Innovations in Public Engagement
Raritan Valley Community College Focus Group (Suburban Millennials)
February 11, 2016

Date: February 11, 2016, 6:00-7:30 PM
Location: Raritan Valley Community College, Branchburg, NJ
Staff Facilitators: Miriam Salerno, Cailean Carr
Other staff in attendance: Zenobia Fields

Major Takeaways

1. **How they self-identified:** Many of the participants did not think of themselves as Millennials and most had never even heard the term "Millennial" before. Several participants did not associate with being a North Jersey resident but instead as a Central Jersey resident.

2. **Public Meetings are for other people**: Less than half of the participants had ever been to a public meeting. The few that had been were driven to go because of a specific interest in the topic. For those that had not been, they had perception that these meetings were boring and did not seem not targeted for them. The students also had general sense of apathy/not caring. Most participants said that they may possibly go to a public meeting if the topic was related to their career interests or future jobs.

3. **The Future is scary unless you make it fun**: Overwhelmingly the students articulated a concern for immediate needs over planning for the future. However, they might be interested in talking about the future if it included futuristic ideas and cool scenarios for life in the future. The year 2040 invoked the following emotions: scared, nervousness, long way away, double their current age, uncertainty, sad, end of childhood, and not thinking about it. Participants suggested that it may be better to not specify the time period and instead say "Let's talk about the future" or ask people to think in more manageable increments, like 5 or 10 years from now.

4. **Public Participation Flyers need cool design:** Participants liked when flyers had something that popped-out at them, a call for action, a question, eye-catching graphic design, calming Zen like colors, specific topics, the word workshop, and when they cut to the chase. Participants did not like when flyers had too many words or text, when the images were not relatable, when the flyer looked bland or looked like a government website. Most participants would not go to a website advertised on a flyer.

5. **Regional planning is good if it makes it easier to get places:** Several participants were interested in the idea of a regional transportation plan, especially because they often struggle to easily get to NYC and other places of interest. They often noted that they wish it were easier to get to more things to do. They would also like to see their communities become more walkable or have better access to places that are walkable, especially via public transit. Connectivity was a big recurring theme for this group – they feel isolated in their communities and want to be connected to the larger region.

6. **Social Media is important but Facebook is for grandma:** Nearly all of the participants use social media, including Snapchat (9), Facebook (8), Twitter (6), and Instagram (3). Participants use social media to follow friends and celebrities, be connected to family, and to see funny content. Many who use Facebook only do so to keep in touch with family, and perceive it to be an older person's medium now, and many young people have abandoned it. Some followed their towns. Most don't like to follow government pages and don't like to see political content. Participants agreed that they would do a survey they saw on social media if it was less than 10 questions and multiple choice. Twitter polls were recommended as an outlet for asking a survey question, especially because they are short and easy, and you see the results right away. Participants would not text responses to surveys for fear of getting spam or solicitation calls on their cell phones.

7. **Advice to NJTPA:** None of the participants had a clear idea of NJTPA, though some thought they had heard of it before. The students' advice to NJTPA was to ask simple questions, access students through student life office, and hire interns or ambassadors that are more relatable.

Participants:

Alexandria Rojas	Hispanic	Female	Nanny, student	Green Brook
Carlos Benitez	Mixed Cuban	Male	Delivery Truck Driver	Lebanon
Rory Fagan	White	Female	aunts horse farm	Livingston
Jessica Reynolds	White	Female	Student nurse	Flemington
Mariah Kargbo	African American	Female	Banquet server	Somerset
Vinny Cloutman	White	Male	YMCA @Tewksbury Elementary School doing morning care	Highbridge
Malcolm James	African American and Spanish	Male	Software Engineer	Branchburg
Juan Pablo Aguilera	White	Male	Student	Morris Plains
Jack Gallagher	White	Male	Car Detailer, student	Milford
Alexander Colon	Puerto Rican	Male	Student	Somerset

Discussion and Responses:

Warmup: Do you consider yourself a Millennial? (13:09)

- I don't consider myself a Millennial; I'm too old
- I don't consider myself a Millennial; I'm too old. I guess I'm Gen-Y.
- I guess I consider myself a Millennial
- I'm a Millennial, I guess

- I don't think I consider myself a Millennial, but I never really thought about it
- I guess I'm a Millennial, I don't know.
- I've never considered myself any sort of – I didn't even know what a Millennial was before tonight. I always thought it was people born from 2000 to now. But I guess I am.
- I guess I would describe myself as a Millennial.

What type of transportation do you use to get around?

