

## **From Participant to Planner: A Longitudinal Approach to Youth Leadership Development**

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**Abstract:** This article examines how an experiential education opportunity affected leadership development of a young adult over a five-year time period. The individual participated in a series of authentic environmental leadership activities which emphasized direct experience, peer-to-peer mentoring, and youth-adult partnerships. We illustrate how sustainability educators and planners can engage youth in meaningful leadership activities and encourage long-term leadership cultivation. Challenges to facilitating environmental youth leadership are also addressed, including relating to and providing appropriate support for adolescents and young adults.

**Keywords:** youth leadership; sustainability leadership; youth empowerment; youth conference; peer mentoring; youth-adult partnerships

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Sustainability leadership is required to meet the complex environmental, economic, and social challenges that our communities face. Cultivating leaders and promoting leadership qualities are critical to finding creative solutions and fostering innovative thinking to move towards sustainable communities. Youth leadership development is particularly critical, especially as the planet faces serious environmental challenges and new approaches are needed. However, leadership development opportunities for adolescents and young adults often focus on preparation for future leadership roles, rather than helping them to lead as young people. Young people need opportunities not only to learn leadership skills, but also to apply these skills in authentic ways that can have an impact on real-world issues (Campbell & Erbstein, 2012; MacNeil, 2006).

This article presents a case study of leadership development of one individual over an extended period of time. Kristen, now age 22, participated in a series of authentic environmental leadership activities over a five-year period. We chronicle her experiences beginning as a program participant at a sustainability summit for high school students and continuing into new roles as youth summit planner, facilitator, and environmental leader. Additionally, we describe the philosophies and approaches of the adult organizers that guided the development of the youth summits. This case study reveals how Kristen became a leader for environmental sustainability through direct experience, peer-to-peer mentoring, and youth-adult partnerships. The overall goal is to provide sustainability educators and planners with ideas to engage youth in meaningful leadership activities and to encourage long-term leadership cultivation whenever possible.

Youth conferences have been identified as a means of empowerment, for personal growth, for social relationships, and to raise awareness of important community, social, and environmental issues (Pancer, Rose-Krasnor, & Loiselle, 2002). The Ohio Youth Summit on the Environment was a two-day event held in Spring 2008 for a group of 20 high school students throughout the Columbus metropolitan area. It was part of a larger community-wide conference on sustainability attended by approximately 225 individuals. It was organized by a university faculty member (Lekies) with assistance from a graduate student (Harrison) and a small team of undergraduate students and a recent college graduate who led summit workshops. The primary goals of summit organizers were to empower young people to take environmental action in their communities, strengthen youth voice, and extend university outreach to diverse youth populations.

The summits were a form of experiential education in that participants did not passively learn environmental science or leadership concepts, but were actively engaged in developing ways to use this knowledge in their schools and communities through the creation of an action plan for change that would be implemented after the summit. In addition to improving natural and built environments, these experiences can help youth grow as citizens because they involve authentic participation in community issues (Campbell & Erbstein, 2012; Camino & Zeldin, 2002; Hart 1997; Jensen & Schnack 1997; MacNeil, 2006; McClaren & Hammond 2005; Stapp, Wals, and Stankorb 1996). College-aged students facilitated discussions on power, definitions of leadership, root causes of environmental problems, and strategies for positive change. As an educational approach, the youth summit's aim was not to modify specific behaviors like recycling or saving water, but rather to engage youth in planning and taking action on environmental issues they found relevant.

Kristen's story is taken from her own reflective writings, an interview, and a summit evaluation when she was a summit participant. Kristen attended the conference as a graduating high school senior. She learned of the summit from a young adult environmental organizer who

led some of the summit workshops. As the president of her school's environmental club, she was concerned the group would disband with the absence of her leadership and brought six students with her. At this point she was more concerned about developing leadership in her fellow environmental club group members than increasing her own skillset. Thus, she arrived at the first summit with the experience of leading an environmental club and the desire to empower others to continue the club's mission after she graduated.

