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## Civic Engagement and Advocacy in Rural Wisconsin: Youth Development Through Legislative Forums

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# Civic Engagement and Advocacy in Rural Wisconsin: Youth Development Through Legislative Forums

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## Abstract

*Youth Development programming that engages youth to work side by side with local leaders creates an environment where youth develop civic skills. These skills include a greater understanding of the legislative process, their role in our democracy, and increased engagement in the democratic process. Through their participation in the Superior Days Legislative Forum, youth increase their civic skills, are inspired to create change in their communities, ask questions and respond to challenges by bringing legislative issues of concern unique to their community to the entire representative body at the state capitol. Youth delegates also gain experience partnering with adults from their communities, establish healthy developmental relationships, and expand their social networks. This article draws from research related to civic engagement, youth in decision-making roles, and programming intended to raise youth voice to make community change. This paper uses focus group interviews as well as post-then-pre-program surveys to understand the impact of the Superior Days Legislative Forum on youth participants.*

Key words: civic engagement, social capital, civic skills, youth–adult partnerships

## Introduction

*Programs that promote Positive Youth Development (PYD) and youth contributions to civil society empower young people to act in manners that elicit hope, for them and their families, that their lives will be marked by positive*



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*futures. . . . PYD programs offer evidence-based means to provide opportunities for thriving among diverse youth.* (National 4-H Council, 2020)

The Superior Days Legislative Forum in Madison, Wisconsin is a 34-year tradition of successful citizen lobbying on behalf of Northwest Wisconsin about non-partisan issues that affect the region. It was started by citizens who felt that decisions made in Madison did not consider the unique needs of rural Northwest Wisconsin. By agreeing on non-partisan issues of interest and banding together in a citizen lobby effort that reaches every state representative in Madison, the citizens of four Northwest Wisconsin counties connected along the south shore of Lake Superior have found a formula that gets results in the legislature. Since its inception, the effort has lobbied on behalf of many issues and bills, resulting in legislative or agency action on 43 issues (Superior Days, 2020).

Youth have been involved in Superior Days for 26 years, since 1995. Youth involvement is important. Researchers such as Flanagan and Levine (2008) have suggested that when youth have **"Opportunities to explore civic issues and to wrangle with others who have different perspectives help young adults to crystalize their values and political stands. Political identities formed in early adult years are highly predictive of the position's individuals will hold in middle and even late adulthood"** (p. 161). Youth delegates are recruited from local schools and youth leadership programs and prepare for the effort much as the adult delegates do. Youth participate in regional training to orient them to the issues and prepare them for the legislative **and lobbying processes prior to going to Madison. The first two "youth only" background** trainings are facilitated by University of Wisconsin–Madison Division of Extension Youth Development faculty. At the final training, youth and adults pair into preselected lobby teams, meet each other, and listen to experts answer questions about the issues identified for the forum. Superior Days culminates with 35 small lobby teams (four to five people) presenting pre-identified legislative issues to each legislative office in the capitol. Youth delegates are represented in each team and are responsible for presenting one of the issues.

Opportunities which engage youth in civic governance develop well-informed citizens who are better able and more inclined to be actively involved in civic life into adulthood. According to the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement ([CIRCLE], 2013), public schools often face backlash when conversations about political education happen in the classroom. Community youth development programming offers options for hands-on engagement in the political process in a setting that allows for safely sharing differing views and **learning from others' perspectives.** Levine recommends education that allows for collaboration

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and civility to show young people what constructive and responsible civic engagement looks like. Positive youth development (PYD) programming that targets civic skill development such as Superior Days, provides youth the opportunity to develop the technical, social, emotional, and cognitive skills needed to succeed as adults (Arnold, 2018). PYD programming must also provide authentic leadership opportunities (Zeldin et al., 2000). Superior Days is a PYD program that addresses each of these aspects. An in-depth evaluation conducted in 2020 by Extension faculty shows a significant impact on youth participants and their connection to the democratic process.

