**Democratic Youth Philanthropy: The Power of Youth Voice at the Decision-Making Table**

*By Sheryl Seller*

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At the [Sillerman Center](http://sillermancenter.brandeis.edu/), our mission is to inform and advance social justice philanthropy. We believe that best practices in philanthropy are democratic in nature. Take youth philanthropy, for example, which we define as young people giving time, talent, treasure, and ties for social good. Youth philanthropy drives young people to take a deeper interest in their communities and in social justice. The goals and values driving youth philanthropy make democratic practices a perfect fit.

In democratic youth philanthropy, youth control their programs and decisions, from organizational structure to areas of focus to whom to fund. Adults act as guides through the philanthropic process, but the youth themselves should be [making the decisions](http://publicacoes.ispa.pt/index.php/ap/article/view/431/pdf) and given the mic. Youth know what their communities need, and with the funding capacity, require only adult guidance to help them fulfill these needs.

Democratic youth philanthropy programs are [inclusive and equitable](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/deborah-n-archer/moving-beyond-diversity_b_8129482.html). While “diversity” looks different from one program to the next, beyond asking who is in the room and who is absent from it, we must ask the more difficult question of whether all participants are included and supported in their participation. If not, we must ask ourselves what we can do to change the status quo.

A democratic youth philanthropy program works to break down [barriers](https://www.everyday-democracy.org/tips/authentic-and-equitable-youth-engagement?utm_source=Everyday-Democracy.org+Subscribers&utm_campaign=e5a399f0c5-April_newsletter_2017_resend&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_949dabd79d-e5a399f0c5-133614445) to access so that youth from a wide variety of socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds and from a diversity of communities are able to participate and thrive in the program. Participation should not be a burden on youth. Despite that, many young people face barriers to philanthropy related to family responsibilities, language barriers, and transportation challenges. Thus, it’s vital that organizers of youth philanthropy programs understand these barriers, deliberately reach out to students with such challenges, and structure programs so that young people can overcome these barriers. For example, a number of programs now offer youth stipends or transportation passes.

Philanthropic decision-making is less responsive and less effective if the perspectives of young people who actually face some of these challenges and who hold a variety of life experiences and perspectives aren’t included in the process. Moving towards a model of democratic philanthropic decision making and structure will empower thoughtful, responsible youth philanthropists capable of sparking positive change in their communities. More than that, the participation of youth in democratic processes contributes to positive youth development. As the Family and Youth Services Bureau explains, the [theory of positive youth development](https://www.acf.hhs.gov/fysb/positive-youth-development) focuses on developing leadership among young people by building on their strengths and offering autonomy which drives positive outcomes for youth participants and their communities. Democratic youth philanthropy can inform and contribute to more democratic and inclusive grantmaking that is responsive to the needs of [underserved communities](http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/yd.20061/abstract), as well as prepare future grantmakers and leaders.

If you are interested in learning more about the Sillerman Center’s work around youth philanthropy or about democratic youth philanthropy practices in general, please join me and Jill Gordon, Program Director of the Youth Philanthropy Initiative of Indiana, for a webinar titled “[Discovering and Engaging Diverse Philanthropic Youth](https://cc.readytalk.com/registration/#/?meeting=fdc3204y1hko&campaign=uzgx9fxs00it)” on July 25, 2017. Additionally, The Sillerman Center will be releasing a brief tentatively titled “Youth Philanthropy: A Social and Philanthropic Movement for Community-Based Change” in the coming months, which will further explore the topic of democratic youth philanthropy and will directly include youth voice. Finally, we invite you to join us for our 3rd Annual [Youth Philanthropy Conference](http://www.fcfox.org/ypc-story/ypc-conference/) on October 22, 2017 at Tufts University. This event will bring together over 200 youth philanthropy constituents from across New England to learn from one another as experts in the field.

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