- [Various participants mentioned using public transit only to get into the city. No participants mentioned using public transit for any other purpose in New Jersey].
- I use public transportation sometimes, but I prefer to drive my car
- I primarily use my car and only take transit if I'm going into the city.
- I normally use my car for transportation
- I only use my car. There's no public transportation to my house at all
- I don't ever take transit, I just use my car
- I drive my car to school but I don't like paying for gas, I feel like it's stupid. I prefer to use public transit, so if I go to the city I use it because I used to live there.
- I don't have a car, but it's provided to me through the family I nanny for.
- I'm originally from Spain so I don't own a car here or there. I depend on my partner's car. I love public transit, but it's a bit difficult here, so when I go to the city I like to use it.
- I very seldom use public transit, I use my own car.
- I do use my car, I don't like public transit so much, and usually where I'm from there's like one bus so, no.

Have you ever been to a public meeting? (21:15)

- I went the other day to Rutgers to hear a speaker. It was a place to discuss political ideas and listen. I'm a political science major so it was interesting. It was a speaker and mostly question and answer
- When I was in high school I ran a club called Students for Change and I was the leader, and I had to speak in front of the Board of Education about how to get more funding for our club.
    - o It was a good experience, but as I was talking to them I could kind of see them not listening very much. Students for Change was not a very well-known club so I could see them not recognizing it. But they thought it was nice that I went out to talk to them because that doesn't happen very much.
    - o It was mostly teachers and some community members.
    - o In the meeting they were also going over union issues, and my teacher who abstained from the union was there, so it was a little contentious.
- There was a new development in my neighborhood and they had everyone coming together and it was like really boring. I was expecting them to tell us how the plans might inconvenience us, but they were talking about the inside wall colors and "I don't like this design," etc.
    - o The new development was a hotel.

- o I was inspired to go because it was literally right behind my house. I figured if there was going to be a hotel behind my house I wanted to know who these people were, in my backyard
  - o I heard about it through mail, and they said there would be a town hall meeting.
  - o They didn't listen to us. There was a vote on if we wanted this property to be there, and everyone voted no, but it got approved. There were about 10 people there.
  - o There was no opportunity to give my opinion. They just said "this is what we're doing."
  - o I felt like it was a waste of time. I was bored. I feel like I could have been more productive dreaming about something.
- I'm a social work major and I went to a conference down in DC about the different studies that psychologists who are also social workers are doing around the country and what settings need more aid compared to other ones. It was more of an information session rather than wanting input. They were going over their case studies and findings.
  - o There were 15-20 speakers and there was a Q&A at the end
  - o It was interesting to me because it's something that I hope to do in life
  - o If there was a public meeting in my neighborhood, I'd be motivated to go to a meeting about the percentages of food stamps that go out, or percentages that go to Head Start, etc.

If you haven't been, is there a reason why, and what kinds of meetings could you see yourself wanting to go to?

- I've never seen anything that interested me. I'm in the nursing program now, so anything related to that I'd go to. If it were health related, maybe, depending on what it is. I mostly want to do forensic work. If it's child-related, probably not.
- I feel like it's not for me. I've never been, but it looks like probably the most boring ordeal I could put myself through. It looks pretty awful, categorically bad.
  - o I'm not really interested in my community. I'm just not really the type of person who cares about the type of fence they're going to put up on some property.
  - o The presidential race interests me – local politics, not really. Maybe I should.
- *Who feels the same way?*
  - o I feel like he does. I live with my parents, I don't own the house, I don't care right now but I could see myself caring if I was established there.
- *What about 25 years from now?*
  - o I would probably want to know what they're building next to my house if it affected me
  - o I would care about my children, if they're going to build anything that's good for the community around me or not
  - o Down the line, with my family, for example during Hurricane Sandy they weren't allowed to go trick-or-treat, so I'd go to a meeting to address how to replace things they were going to take away
  - o That's an interesting question. I don't know. I care about stuff now, but in the future, I see the true importance in local government because I know it's the small things that add

up to the big things. I can see myself going in the future to talk about anything, but I don't know if I'm going to be invited because I plan on living in the middle of nowhere. I hope to get rich one day and then just disappear.