### Program Objectives

Intended outcomes for Superior Days youth delegates include the development of skills that support active citizenship. For youth to become active in their community, they must first understand how the government works and then determine the role they will play in the governmental process. By working side by side with elected officials and local business leaders from their communities, youth build positive developmental relationships with adults and expand their social networks. Through these relationships, youth learn about the needs of their community, are given the chance to make a difference, and are seen as a source of positive change. Superior Days provides youth the opportunity to improve civic skills, build the confidence necessary to identify important issues that affect their community, and become engaged citizens.

### *Civic Understanding and Engagement (Youth in Governance)*

Civic engagement is defined as the process of believing that one can and should make a difference in enhancing their communities (Doolittle, 2013). Youth programs that enhance community civic engagement build the knowledge, skills, and values that support participants to make a difference. Civic literacy refers to the knowledge about community affairs, political issues, and the processes where citizens can become informed and affect change. (Flanagan & Faison, 2001). In Superior Days, youth develop civic skills such as achieving group goals; social skills of listening and understanding different perspectives; and leadership skills including public speaking, contacting public officials, and organizing meetings. Engagement in civic activities has the greatest impact on youth when those activities are related to issues that directly affect the youth; this also fosters civic attachment, inspiring continuing **involvement in one's community (Flanagan & Faison, 2001). Examples of issues affecting youth include a citizen's right to due process or which level of government issues driver's licenses (Niemi & Junn, 1998).**

### *Positive Developmental Relationships and Network Building*

In contrast to youth development programs that expect young people to conform to prescribed parameters set by adults (Schlegel & Barry, 1991; White & Wyn, 1998), Superior Days follows the model of shared youth-adult leadership which provides the possibility to meet the needs of all participants. There are multiple ways to measure the impact and effectiveness of these youth–adult relationships. Henness and colleagues (2013) call attention to the role civic engagement plays in the development of social capital, which is the network of relationships **that increase one’s access to privilege and resources (Bourdieu, 1986). By widening youth networks to include adults with political influence and who model civic engagement, young people shape their civic identities and learn to maneuver in “adult” spaces. The Henness research also documented youth agreement that “adults brought knowledge of the community, the workforce, and the real world, and they strongly perceived adults as positive resources with real experiences and responsibilities” (p. 81). This illustrates the value youth see in youth–adult relationships in programs that support civic engagement.**

### Methodology

To understand the impact of the Superior Days program on youth delegates, the authors used both qualitative and quantitative methods to evaluate outcomes for 15 high school youth who participated in the program in 2019 and 2020 representing Ashland, Bayfield, and Iron counties. Primary data sources included transcripts from structured interviews with participants (20 open-ended questions) to address the overarching question, “What was the impact of the Superior Days Legislative Forum experience on participating youth delegates?” The qualitative interview questions replicated a previous program evaluation from 2010 developed with the assistance of the University of Wisconsin Extension Youth and Governance State Specialist. This retrospective qualitative approach allowed for open-ended discovery about the impact of the program on youth who were interviewed. A quantitative follow-up assessment created in Qualtrics (Version March 2020) and administered after the interviews was designed to test and support the findings of the qualitative interviews. Both evaluations were conducted 3 months after the legislative forum and addressed the intended outcomes for the youth delegation involved in the Superior Days experience. Eleven of the 15 participants responded to the survey.

Interviews were transcribed and uploaded into a qualitative data analysis (MAXQDA) software program. The qualitative reporting data were analyzed using a thematic coding methodology, in which segments of text from each report were assigned a code that characterized a particular outcome (Braun & Clarke 2006; Guest et al., 2012). For instance, segments where youth and

**adults worked together would be assigned as “youth–adult partnership.”** The qualitative analysis proceeded in three phases: (a) evaluators reviewed interview transcripts and developed broad coding categories based on intended program outcomes; for example, the authors looked **for evidence of “civic competencies” in the transcripts;** (b) **subcategories and new emergent** categories were identified; and (c) a summary report captured primary outcomes from the transcripts. Coding themes were framed around youth development outcomes regarding civic engagement and citizenship.

To affirm our qualitative analysis, we asked youth to complete a survey about their experience. The quantitative survey was sent to participants immediately after the interviews. Nineteen retrospective questions addressed the same themes as the qualitative interview questions and were organized in a post-then-pre-program format using a 5-point Likert scale: 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Statistical analysis found the program to be highly effective (see Appendix). The combination of the qualitative and quantitative analyses confirmed program impact.

