

## **Youth in Government Day: Bringing Tomorrow's Leaders in Touch with Today's!**

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Bringing high school student government leaders in touch with their local government was the focus of this experiential learning program. Students received professionalism training prior to their shadowing and participative experience, while city officials garnered new respect for the community's youth. Find out how it works for agricultural leadership programs!

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### **Abstract**

*To teach is often the best way to learn. This practical application of Kouzes & Posner's leadership model allowed a group of collegiate students to teach while they learned. By designing and implementing a leadership mentoring experience for thirty-three high school student government leaders, the five characteristics of exemplary leadership practices were consistently practiced, modeled and reviewed. This program is a tremendous way for leaders to develop their leadership skills while teaching others those same skills.*

### **Introduction and Background**

Santee, El Cajon, Paducah, Columbine. Each of these city names brings heartbreak and anguish into the lives of parents, teachers, students, and city officials across the United States. These are the cities where youths promulgated the stereotype of apathetic, angry, disenchanting teenagers through their violent and deadly actions. That extreme aside, teenage students need to feel as though they are an integral part of their school and community. Even without being directly involved in school leadership opportunities (student government, FFA, athletics, etc), they deserve to be valued as the stakeholders they are if they are ever going to meet the expectation that they should be productive, involved citizens.

With a general societal belief that high school students, even though they were members of their high school's student government program, knew little and cared less about how and why their government functioned, the idea behind this program was to expose high school student government leaders to their local government.

In developing the overall structure of the program, the purpose was eminently derived as: "Bringing the youth of Gainesville in touch with the impact of local government on their community." In other words, students who served as leaders at the local high school level should have the opportunity to understand and become more involved in the purpose and function of local governmental leaders. In order to accomplish this purpose, four objectives were identified and met:

- 1) Bring the students to their local government in an experiential venue.
- 2) Provide positive public relations for both the schools and the government.
- 3) Enhance community partnerships.
- 4) Activate a framework for future replication of this program.

### **Implementation**

There were four major organizational areas identified: education liaison, government liaison, public relations, and sponsorships. The actions were planned for and implemented prior to the actual Youth in Government Day activity.

### Education Liaison

Target students included those who had been identified as leaders through their participation in student government, student council, class office, etc.

The education liaison made critical contacts with the student government advisors at two local high schools. The advisors were responsible for student selection and for completion of all necessary paperwork to allow student participation, such as obtaining approval from administration, collecting permission slips and photo consent forms from students, and arranging transportation to the event.

### Government Liaison

The most difficult challenge the group incurred was obtaining “buy-in” from the government officials, and finding a date that would meet their schedules.

The educational adage of never discounting the staff and custodial crew was immediately brought to mind with the planning of this event. The senior staff administrative assistants in both the City Commissioner and City Manager’s offices were key players in ensuring the success of this program. Upon learning of the purpose and goals, they were excited about the prospect and pledged their assistance in making this program a reality. They checked schedules, coordinated personnel, and forwarded contact information to the government liaison so that direct contact between the group and the participants could be accomplished. At every step, the administrative assistants were included on all correspondence.

### Public Relations Liaison

Initial contact with local education and community media representatives was made via e-mail. This contact provided pertinent information to allow news directors and assignment editors to assign reporters to the story well in advance. The public relations liaison received several inquiries and commitments to cover this story. Although another local news event was a higher priority that day, reporters made time to cover our event because it was previously scheduled on their calendars. The newscasts that evening, as well as the print report the following day are evidence that proper prior planning is critical for mass media coverage of any event.

### Community Sponsorship Liaisons

Another critical task was in acquiring sponsorship of a meal that would befit the occasion. The community sponsorship liaisons were successful in getting a national chain restaurant to not only donate all of the food, but also provide plates, napkins, and utensils.

### Professional Presence Presentation

The final preparatory step, and the first implementation step, was preparing the students prior for their experience.

The Monday prior to the Youth in Government Day program, the group members presented a 50-minute program on Professional Presence to both groups of students at their respective high schools. Segments on professional dress, city organization, parliamentary procedure, and

professional correspondence were included in the presentation. This initial program was acquired by one of the group members and then modified to meet the needs of the Youth in Government Day student participants.

Once the preparation was complete, the students and the government leaders were ready! Twenty-nine students were placed with eighteen city officials and employees.

The students showed up on time, dressed professionally, ready to greet their mentors. After a short welcome by the mayor and introduction of the city officials, the shadowing experience began.

The students spent the morning attending committee meetings, going on residential visits, learning the human resources trade, observing firemen conducting training, watching politicians work with the media and community members, and participating in myriad other experiences related to the government in the City of Gainesville.

Following a catered luncheon, the students watched a brief video of a City Commission meeting, then proceeded upstairs to the commission chambers to conduct their own version of a city council meeting. A regional transportation manager even volunteered to stay through the meeting to answer questions the “commissioners” had on increasing bus routes throughout the city.