The summit's experiential education approach allowed participants to brainstorm, plan, and test out their ideas for taking environmental action where they lived. While some youth leadership programs teach leadership principles and give examples of how leaders might act, summit participants could experience being leaders. Kristen explained how the youth summit approach gave participants valuable skills to solve real problems, "It [youth summit] definitely was experiential because all of the workshops were tailored towards us having the experience of the project we were suggesting to work with." Summit participants took the first steps toward reaching their environmental action goals through planning and skills building at the workshops.

The first summit was well received by the youth, and plans were made to hold more summits over the next year. The graduate student assistant stayed in contact with the participants to provide support as they began to implement their plans. It was the intent of the faculty member that the participants be exposed to additional leadership and environmental education opportunities after the summit, and that they could reach other youth with their new skills and knowledge. Ultimately, an aim was that some of these youth could become facilitators for the future youth summits.

The graduate student assistant commented on her interactions with Kristen:

*When I met Kristen, I recognized her dedication to environmental sustainability and ability to take on new responsibilities and skillsets. Her commitment to environmental causes made me want to work with her and keep in touch. I developed a friendship with her and invited her to join other organizations I was a part of. I could tell that she could become a strong leader and inspire others to do similar work. I knew I was leaving Ohio State at the time, and I could see that she would be able to take on new environmental issues that might arise on campus.*

With this in mind, the faculty organizer hired Kristen as the new summit coordinator when the graduate assistant completed her degree and moved out of state. Kristen was now enrolled as a university student. She and the faculty member worked closely over the course of the next several months to plan additional summits. Two university-sponsored summits were held the following spring. Kristen also took the initiative and organized two summits on her own—one with her former high school environmental club and one with a suburban high school in another part of the state.

In her role as summit coordinator, Kristen recruited several students to be part of the undergraduate student facilitation team and engaged in ongoing planning meetings. Of particular interest to the faculty member was developing a youth summit model that could be replicated in other communities. Thus, there was ongoing dialogue about different populations with whom to work, the structure of the summits, the role of adult leaders in the summits, and ways in which efforts in working with youth could be more effective. For example, one of the summits had a strong adult leader presence and another was held in a low-resource neighborhood in which community leaders requested university outreach opportunities for youth.

In recalling her transition from participant to planner, Kristen did not feel prepared initially. But the youth summit's peer-to-peer mentoring approach gave her the confidence to plan other youth summits:

*I saw college students that were not that much older than me, that were able to present these workshops well. It made me feel empowered in that I wanted to do that for people around my age or younger, or even older. Having facilitators close to my age really helped me connect with them and see myself in their shoes later.*

Youth empowerment was a central goal of the summits. The faculty member used Hart's (1992) ladder of participation as a guiding framework, with the goal of helping youth reach higher rungs of the ladder through activities that could be described as: a) adult-initiated, shared decisions with youth; b) youth-initiated and directed; and c) youth-initiated, shared decisions with adults. Kristen described how youth were empowered to take environmental action that mattered to them:

*Our inherent goal was to give responsibility to the youth. That had elements of social justice in terms of giving them voice, instead of a top-down adult-teach-youth dynamic. Essentially we were trying to work as consultants for the groups, having them come to us about what they wanted, as opposed to us telling them what to do. It put the responsibility and leadership on the youth to accomplish the goals they wanted.*

Youth-adult partnerships involve collaboration between youth and adults, joint decision-making power, mutual teaching and learning, and working together for a common goal (Camino, 2000). The faculty member believed strongly in respecting the contributions of youth, and saw ways that Kristen could gain additional opportunities to implement the leadership skills she had learned and engage in new types of activities. By maintaining a good relationship with the faculty member who organized the youth summits, even after the summits had ended, Kristen learned of opportunities to further hone her leadership skills and pass on lessons learned to others over the next several years. Additional leadership opportunities that Kristen participated in included:

- Mentorship of several summit participants and assistance provided to help them organize a panel on climate change for a 4-H teen conference
- Participating on the panel at the 4-H conference
- Discussion of environmental projects of her own on a youth radio show
- Participation on a youth leadership panel with an audience of over 200 Extension educators and community leaders
- Organization of a series of workshops modeled after the youth summits for a high school environmental club

Kristen directly applied youth summit principles on sustainability leadership to the additional leadership activities. She recalled how workshops she planned for a high school environmental club were experiential and relevant to participants:

*If we were going to do a workshop on media engagement and media planning, then we would do activities so that they would have to write the rough draft of a press release for*

*their specific event related to that campaign. They were having a direct experience of that facet of how to run their campaign in the workshop.*

These opportunities gave Kristen a chance to reflect on her achievements, “Having the leadership opportunities was inspiring and satisfying. It was empowering to be able to explain on a panel and have discussions about what I had accomplished in that time.”