## Results

Two broad categories emerged from the interviews: (a) civic understanding and engagement (youth in governance) and (b) positive developmental relationships and network building. Further analysis yielded subthemes in each category.

### *Civic Understanding and Engagement (Youth in Governance)*

Five recurring themes emerged from the Superior Days Qualitative Assessment interview **responses grouped under “youth in governance.” Youth delegate reflections were coded under** the following themes: (a) understanding governing processes (how the system works), (b) understanding our role as citizens, (c) engagement in the democratic process, (d) inspired to create change, and (e) questioning the processes and identifying challenges.

### *Understanding Governing Processes*

The Superior Days Legislative Forum for youth delegates included three meetings to prepare them for their non-partisan citizen lobbying event. These educational training sessions included an overview of the three branches of government, the role of each, a review of how a bill becomes a law, the distinction between legislative and agency issues, and an opportunity to meet with adult lobbying teams to select and review lobbying issues. Though most of the students had studied governing processes in high school civics classes, Superior Days presented

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the opportunity for civic participation alongside adult leaders in a “hands-on” fashion. **Statements from youth delegates’ interviews demonstrate that Superior Days and the interaction with state government and elected officials had a significant impact on participants’ understanding of the governing process:**

*I learned about how the Wisconsin government works. I learned that a lot more goes into making a law than just some people voting on it.*

*I learned about the ‘we the people’ part of our government. As citizens we affect the government. The government is us and we definitely have a say.*

*I remember getting a first-hand experience about how our democracy works and government and it demystified how the system works, how government operates.*

*It was kind of a big introduction into the whole legislative process and understanding how government works. . . . After a couple of years of going I feel I have a pretty good understanding of how things work and what different **officials’ responsibilities are. So, I think it was that understanding, that big picture of how state government works [that I gained through Superior Days].***

Understanding the governing process ( $n = 15$ ) was the second-most-mentioned theme (outcome area) identified in the data. This finding was supported by the quantitative survey where 100% of students who responded ( $n = 11$ ) reported that their understanding of how to engage their elected representatives had increased. One student reflected on their experience by saying, **“It’s important because it helps educate the younger generation about government.”**

This experience with the governing process helped the youth delegates develop a more thorough understanding of their roles as citizens.

### *Understanding Our Role as Citizens*

*Superior Days changed my view about my role as a citizen and the importance of being aware of what is happening, and it changed my sense of how anyone can get access to being elected if they have the support of the people. Before Superior Days, I felt that access to elected office was only for wealthy people with family connections to elected officials.*

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This quote from a youth delegate illustrates that through participation in the legislative forum and direct engagement in a representative democracy, students came to understand the role citizens play in this process. For many of the students interviewed, that role goes beyond voting. As one student commented, “[Superior Days] made me realize that I can do more than just vote. I can initiate contact with elected officials and tell them how I feel about certain laws.” Answers related to “our role as citizens” were the third-most-mentioned theme (outcome area) identified. The Superior Days experience helped youth delegates understand that even high school students who are not of voting age have a role to play in the democratic process. One youth delegate reported, “I learned that it is easier to have influence in our government than I thought before. I was just a high school student, but I was able to go talk about issues concerning my area.” On the follow-up survey, 100% of youth delegates agreed after participating in Superior Days that high school students have a role to play in democracy.

Delegates’ responses to the interview questions indicate that through reflection of their Superior Days experience, they develop a nuanced understanding of their roles as citizens. The following quote, in response to the question “What do you see as your role in our democracy?” demonstrates this point:

*Doing what I can to help the community keep moving forward. That includes voting (which is important because one vote can matter). Also working to add to the economy, spending money locally. I think doing things that are bigger than yourself and giving back to the community is a role that I want to have in my community (helping out) as a citizen.*

Understanding their role in democracy in a deeper way enables the youth delegates to engage in the democratic process.