While the students were not completely clear on how to handle the issues, the most important experience was to allow them the opportunity to be present in the room; to know that what they see on television is neither intimidating, nor inaccessible.

## Results

A quantitative analysis of the program reflects the results gathered through interview, observation, reflection, and anecdotal comments. Table 1 indicates that students at both schools experienced a significant increase of their knowledge and self-awareness of city government (N=29). Furthermore, professional preparation prior to the experience helped them to be prepared, and as a result of this total program, there was not one student from either school who would not recommend this experience to a peer.

Table 1  
*Results of Student Surveys Regarding Knowledge of City Government and Professional Preparation*

<i>Results of Student Surveys</i>	<i>Eastside HS</i>	<i>Gainesville HS</i>
Increased knowledge of city government	88%	92%
Professional Presentation Usefulness	89%	92%
Recommend to Others	100%	100%

Note. The values represent mean percentages of increased knowledge, usefulness and recommendation. Eastside High School students (N=17). Gainesville High School students (N=12).

Further analysis of the data indicated that the students had significant increase in knowledge gained when comparing knowledge levels before and after the experience. Sixty nine percent of the participants indicated that they had little or no knowledge of how city government functioned before this experience (Table 2); whereas, 89.7% noted an increase or a significant increase after the experience (Table 3).

Table 2

*Students' Self-Perceived Understanding of City Government Before*

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Not well at all	8	27.6	27.6	27.6
	Not very well	12	41.4	41.4	69.0
	Fairly well	8	27.6	27.6	96.6
	Very well	1	3.4	3.4	100.0
	Total	29	100.0	100.0	

Table 3

*Students' Self-Perceived Increase in Understanding of City Government After*

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Somewhat increased	3	10.3	10.3	10.3
	Increased	12	41.4	41.4	51.7
	Significantly increased	14	48.3	48.3	100.0
	Total	29	100.0	100.0	

When students were asked about the benefit and usefulness of the Mentoring experience with a city official, an overwhelming 96.6% found the activity somewhat or very useful (Table 4).

Table 4

*Students' Perception of Mentoring Experience*

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Somewhat useful	10	34.5	35.7	35.7
	Very useful	18	62.1	64.3	100.0
	Total	28	96.6	100.0	
Missing	System	1	3.4		
Total		29	100.0		

Overall, the students unanimously indicated that they would recommend this experience to their peers in subsequent years (Table 5).

Table 5

*Students' Participation Recommendation to Peers*

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Yes	28	96.6	100.0	100.0
Missing	System	1	3.4		
Total		29	100.0		

The city officials (n=6) were asked to contribute evaluative scores for the event. Overwhelmingly, city officials indicated this event was somewhat (16.7%) to very (83.3%) effective in teaching high school students about city government (Table 6).

Table 6

*City Officials' Perceptions Regarding Effectiveness of Youth in Government Day as a Teaching Tool*

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Somewhat effective	1	16.7	16.7	16.7
	Very effective	5	83.3	83.3	100.0
	Total	6	100.0	100.0	

Additionally, 83.3% of the respondents agreed that it is important for high school students to have hands on experience (Table 7), like Youth in Government Day, with local government, and 100% of respondents would be willing to participate in this activity in subsequent years.

Table 7

Importance of Student Participation in Hands On Government Experience

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Not important	1	16.7	16.7	16.7
	Very important	5	83.3	83.3	100.0
	Total	6	100.0	100.0	

Perhaps the most surprising finding was in the increase city officials believed they had garnered in confidence in working with local youth. A full 83.4% believed their confidence had increased or significantly increased as a result of their participation with the high school students (Table 8).

Table 8

*City Officials' Self-Perceived Confidence Level Increase of Working with Youth*

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	No increase	1	16.7	16.7	16.7
	Increased	4	66.7	66.7	83.3
	Significantly increased	1	16.7	16.7	100.0
	Total	6	100.0	100.0	

**Future Implications**

The consensus was that the Youth in Government program left a legacy that has the potential to be sustained for the future. Fundamentally, the framework for an annual program is in place. With a clear purpose, attainable goals, and a successful model, this program can thrive in the future. The group identified a potential campus student group that may be willing to continue Youth in Government Day as their community service endeavor.

Secondly, the legacy will live on in the efforts, attitudes, and decisions of the participants. Initially, students did not have a clear understanding of the individual roles and responsibilities of city officials. Many had only cursory viewpoints colored by media reports of current topics. When the students were interviewed after the shadowing experience, many expressed incredulity

at what each person really does on a daily basis. Even though many of the personnel serving as mentors do not hold “glamorous” government positions, each of them gave incredible effort to allow the students to see into a day of their life and to assist them in deciding if public service was an avenue of interest. Each of the mentors set aside preconceived notions they may have harbored about teenagers to make a sincere connection with the students.

*There is no more noble occupation in the world than to assist another human being  
- to help someone succeed.*

*Alan Loy McGinnis*

### **References**

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