

Observations: Young Adult

Program 1: Bloomington Teen Council meeting: Youth Service Grants

Age-group: officially, 13-20 years (ages 14-19 attended)

Place: Monroe County Public Library

Date/Time: Wed. 2/19/03, 3:30pm – 5:30pm

The Bloomington Teen Council is more than a board for the library, and more than a library program. The Council offers its services to the entire community as a consulting and advisory board. It is a place for Bloomington-area teens to meet, eat, express their opinions, and make a difference. Current partners with the library for supporting the Teen Council include the Bloomington Volunteer Network, and the City of Bloomington Parks and Recreation, although the partners involved have varied over the years.

One of the activities of the group is to administer Youth Service Grants, disbursing funds to teen projects designed to benefit the community. The Council itself receives grant money for this program, usually \$1,500-\$2,000 each year, that it awards to service project ideas submitted by teens. The program follows a “2 x 4” philosophy: “**To** Teens, **By** Teens, **For** the Community.” The meeting I observed was the 2nd-to-last in the grants decision process. The following week, 2/26/03, the final grant winners were decided.

Ten teens attended the meeting I observed, plus four adults: Dana Burton of MCPL; Laura Sorkin, Dana’s intern; Bet Saavich of Bloomington Volunteer Network; and myself. The role of the adults is only to facilitate (and hand out snacks): the meeting itself was run by the kids, and the adults had no votes in the decision-making process.

This year the membership of the Council comes mostly from Bloomington High School North, with a few from Edgewood High School, one from Bloomington South, one a home-schooler, and one a current IU student who started with the Council while in High School. Only two of the members who attended on the day I was there were boys (one of whom was the home-schooler and the youngest in attendance), although this ratio varies from year to year.

A senior named Danielle convened the meeting and acted as chair throughout. Dana made sure I was introduced, and I promised to stay out of the way (they were friendly). ☺ For this session, they were discussing the evaluations they had made at the previous meeting of all the proposals received, and coming to a consensus on which proposals were best prepared and most worthy of funding. Danielle did an excellent job of keeping the meeting on track, making sure that each aspect of each proposal was discussed and that all the members got to speak their minds.

Winners are selected on the basis of the quality of their idea, and the effectiveness of their application (how well the form was filled out and how clearly the project was presented). This year’s application form had been simplified somewhat from the previous year, and the Council members were now running into some consequences—discovering that they didn’t have all the information they would have liked, such as a clear idea of the

applicants' background and goals. It also wasn't always clear whether the kids themselves had written their proposal, or been "ghosted" by their adult supervisor (each project must have at least one adult attached who will be responsible for the grant funds). Live and learn! Laura reminded the Council members that part of the goal for the grants program is to give applicants the opportunity to learn how to propose projects like these—everyone is on a learning curve in this process.

A major criterion for the granting process is that teens be in charge of the project. They have to come up with the idea and execute it themselves. The adult supervisor should be there as a point of contact for the library and to be accountable for the funds awarded, but shouldn't be doing much if any of the work involved. One of the issues discussed at the meeting I attended involved the role of the adult supervisor, and the difficulties the Council has had in past years of keeping in systematic touch with the grantees while the project is executed. It was suggested that each winning group be assigned a Council member who keeps in regular touch with them (e.g., monthly phone calls), with the reassurance that the adult advisors of the Council will always be available to the assigned Council member for advice and authority if issues of money or non-compliance come up.

An interesting discussion arose over a project proposed by a church group to teach bicycle helmet safety to 5-8-year-olds within their church—going outside their membership only if they didn't have enough church kids enroll. Several members of the Council were uncomfortable with this proposal, and Danielle asked the incisive, neutral question, "Is it because it's a church?" Another group, Girls Inc., was similarly exclusive, with a proposal to remodel a room in their building as a teen space for the older girls. Girls Inc. is open to all girls in the community, but it's still a "closed" group proposing a project to benefit its own members, not (in theory) the broader community. Yet the Girls Inc. proposal was popular with the Council, while the church proposal was not. Some of the members were uncertain about giving money to a religious organization for a secular project. One member pointed out that the exclusive nature of the project might be due to parental trust: they know each other in the church, and would trust their kids to the teens proposing the project. One Council member spoke up to say that she had been the one to interview the group for this project (each submission gets an interview by one of the Council members), and she had received the impression that, contrary to the "just within our church" statement on the application, they really intended the project as outreach (possibly for proselytizing).

As they debated these issues and tried to put their fingers on what their objections were to this proposal, the kids decided two things: 1) the Teen Council is in charge of this grants program, and can set any stipulation they like—such as "non-denominational" (although they don't want to discriminate against church groups with good ideas); 2) what they *really* didn't like about this proposal was not that it came from a church, but that it seemed a bit lame (helmet safety? And they can only actually do it if they get a 50% discount on helmets from Kmart or Target that they haven't even asked for yet?), and was not sufficiently relevant to the goals of the Youth Service Grants program.

After discussing each proposal and its attendant issues, it was time to narrow down the choices for favorites. Danielle asked, “Is there any proposal we *wouldn't* fund? Any we absolutely *would*?” One member wasn't comfortable with ruling any of them out at this point, and wanted to take a broader look at all of them first. Another girl proposed, “Let's vote, argue, then vote again.” So astute!