#### *Engagement in the Democratic Process*

Through their first-hand experience of how the government works and what role citizens play, youth delegates discovered a variety of ways to engage in the democratic process. One youth delegate’s observation addressed how perceptual barriers were removed, leading to a willingness to engage as a citizen: “Superior Days gave me the experience to present an issue to an elected official and I don’t think I would have thought that was possible. It is a lot easier than people might think it is.” Another youth delegate reinforced this saying, “It is a nice way to support the community and help advocate for change for Northern Wisconsin.” Other



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delegates addressed engagement, their determination to vote, and their self-concept as voters. The following quote from the interviews speaks to that point: **“I’m a voter now—I will plan to take an active part, and I will. Always. Superior Days reinforced the belief that voting is a civic duty.”**

Several youth delegates addressed how Superior Days engendered a sense of agency, a feeling of satisfaction after engaging the governance process. One student put it succinctly, **“This is it. It’s the real deal and we’re doing our part.”**

In the survey following the interviews, 72% of respondents indicated that after Superior Days, they felt, **“It is important to engage when something in my community needs changing.”** Two other survey items reinforced their increased agency for civic engagement: 90% of respondents agreed with the statement, **“It is important to engage as a citizen in our civic governance;”** and 100% of the youth surveyed said that they know how to engage their representatives in the government after their experience at the legislative forum.

All the above findings are statistically significant. The sense of agency the youth delegates gained was instrumental in inspiring them to create change.

### Inspired to Create Change

*Before I went to Superior Days I didn’t really care about the government. After, I realized it is my right to vote, and lobbying is the simplest thing I can do as a citizen. Before Superior Days, it didn’t really cross my mind. After Superior Days, I decided it was really important.*

Both the qualitative and quantitative data indicate that Superior Days inspired the youth delegates, sometimes in a life-changing way. One youth delegate put it this way: **“Lobbying has an impact on what gets done and leads to Legislation. If you want change you need to be willing to speak up to make things happen.”**

The survey supported the notion that Superior Days inspired youth delegates to create change. Eighty-two percent of respondents increased their score on the survey related to the statement, **“After participating in Superior Days, I enjoy participation (in governance) because I want to have as much say in my community or school as possible.”** Eighty-two percent agreed that Superior Days increased the likelihood that they **“will work with others to make change.”**

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Firsthand experience with the governmental process inspired the youth delegates, many suggesting a lasting change. As one delegate stated, **"I think that it really instilled in me an interest in politics, community involvement, and getting your voice heard."**

#### *Questioning the Process and Identifying Challenges*

A number of youth delegates indicated that their engagement in Superior Days helped them develop an awareness of challenges and flaws in the democratic process. Further, they referenced options to influence change beyond official democratic mechanisms: **"You can do a lot more than just vote. You can lobby. You can protest. There are a lot of ways you can participate besides just voting."** This indicates a more mature and nuanced understanding of democracy. Within American democracy, a more complex understanding of influencing change is important. Though Superior Days is focused on helping young adults and citizens engage in formal democratic processes, many youth delegates indicated that they gained knowledge about engagement in some of the informal ways that characterize American democracy. This is illustrated in the following statement from a youth delegate:

*I see my role as to build the kind of country and community I want to see in any way I can. I have a responsibility to engage, to know what is happening, and to respond to what is happening and make my voice heard in more ways than just voting and calling my representatives in government. When the democratic process isn't working, I have to step outside of it and raise my voice and say, "this is what needs to change."*

Superior Days youth delegates gained knowledge, skills, and engagement relating to five recurring themes as evidenced in Superior Days Qualitative Assessment interview responses **under the general heading of "Youth in Governance."**

#### *Positive Developmental Relationships and Network Building Social Capital (Bonding and Bridging Networks)*

The Superior Days Legislative Forum connects youth and adults from Northern Wisconsin with a shared goal of improving their communities. Young people are introduced to local private and public sector leaders who are in positions to positively impact the communities they serve. This can also open doors of opportunity for delegates including potential internships and jobs. Two forms of social capital (bonding and bridging) were reported through our interviews.

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Bonding networks offer a sense of identity and security (Heness et al., 2013). Superior Days delegates reported building bonding networks with other youth around similar interests. As youth participate with their lobby teams, they build relationships with both youth and adult **team members, as exemplified in this youth delegate's observation: "While I really connected with local officials at Superior Days, I also connected with other young people who are passionate about making their communities better."** Another youth delegate noted that **"connections and relationships I built with other youth was super important for me and I've remained inspired by it."** These relationships empowered participants to feel comfortable to access community resources that set them up for later success.