What if there was a chance to give your input about the future of transportation, for example? (31:25)

- I hate to be so curt, but it has zero draw. It looks like class when I'm not in class.
- *What if it wasn't a meeting? What if it's a kiosk or survey?*
    - On the street, I'd walk in the other direction. They're probably nice people, but I find things like that incredibly obnoxious. Sometimes when I get phone surveys I'll give fake answers to screw them up.
- I'd go. I'd be curious for example if it had to do with putting a train in the middle of New Jersey. If it was a survey, it would depend on the topic.
- I know that in my town you see the Department of Works just sitting there with one guy working and the roads are horrible right now. Things like that are frustrating and I'd want to know why this is happening right now.
- I would go to see what the plans were, to give my input. One of the things I'm in favor of is solar roadways. The lights can change if there's a lane change or something during a snow storm. I'd give money to that. Even when it comes down to public transportation, I'd want to see the Google self-driving cars and stuff. It doesn't scare me because I'm a computer science major so I know how it works. I'd want to see more futuristic or modern approaches. 100 years from now, I want it to look like the robot city from Star Wars.
- I think that'd actually be really cool, especially because during snow storms when people are driving it'd be cool to have solar roads.
- *Would you submit a wishlist for the future if asked?*
    - [several yes]
    - No, I'd want to make it happen myself and be ahead of the game.
    - How would you know that someone's listening?
- *What would make you feel like you'd been heard? (38:09)*
    - The one-on-one conversation with someone writing down everything I say seems personable, but I don't think that's realistic. I feel like only the majority would get reflected, and I don't know if I would represent the majority.
    - Something like this, where it's a smaller setting, open for conversation. We know that you're going to go back and record this information and try your best to put forth your research.

Look at the flyers. (39:30)

Flyer #1

- If I was walking past this today, it's already too much to read. And it's a bus, so I'm done.
- I'd probably just walk by it. I'd see the bus and think it doesn't apply to me.

- I feel like there's no call to action. There's nothing that says I should so something. It needs something that pops out. There's so many of these everywhere that I guess I never look at any of them.

Flyer #2

- It looks like there's too much going on to catch my attention. I wouldn't stop and look at it.
- The text blends a little bit. It's overwhelming.
- It's overwhelming, but I will say that the circles draw my attention.
- The text is hard to read, but it's good imagery.

Flyer #3

- It's a lot of words. "Where are we going?" Caught my attention. I want to know what they mean. I guess the future of housing and jobs is something I'd want to go to.
- With flyers I feel like, cut to chase. Give us some background, give us something that pops, say: "this is a meeting about this. Do you want to come or not?"
- I think the question at the top is a good idea because it draws you in. But I'd say something more like "are you worried about the future?" because it would appeal to a broad spectrum of people.
- The housing, jobs, transportation are all things we're involved with right now, so we should be worried.
- Yes, jobs are on our minds a lot.
- I think in philosophical terms and I believe your gut and your heart will lead you to the happiness you want, whether that job is in Corporate America or it's in farming. So you shouldn't worry about the future, just be you and you'll be cool.
- [8 participants indicated that they would go to a meeting to talk about job opportunities in the future].
    - Yes, I'd be interested in that.
    - I wouldn't go because I don't think I'm informed enough to take anything away from it at this point. I don't think I'd have much to say.
    - I'd go if it were more organized, talking about specific types of jobs. I don't want to sit through a meeting about teaching jobs if that's not my interest.
    - If I was coming right out of college and there were no jobs in my major I might feel more invested. I've still got a couple years now.

Flyer #4

- I think the headline is good, but too many words, and the text is way too small. If I was just walking by, I couldn't see what it's about really. I think it's a little broad.
- I feel like that workshop would just be all over the place. You'd have people talking about different things.
- I don't like the flyer, it looks like a government website. It's bland. There's no flavor.

Flyer #5

- I'm not going to remember the website, so I'm not likely to follow the link.

Flyer #6

- The graphic design is nice.
- I like it.
- I'd be more inclined to click the link than for #5.
- I'd be more inclined to go to this website.
- I'd expect it to be something environmental
- I'd expect the website to be a survey about what I want to see in 2040. I'd take the survey.

Flyer #7

- I like it [several]
- It has you thinking about something specific, it's not too broad
- It's less personal, less intimidating
- Calming colors, very "zen"

What thoughts does the year 2040 invoke?

- Scared
- Nervousness, not too serious, but a little
- Long way away, scary
- I think kids, so I get sad. That means my childhood is over.
- The uncertainty is scary; we don't know what's going to be happening in 20 years.
- *What if it says 25 years from now instead of 2040?*
  - The same [several]
- It doesn't really worry me because I'm thinking about now, so when that time comes it comes.
- I don't think I would go because it's so far away. I know in my head that plans like train stations take a long time, but I still probably wouldn't go

How could we make the future seem more exciting rather than anxiety-inducing? How can we get you to participate? (52:30)

- Even though the future, in 2040 I'll be more than double my age. I'm 19 now, so in 2040 I'll be almost 45. That's a long way away.
- I think it'd be better to not specify the time period, just say "let's talk about the future"
- I think when people think about 2040 they picture themselves older, settled, driving a nice car, so why would they take public transportation?
- I live paycheck to paycheck paying for college, in the present.