Finally the Council settled on voting for each member's top three choices, with each vote counting as one point for the project. Of the eight proposals under consideration, this method brought out two definite favorites, with eight points each (meaning that eight of the ten members present had included it in his or her top three): a “Culture Day” project from the Bloomington High School South Diversity Club; and the Girls, Inc. teen room project. Three proposals received zero votes: the helmet safety project; a Kiddy Karnival proposed by the Edgewood Key Club, which was deemed too ambitious and so expensive to put on that it would probably not return much in donations to the intended charity (The Villages foster care program); and a plan by the Edgewood High School National Honor Society chapter to plant 3 pear trees to repair landscaping at their school after last Fall's tornado.

The meeting was a fascinating process to watch. The Teen Council bears excellent witness to the proposition that teenagers are perfectly capable of making serious, responsible decisions; of listening to each other and making effective arguments; and having a great time doing it. Dana pointed out afterwards that these kids probably give more balanced consideration to the issues they tackle than many similar adult committees, where everyone is so eager to get done and get out of the meeting that important matters are often not given much weight.

Dana talked with me for a long time after the meeting about how the Teen Council was formed and what it has been like working with the different generations of kids over the years. She also stressed how the Council is a program that costs very little to run, but has many tangible benefits—for the kids involved, for the library and its partner organizations, and the larger community. It was very energizing talking with her, and not just because I'm such a library programming nut and so easily enthused about the potentials of kids to do great things. She can give the impression that she thinks she's burning out, and does have some legitimate frustrations with her current situation (it irks her no end that the current MCPL Director has outlawed after-hours program—which had been very successful with teens in the past); but get her started talking about what it's like working with these kids, and it's clear that she loves what she does.

Event 1/2: Library Exploration Tour

Age-group: 13-20; normally Middle School or High School age

Place: Monroe County Public Library

Date/Time: Wed. 4/2/03, 3pm-4pm

This observation is labeled “1/2” because, although I had arranged to help Dana and Laura with the tour back in February, the Middle School-age group from the Boys and Girls Club called that morning to cancel and the event did not take place. Dana and Laura still very graciously gave their time to me to tell me how these tours are usually handled.

Rather than have kids follow a talking head librarian from place to place, the “tour” is run more like a scavenger hunt. The group starts in a meeting room with Dana and Laura. The kids are paired up (sometimes in groups of three), and each team gets an assignment on a slip of paper. They then go out into the library to find the answer and return with what they discover. For each answer they are given 1-3 tickets (they aren’t told what the tickets are for)—and another assignment. Dana and Laura remain in the meeting room while the teams pursue their informational quaries.

The assignments are designed to engage the participants beyond just “find a book”, and are also meant to cover every facet of the library’s facilities and services, such as locker rentals and security rules as well as what’s in the Hoosier Room (for instance). This ties in with Dana’s existing theme of “Things You Never Knew Existed at the Library,” which is used on publications and posters for YA’s at MCPL.

Many of the assignments require the “tourists” to interact with staff—thus learning what different staff members can do for them (and hopefully getting a positive experience from meeting a librarian). Sample questions: “Go to the Tutors-for-Teens board and tell me what one of the current items is.” “Find a book called *100 Thin Books* and tell me one of the titles it lists.” “Look up your favorite car and find out how much a 1997 model would cost.” “Run around the outside of the library, find the book-drop, stick your head in and find out who’s there and what they do [a librarian with a piece of candy for them, who tells them how the book-drop works].”

The entire library staff is “in” on the tour, and knows not only that the group is coming, but what assignments they will be pursuing. The whole idea is for the kids to discover the library as a friendly, exciting, interesting place—a goal that will not be met if the reference librarians or circulation desk staff aren’t ready for the questions or react to the teams of kids as if they were a swarm of beasts (things can sometimes get a little rowdy).

The structure of the “tour” can inspire a great deal of enthusiasm and, well, running. Some of the kids get competitive about finishing their questions quickly, and finishing the most questions. Everybody learns something, including the adults. Collecting the tickets is fun for the kids; Dana and Laura neither encourage nor deny the competitive impulse.

This goes on until the group hits critical mass, or they have about 20 minutes’ time left in their appointment, whichever comes first. The group re-gathers in the room with Dana and Laura. If there is time, they play a game called “Everyone who has...” Pieces of paper are drawn from a jar, with questions relating to the assignments they all just did (e.g., “Everyone who knows an item that’s posted on the Tutors-for-Teens board...”). The kids who got that answer get to repeat it to the group, reinforcing what they learned

and sharing it with those who didn't do that particular assignment. The game is a good way to gather the group, focus them, blow off some steam, and reiterate what was learned during the Tour.

Then they find out what the tickets are for. In the next room, a table has been set up with small prizes and treats, which the kids can “buy” with varying numbers of tickets for each prize. If there is too much disparity between “haves” and “have-nots”, tickets get redistributed before the kids enter the prize room. The prizes vary in size, color, etc., so that there's clearly an attractive range of choices. Hopefully, the kid with the fewest tickets can still get more than one prize. Also, in preparing for the event, Dana plans to have enough of each type of prize that if everybody picks the same one, there is still enough to go around.

One of the things Dana emphasized in describing the Exploration Tour was the element of free choice. Nobody *has* to pursue the assignments, or has to pursue all of the assignments they're given. The kids are not being watched or goaded, and are not forced to participate. They also get to choose their own prizes at the end. We briefly discussed the controversy over incentives and rewards (Dana brought it up); Dana considers her prizes happy rewards, underscoring the goal of the Tour to present the library as an exciting and, um, rewarding place to be.