*Bridging networks* extend beyond one's immediate peer group. The development of bridging networks during Superior Days is illustrated by this comment from a youth delegate, **"I want to use my knowledge and skills to influence our community for the better."** Superior Days builds these networks by connecting youth with community members who can open doors and opportunities, such as county board members, local business leaders, state officials, and peers with similar interests. Youth participants expressed that Superior Days made them realize that they were connected to more people with influence than they were aware of before the experience. One youth shared, **"If you know one person they know five others, so you are pretty much connected to everyone. . . . I didn't know this prior to Superior Days. Superior Days opened my eyes to the web of influence that I didn't previously see or understand."** These bridging networks are useful for youth to connect to jobs, internships, and to make change in their community (Anderson et al., 2019).

Sixty-three percent of the quantitative survey respondents stated that the adults they communicated with valued their opinion. When adults see youth as sources for valuable community input, it creates opportunities for leadership and decision-making roles for youth. Superior Days provides youth an opportunity to engage in a process that has typically been reserved for adults.

#### *Youth Voice*

Youth voice, according to Pittman (1999), is a process that allows youth to communicate and be considered valued stakeholders. Young people who participated in Superior Days reported a greater understanding of the role they play in bringing concerns to their elected officials. They realized they have a voice in the decision-making process, as evidenced in the following statements:

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*I see my role as building the kind of country and community I want to see in any way I can. I have the responsibility to engage, to know what is happening, and to respond to what is happening and make my voice heard in more ways than just voting and calling my representatives in government. When the democratic process isn't working, I have to step outside of it and raise my voice and say, this is what needs to change.*

*In the future if I have a problem instead of sitting around complaining about it, I'll write a letter or contact a representative and do something about it. I know there is more I can do to make something happen.*

Among the youth who participated in the quantitative survey, 82% reported that they had a better understanding of local issues after participating in Superior Days and 82% also reported that they wanted to have as much say as possible in decisions that impact their communities after the Superior Days program. These results illustrate that youth involved in Superior Days are better prepared for their roles as leaders and active participants in their communities.

#### *Leadership and Development of Civic Skills*

Throughout the interviews, youth participants of Superior Days reported five key outcomes in the area of civic skills. Participants reported that they built stronger relationships with adults through the youth–adult partnership structure. Participants also discussed an increase in communication or public speaking skills, including a better understanding of how to prepare for **legislative visits by researching their topic to understand how it affects their communities: “I gained communication skills I use every day at work. I communicate on behalf of fellow workers to management. . . . It is a role I can now take on that I might not have prior to Superior Days.”**

Related responses showed that youth have a greater respect for differences and for listening to viewpoints other than their own. Lastly, youth reported an increase in leadership skills and a sense of belonging with the youth and adults at Superior Days:

*There are so many types of Leadership. One thing that stuck out to me was that **as a leader you have to learn to follow too. I'm involved in leadership situations and not everyone can lead at the same time. Sometimes you have to follow or listen. . . . Leading and Government are a two-way street.***

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Additional support for increased communication skills was provided by the survey. Of the youth who participated in the survey, 83% reported that they felt more confident speaking in front of groups after Superior Days and 55% reported that they increased their ability to organize their opinions and to present them effectively.

*Youth–Adult Partnerships*

This Superior Days evaluation confirms what the authors have observed over the past decade, that when youth partnerships are both meaningful and valued by adults, they have a lasting positive impact on youth civic identity. As one adult participant noted, **“Elected officials are more open to hearing about issues from youth than adults and it is meaningful to representatives to see the passion youth bring to the issues.”**

While Superior Days makes a distinction between youth and adult delegates, there is little difference between the youth and adult experience. The most impactful youth–adult partnership experience that Superior Days provides is within individual lobbying groups. Lobbying groups typically include four to six people with at least one youth in each group. The Superior Days **experience culminates when lobbying groups sit down in elected officials’ offices and present** their legislative issues. Each youth delegate is responsible for speaking to the elected official or their staff about their chosen issue. This experience develops two key components identified as essential for a successful youth–adult partnership: (a) a relationship with a caring adult, and (b) a sense of authentic belonging.

