

# Capturing Student Voice

## Podcast Transcript

Hello and welcome to the You for Youth podcast on capturing student voice. I am Monique S. McDowell-Russell, Lead Educational Specialist for the You for Youth project. The title of today's podcast is Capturing Student Voice. Today I am going to give you some insight into how we can capture student voices so their needs and interests will be central to your conversations about transforming and improving their experiences within your programs.

Before we begin, let me read a short disclaimer:

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Let me share a little about myself. I have been a part of the afterschool and out-of-school time field for over 20 years. I have been a Director of Youth Services that included 21st CCLC programs, and a Project Director of 21st CCLC programs in New York. I am a grant writer, trainer and reviewer for many 21st CCLC programs nationally. I am excited about this opportunity, and hope you will find the information given today useful.

Now let's discover how to capture student voice so we can bring their experiences to the national conversation on 21st CCLC program transformation, and develop opportunities to better meet their needs and enhance their 21st CCLC program experiences.

We must first have an understanding of what it means to capture student voice. I believe it means three things:

1. Listening to students' opinions
2. Involving students in program decisions
3. Providing opportunities for governance

First, listening to students' opinions means treating students as full partners who are respected by all interested parties within your program; that is, the director, staff, principals, teachers, students and community.

The value of students as partners must be continually revisited within our programs. We need to develop in our staff the unique ability to incorporate students' perspective into decision-making and ensure that all parties are committed to the success of the 21st CCLC program.



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Partnerships and awareness of them are vital for students to engage effectively within your program.

In exploring the key aspects of students' experiences, we look at the roadblocks that impede their ability to inform and propel their voice into actionable plans. There are many valuable strategies and resources to choose from but the resources that can be a catalyst are sometimes overlooked. The Y4Y/You for Youth portal provides many examples and resources that can assist you in connecting and capturing student voice.

Through my work, I have identified six opportunities of focus that bring the perspective of the student to the discussion.

1. Examine the day-to-day challenges of the student. These challenges may hamper their ability or desire to speak about what would make their experience better.
2. Comprehend the special issues high school students face as they prepare for postsecondary education — and ultimately evaluating the factors that have the most significant impact on student success when they are engaged in college and career activities/programs.
  - a. In one of my programs, we noticed that our high school population had not submitted their applications for colleges because they lacked money to pay the application fees. Through a group meeting, we came up with several ways to accomplish the submission of their applications. We researched that there were waivers and smaller fees for certain economic situations, which alleviated the burden for some. For the others, the program staff and high school students held bake sales. Through that activity, we taught entrepreneurship, marketing and money management.
3. Identify opportunities for interlocking activities, including individual, group and peer-to-peer roundtables.
4. Have students of all ages and grades participate in site observations and self-documentation exercises.
5. Involve students in decisions about their programs. Explain the program's budget and the essentials detailed to provide services (of course, you will need to customize this sharing based on ages and grades).
6. Create scenarios that allow for pathways and direction to share and lead.
  - a. In another group of programs, we implemented a Youth Advisory Board that allowed the students to have biweekly meetings to provide input and guidance on issues that were relevant to them. Students held campaigns and elections to ensure that their voices would be heard. This foray into civic learning and engagement supported the importance of their voice.

Capturing student voice may at times be controversial and even scary to us as educators. If this

is so, we should start off with this question: What is it we want to hear, learn and understand from students that will help us improve our program outcomes?

Can they narrate their thoughts and speak with an understanding of diversity?

Involving students in program decisions makes us look at the various ages and grades within our program and see if the students are able to have the conversations needed to pursue this exercise, and determine whether our staff or team is willing to move to a more student-driven program model.

Next, we must look at listening and responding appropriately to the student voice. It is a crucial element of confidence and program enhancement. I believe that by creating a peer-supported, staff-supported environment that is student led, we will help students develop confidence to express their opinions and enable them to assume the roles of partners in the learning and program process.

The Youth Advisory Board I mentioned earlier created opportunities for engagement that may have been overlooked. The wants and needs of the students were progressively identified as the program year went on. Through open communication, staff were able to align the program goals with the students' requests. This created an open door policy that trickled over to the parents.

Finally, I want to share these responsibilities with you as you embark on capturing the student voices within your 21st Century Community Learning Center programs.

Your program and staff should commit to the following:

1. Provide students with the opportunity to give feedback.
  - a. The Youth Advisory Board and college application examples testify to the opportunity and importance of student feedback. The overall attendance of the students, parent engagement and staff commitment levels increased, thus proving the shared responsibility method can achieve a positive collaboration.
2. Actively promote an array of methods to engage students in the feedback process.
3. Make sure that the methods used do not disadvantage or prevent any student from participating.
4. Conduct student surveys that ensure confidentiality.
5. Incorporate student voice in the strategic and continuous improvement plans and goal setting.
6. State and reassure that positive action will be taken in response to student feedback.
7. The purpose of capturing student voice was supported when the requests were incorporated into the student program.

Your students should commit to the following:

1. Recognizing the importance of their feedback for the continuous improvement of

- their 21st Century Community Learning Center programs
2. Being honest with their voice
  3. Contributing constructively rather than in retribution or in an offensive manner.

If you have any questions regarding Capturing Student Voice, please take them to the Y4Y/You for Youth online discussion board. Post your questions, and one of our team members will be sure to respond to you.

Thank you for joining me today. You may contact me at [y4y@seiservices.com](mailto:y4y@seiservices.com)

This is Monique S. McDowell-Russell signing off. Enjoy and make the most of your day!