Furthermore, the faculty member supported Kristen in other environmental leadership activities she did as part of campus and community organizations. For example, she attended a state-wide environmental summit for college students that Kristen helped organize and facilitate, as well as other local events. They also remained in contact and met periodically to discuss academic issues as Kristen progressed through her academic program. The faculty member recalled, “I always kept Kristen in mind when leadership opportunities arose. When there was a need for a youth perspective, or for adults to learn more about the contributions of youth, I talked to Kristen about how she could be involved.”

In planning and organizing summits, Kristen faced several challenges in relating to and providing appropriate support for participants. Different backgrounds, experiences, interests, and values of participants served as barriers in her new position and forced Kristen to constantly evaluate how best to connect with participants. Selby (2012) described how environmental sustainability must respect cultural diversity and democratic processes to be inclusive to all people. The youth summit approach was organized with the intent to empower young people to make change that made sense to them. Through encouragement and skill building, participants could tackle the environmental issues relevant to them and the communities in which they currently live. Additionally, they would be able to draw upon the learned leadership skills in future endeavors. Yet, Kristen’s experience as a summit facilitator illustrated some of the challenges she encountered to instill environmental leadership in young people.

The final summit, hosted by a community center, was the least successful in terms of environmental action being taken by participants. The community leader who facilitated the summit was excited about the workshops and engaging youth in his community around sustainability issues. However, the leader did not communicate the aims of the summit clearly to the youth. Kristen explained why the summit did not go as well as the others: “We had trouble connecting with the participants because they were not there on free will, as much as they were there for community service. It wasn’t a clearly defined group in a sense that they had defined goals.” During the summit, organizers realized that participants had little interest in taking environmental action. Instead, many youth attended the summit to receive a community service credit.

Furthermore, Kristen realized that summits went more smoothly when organizers and facilitators could relate to diverse participants. Kristen explained how this summit suffered when the sole organizer/presenter of color was not available, “Being from a different place made it hard to connect with participants, because all of us, the three facilitators, grew up in suburbia and were Caucasian, and we were working with African-American youth.” She recognized that it was not just age that was important, but also similarity on other dimensions. Despite a well-thought out agenda and activity plan, her effectiveness as a summit leader was limited. In the future, she would need to build a diverse team, as well as to understand the experiences of those from different backgrounds.

Another challenge Kristen encountered was to learn how to cultivate leadership in summit participants, and not simply make decisions or take action for them, especially when she was in

disagreement with their views or ideas. The 4-H event led to an ethical dilemma when the students Kristen was mentoring wanted to invite speakers with different perspectives on climate change to be on the panel, including perspectives in which she was in disagreement. She worked closely with the faculty member to identify ways to support the students in their own leadership development without compromising her own integrity. As a result, she helped the students emphasize to the audience that the panelists reflected different perspectives and recruited a speaker to present research-based information. Additionally, she participated as a panel member. The students were proud of what they had accomplished, the panel was thought-provoking, and Kristen was able to express her viewpoints.

While studies typically assess leadership outcomes from a particular event at a particular point in time, this article presents perspectives on a young person's leadership development over a five-year period. Experiential learning, peer mentoring, and youth-adult partnerships were critical for Kristen to become a sustainability leader. The ability to learn and cultivate leadership was strongly influenced by Kristen's ability to relate with other leaders or participants. Kristen explained a valuable lesson from the summits that she finds applicable to her future career as a dietician, "One really important piece that I learned from the youth summits was to know your clients, figure out their needs, and how best to work with them depending on their situations." Leaders of sustainability and experiential education initiatives should examine ways to involve youth over extended periods of time, facilitate authentic leadership opportunities, and recognize the ways youth and adults can work together on common interests.

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First Youth Summit