Further, youth introduce speakers to the delegation and share meals together with adult delegates, creating a culture where adults value youth participation and acknowledge their unique contributions. The impact of youth–adult partnerships at Superior Days was expressed throughout the interviews, as exemplified by this comment from a youth participant, **“The adults act [both] as a leader and a teacher and youth learn from this. I also felt like the adults valued the perspective of youth delegates.”**

According to Norman (2001), **“Proponents of youth-adult partnerships see young people as individuals with the capacity to make positive and wide-ranging contributions when they receive support and the opportunity to develop their skills.”** Prior to the legislative visits, educators facilitate a small group rehearsal where youth present their issues. This provides an opportunity to learn from each other, build confidence, and receive constructive feedback. After Superior Days, the authors have observed (and heard from lobby team leaders) that the youth were

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more prepared than adult delegates who often did not rehearse their issue. In many cases, youth presented their legislative issue in a lobby group that included a city mayor, county supervisor, business leader, or county department head. Regarding the influence of the youth contributions at Superior Days, Mark Abeles-Allison, Bayfield County Administrator and long-time Superior Days delegate commented, **"The youth impact on adult leaders, legislators, and their staff is tremendous. Youth interest in public policy enhances discussion and impacts issue outcomes. The knowledge that youth are interested and concerned about these outcomes emboldens, affirms, and validates their contribution."**

Another unique aspect to Superior Days is the consistent recognition the youth receive during the entire event. This serves to legitimize their presence and continues the tradition of **welcoming youth participation. Research done by Benson et al in 2006 found that, "When youth are allowed entry into influential settings of decision making, they can become significant resources for creating the kinds of settings and communities that enable positive development for themselves and for others" (p.90).**

Currently isolation between youth and adults and the delay in the assumption of adult responsibilities is especially pronounced in political and organizational forums of community decision making (Sherrod et al., 2002; Torney-Purta, 2000). This context is perpetuated by policy. There are few contemporary policy structures to support youth in community governance (Camino & Zeldin, 2002; Flanagan & Faison, 2001). Superior Days is one of the few that provide an opportunity for youth to work alongside adults to engage in meaningful community decision making as clearly articulated in the interviews. The following quote from a youth delegate illustrates the impact:

*I think that it really instilled an interest in me in politics, and community involvement, and getting your voice heard. . . . I will always have an interest in community involvement and politics . . . be it at the county board level or one day running for state office. Superior Days really started that all off for me.*

The lasting effect of Superior Days on youth delegates was further documented in the quantitative survey. In response to the statement, **"I have opportunities to communicate with adults in the community who value my opinion," 82% of delegates surveyed agreed or strongly agreed.** When asked the same question prior to participating, only two of eleven agreed or **strongly agreed (18%). Relatedly, when asked to consider the statement, "I feel that high school students have a role to play in the political process," only one student (9%) agreed or strongly agreed, but after Superior Days, 82% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed.**

### *Legislators and Government Officials Are Real People*

Superior Days introduces youth to elected officials at community and state levels. Youth networks grow through the Superior Days experience, and youth delegates learn more about their representatives. Officials who once seemed inaccessible took the time to sit with Superior Days lobby teams and listen to their concerns regarding their communities. In many cases, this changed the way the youth delegates viewed their elected representatives. Superior Days delegates also connected and worked alongside their local officials to address issues that affect their communities. This partnership helped young people see local leaders as people they could approach about issues they care about:

*Two things: First, our Representatives are just average people, and they are willing to talk with average people. Second, on top of that, average people can make a difference, shape policy, et cetera. It is not just higher ups that make things happen. We can change things too.*

Recognizing elected officials as approachable was supported by the quantitative survey where 72% of the respondents reported that they were more likely to contact an elected official with a concern after their participation in Superior Days. One youth delegate summed it up this way:

*I feel like they are just normal people I can relate to, being able to sit in their offices and talk and just see what they enjoy in life. I got to know reps as people through Superior Days. My view on them changed because now I think they are a lot cooler than before; I realize they are approachable and easy to talk to.*

