [probe in terms of: (a) public policy/advocacy and (b) service delivery]
7. If things went really well over the next five years, what would success look like? [probe in terms of: (a) collaboration and (b) youth outcomes]

The following questions relate to our second primary research question: How do collaborations utilize the resources of different agencies, organizations, and individuals under the goals of youth health and well being? By resources, we mean both the financial support as well as the knowledge, skills, networks, systems and other human and social resources needed. We are not after precise numbers of resources, but best approximations.

8. What resources do you provide to the collaborative efforts that we discussed earlier? Who else provides resources?
9. What do the resources devoted to the collaboration make possible that could not be achieved any other way? Who benefits from these resources? [probe to identify benefits for the collaborative, for youth in the region, and for the organization represented by the interviewee]
10. What are the major resource issues and concerns, now and in the future, that collaborative organizations collectively face?

11. Where are there resource gaps? If you could have your way, what types of resources could help regional collaborative efforts along?
12. From the perspective of building up the strengths of youth, where do you think substantial new investments would make the most difference?

This last set of questions relates to our third primary question: How does the existence of political and policy opportunities inform which strategies are pursued by collaborations?

13. From your perspective, what policies do you see acting as the most problematic barriers to what your collaborative efforts are trying to achieve? How so?
14. What are the best opportunities for new or improved policies to support healthy youth pathways to adulthood? [probe for jurisdiction/ scale]
15. Where are the centers of power with respect to youth development and well-being in the Capital Region? [if none are given then ask what are the most influential organizations and individuals with respect to youth development and well-being in the Capital Region?]
16. As an example of a youth policy effort, the Capital Region Compact for Children and Youth aims to get organizations to adopt specific strategies and be publicly accountable for increasing the odds that all youth are ready by 21 for college, work and life. Are you familiar with the Capital Region Compact for Children and Youth? If so, what do you think of that effort?

Closing

17. Is there anything else that you would like to share that we haven't discussed? [Time permitting, this is an opportunity for us to revisit a portion of the interview worth discussing further]
18. Can we add your contact information to our e-mail newsletter?