

Public Value in the West

An initiative of the Western Extension Directors Association

Community Self-Determination



Relevance

Families and communities across the West have long relied on the resources at hand to address the challenges of survival in a rugged and ever-changing environment. As a result, self-sufficiency, independence, and local determination have become central values of western culture. While the west is often known for its vast array of natural resources, many of these resources are not as plentiful or easily accessible as they once were. The same is true for the human resources needed to sustain communities across the west. Without active engaged citizens, these communities face a bleak future. When communities solve their own problems, they become less reliant on public funds and less subject to externally-imposed solutions.

Extension's Response


Research consistently shows that young people who are actively engaged in their communities are more likely to be active engaged citizens as adults. They are more likely to vote, more likely to volunteer, and more likely to serve on public boards and committees. Moreover, young people who have had experience leading or facilitating groups, setting goals, developing plans, and organizing community events possess the skills needed by communities both now and in the future.

It is important to recognize that young people have value in the present and their involvement in community processes is not just practice for a future adult role. Consequently, it is important to include the perspectives of young people in the process of framing issues and designing community-based responses to those issues.

Some organizations that promote civic engagement by young people often select only the “best and brightest” to participate in their programs.

Unfortunately, these young people are often the ones who leave rural communities to engage in higher education or seek employment.

Youth civic engagement programs must engage a broad cross-section of community's youth to ensure that youth who remain in the community have the social capital to be effective community leaders.



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Results

Through 4-H, young people develop internal assets and experience external supports that place them on a thriving trajectory toward adulthood. As a result they develop a sense of belonging, mastery, independence, and generosity. Together these help young people feel good about who they are, have a positive outlook for the future, and develop a sense of social responsibility. Perhaps most importantly, they instill a sense of confidence that their voices and action have the potential to catalyze community change.

The 4-H Study of Youth Development conducted by Tufts University, found that compared to their non-4-H peers, 4-H members are four times more likely to make positive contributions to self, family, community, and institutions of civil society. Furthermore, they are twice as likely to be civically engaged. When working in partnership with adult mentors, young people gain the courage and confidence to tackle complex social issues that adults sometimes ignore or avoid.

In 4-H, caring and supportive adults work in partnership with young people to engage in active discovery of the world around them. They learn new skills and use these skills as participants and leaders of valued community activities. In the west, more than 75,000 adult volunteers work with more than 1 million young people enrolled in organized 4-H clubs, camps, school enrichment activities, and afterschool programs. In addition, most states in the West offer programs that focus explicitly on developing a better understanding of local, state, and Federal government and the role that young people can play in civil society.



Contact Information

References

The Bottom Line