### Implications

This evaluation of how the Superior Days experience impacts youth delegates aligns with research regarding the importance of including youth in programs that facilitate dynamic youth–adult partnerships. **According to CIRCLE (2013), “Just as young people must be free to adopt and express their own view, they must also be taught and expected to interact with peers and older citizens in ways that involve genuinely understanding alternative views, learning from these discussions, and collaborating on common goals”** (p.22). Research supports that organizations incorporating youth voice into the decision making at all levels of participation have shown the greatest impacts on the development of youth agency (Zeldin et al, 2013). This highlights the importance of providing youth opportunities for youth–adult partnerships in civic engagement. **These partnerships deepen youths’ understanding of the governing process, their role as citizens, and their need for engaging the democratic process.** Inspiration may be one of

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the most important outcomes of the experience. Extension educators have opportunities to affect knowledge, attitudes, and behavior. Perhaps the most powerful role that educators can play in the educational process is to inspire youth.

The authors noted two impacts on youth delegates that demonstrated significant growth in their identity as community members. First, the Superior Days youth delegates started to differentiate between types of democratic engagement, including official and less formal means such as protest. Second, some youth indicated they began to develop a sense of their own civic role, feeling empowered to engage the political processes and to recognize that their voices were important. This shows nuanced and mature understandings of the process of civic governance and participation.

Adults valuing the active participation of youth has been embedded in the culture of Superior Days for over two decades. These youth–adult partnerships are developed by connecting locally elected officials with youth to discuss ideas and perceptions. In these discussions, legislators **expressed authentic interest in the youth perspectives, which increased the youths’ sense of belonging to the political process.** From a positive youth development standpoint, the authors provided training and educational support to help youth understand and engage the political process at the state level. Effectively preparing youth prior to Superior Days contributes to the culture of valuing youth.

When asked about the impact youth delegates have on Superior Days, Senate Minority Leader **Janet Bewley reflected, “Many regional delegations visit the Capitol to discuss their issues with legislators, but the Superior Days contingent clearly stands out. Its full engagement of youth . . . gives senators and representatives a complete and authentic understanding of challenges facing northwest Wisconsin. The students arrive well-trained and confident and depart enriched by an exceptional **experience within the political processes of the Wisconsin government.**”** Youth–adult partnerships and civic engagement have a positive impact on youth and the authors suggest further evaluating the impact youth involvement has on adults.

According to the quantitative evaluation of Superior Days, one area of limited impact is in young **people’s sense of improved decision-making skills.** More could be done to increase youth involvement in the selection of issues. This has not been a focus of the program, but according to youth development research (Zeldin, 2000) meaningful involvement in decision making is a key to making the experience more impactful to youth. This could be accomplished in a couple of ways. First, youth can be actively included in the committee that selects the issues that will



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be presented. Secondly, young people could be recruited to create a youth issue selection committee to identify an issue to be presented to the state legislators or a specific state agency. This would further develop the bonding and bridging social capital discussed earlier through greater interaction and collaboration between youth and adult delegates.

In the past 2 years, Extension was no longer the lead organizer of Superior Days Legislative Forum as it had been for more than 30 years, and some of the youth focus has been lost. Several of the youth delegates we interviewed for this study (who were multi-year participants) noticed that shift in focus. One commented, **"The first year was great. This past year was not as informative."** According to another youth participant, **"What was hard was less info this year and not having a nice succinct version of issues and a chance to ask experts questions about them in Superior at the Student Center."**

Particularly in our polarized times, the Superior Days experience provides youth an invaluable opportunity to engage the democratic process and to hear viewpoints other than their own. The fact that the delegates are civil creates a positive non-partisan experience. Youth are involved in an experience that centers what is best for all citizens in Northern Wisconsin. One of the youth delegates addressed this in the following quote:

*Wisconsin is a partisan battleground state, but I appreciated meeting a lot of legislators from different views. It is eye opening to see that they are regular people. I found out that it isn't just a party line thing. After someone gets slammed by one party or another, I saw that I could respect and get along with someone even from a different party. I learned that they might listen to anyone, even someone from a different view. It was eye opening for me to realize that.*

One final quote from another youth participant illustrates how lessons delegates learned from Superior Days extend beyond civic engagement and into other areas of life:

*First, I specifically remember you telling us that it is every American citizen's duty to run for office at some point, that our democracy depends on citizen participation. That has stuck with me over the past couple of years. Thinking about that, keeping that in mind, I wouldn't mind running for something later in the future. Second, I'm going into the medical field (I want to be a doctor). I have realized through my Superior Days experience that you need everyone's input, listen to everyone, no matter where they come from or who they are. That is not just good advice for politicians and community leaders, that is good advice*

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*for doctors. Listen to patients. Listen to your team. Everyone has info that might be important to consider.*

## Conclusion

Our research confirms that participating in Superior Days has a profound impact on how youth understand their role in our democracy which motivates them to be actively engaged. This experience goes beyond what students can learn about the political process in a classroom and provides a hands-on opportunity for youth to present issues and participate in the democratic process alongside community leaders. Youth were provided an entry point into meaningful networks of relationships with those that wield power and influence locally, regionally, and statewide. While Superior Days takes advantage of unique context, other programs can model its success by applying this design which utilizes training to create successful interactions between youth and adults in a hands-on setting.

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## Appendix

## Superior Days Statistical Analysis of Retrospective Pre- and Post-Program Survey Results

Table A1. Means, *T*-Scores, *P*-Values, and Effect Sizes Comparing Youth Survey Results Before and After Participation in Superior Days.

Item	Pre-program mean	Post-program mean	Percent improving score <sup>a</sup>	<i>T</i> <sup>b</sup>	<i>P</i> <sup>c</sup>	Cohen's <i>D</i> <sup>d</sup>
I feel confident speaking in front of groups in an official setting.	3.45	4.55	82%	3.83	.003**	1.15
I have organized an opinion and presented it in front of a group.	3.64	4.45	55%	2.17	.055	0.65
I want to have as much say in my community or school as possible.	3.18	4.18	82%	2.14	.058	0.64
I have a pretty good understanding of the important issues which confront my community or school.	2.73	4.27	82%	4.94	< .001***	1.49
I feel that my opinion is important because it could someday make a difference in my community or school.	3.09	4.36	73%	4.18	.002**	1.26
I have opportunities to communicate with adults in the community who I feel valued my opinion	3.18	4.27	64%	3.46	.006**	1.04
I am confident about the decisions I make.	3.82	4.18	36%	1.49	.16	0.45
I will work with others to change legislation to benefit my community.	2.64	3.91	82%	5.37	< .001***	1.61
I think it is important to engage when something in my community needs changing.						
I believe, to improve my community, it is more effective to work with a group than as an individual.	4.45	4.82	36%	2.39	.038**	0.72
I feel it is important to engage as a citizen in our civic governance (democracy).	3.64	4.45	73%	4.5	.001**	1.36

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Table A1. (continued)

Item	Pre-program mean	Post-program mean	Percent improving score <sup>a</sup>	<i>T</i> <sup>b</sup>	<i>P</i> <sup>c</sup>	<b>Cohen's <i>D</i></b> <sup>d</sup>
I know how to engage my representatives in government.	2.18	4.36	91%	6.71	< .001***	2.02
I could serve as a representative for my community at some level of government/governance.	2.82	4.55	100%	8.86	< .001***	2.67
I feel that citizens in our area have a voice in government.	3.18	4.00	73%	1.93	.082	0.58
I feel I can contact my representatives with a concern.	3.00	4.36	73%	3.32	.008**	1.00
I feel that high school students have a role to play in the political process.	2.55	4.27	91%	5.19	< .001***	1.56

Note. *n* = 11

<sup>a</sup> Percentage = (number of all youth in the sample whose score improved for that item)/(total number in sample)

<sup>b</sup> *T*-tests confirmed statistically significant increases from pre-program to post-program for all variables

<sup>c</sup> *P*-values marked by asterisk(s) indicate statistically significant difference above 95% confidence. (.05 = significant above 95%)

<sup>d</sup> Cohen's *D* - effect sizes: .2 (*small*), .5 (*medium*), >.8 (*large*)

\*\*\**p* < .001, \*\**p* < .01, \**p* < .05