- I think about the future because I'm a big ideas guy. I like to think about projections but I don't overanalyze it. People think in 10 years from now they might want this, so let's ask them about this.

What about the idea of a regional transportation plan? Does it interest you? Would you feel more connected to a regional plan for North Jersey than something local? (56:40)

- I consider myself a Central Jersey resident, not North Jersey. Everything's like an hour away.
- A North Jersey plan would attract me more than a small community plan, because it shows there's an effort to get things going. I trust big government more than smaller communal plans.
- I don't feel invested locally, but if I had to compare them I feel more connected to local issues because if there's a pothole or something I could get that addressed locally. I don't really travel around the region either.
- I'd go because when I travel to the city it's such a hassle.
- [Spanish participant] I'd definitely go. Since I moved here I'm still adapting and struggling with the transportation issue because I didn't own a car and I didn't think about needing one here. When I need to buy milk and eggs it takes 15 or 20 minutes.
- I visit family in France and they can walk places there but here I can't walk anywhere.
    - It would be nice to have more of that here. You have to like make a pilgrimage to society.
- *How many of you would give up your car if you could walk instead?*
    - [6 said yes]
    - It's hard to get places. There's literally one bus in my township.
    - I went to a regional high school that was 20-30 minutes away by car [several agreed].

How has the lack of connectivity here affected where you see yourself living in the future?

- I'm used to it, and I'd prefer not to drive everywhere, but I'd still live here
- If something happened to my car, I know I can't walk to school, you're just stuck so you'd have to rent something. But under a certain age you can't rent. How does the bus work? I wouldn't even know where to look up a bus schedule.
- The first time I took a bus I was 21.
- I have a horse but I can't park it!
- Connectivity is a big issue
    - There's nothing to do, you have to drive 20 minutes just to get to Flemington
- Hunterdon County where I live is really the sticks. People have spontaneous southern accents.

What kinds of social media do you use and do you follow any local governments?

- [9 of 10 participants indicated using some form of social media. The exception was a Spanish exchange student. Of the 9 who do use it, all 9 use Snapchat, 8 use Facebook to varying degrees, 6 use Twitter, and 3 use Instagram].
- I used to use Twitter and Instagram. Now I use Tumblr, Facebook, Snapchat. I follow friends and celebrities

- Facebook, Instagram, snapchat. I don't follow anything political but my family's into that so I see what they post.
- Instagram, Facebook, twitter, snapchat. I follow Trump only because he's funny.
- I'd take a survey posted on social media if it was less than 10 questions, multiple choice
- Facebook and Snapchat. I follow the town of Clinton on Facebook.
    - They post stuff that happens in the communities. I mostly liked it just to give them a like.
- I use Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat. A little Facebook. I don't follow any agencies because I like to keep me and the Feds completely separated.
    - I go for information through people's postings but I don't like to see political things.
- Facebook, Snapchat, Twitter. I followed my town in NJ when I left the state for school. My dad follows politics so I wanted to know what he's talking about and stay up to date.
- [Spanish participant] I'm not on any type of social media and I wouldn't follow.
- Twitter, snapchat, facebook, tumblr
    - Cory Booker follows me but I don't follow anyone. I'm not sure why he follows me!
- Twitter, Instagram, snapchat. I don't follow anyone. It gets tiring to follow those guys. They smear each other and it creeps into your life too much.

How would I reach you on social media?

- Twitter poll. I like that then I can see the results too.
    - Anyone can put up a poll, one question at a time. People following you will see it
    - I'd do it because it's so short and easy.
- *Would you respond on Facebook?*
    - Nobody's on there anymore, just family. My grandma's on it, that's why I got off
    - [several agreed that most people have stopped using Facebook and/or only use it with their families].
- *What if we want to ask follow up questions or more than one question on a Twitter poll?*
    - Just make a new tweet

Look at the Textizen example. Would you respond? (1:16:55)

- I hate this. It feels like a scam
- When you respond to these things, they text you back and they're constant.
- I don't like it because they keep texting you. I feel like, I didn't give you my number. We're not friends. When I go to Nets games at Barclays they ask me to sign up to get updates but they text like every 2 hours.
- Sometimes restaurants will offer you specials if you sign up for text updates but then they text you too much.
- *How could we get you to trust that there will be no spam?*
    - That's hard to do. They all claim that there will be no spam.
    - You could have an ad pointing to a website with a survey. This is exactly what a Twitter poll is. [several agree}

- Yes, Twitter polls are better because Twitter can't text you back and bother you.

Word association (1:19:40)

- *Walkable*
  - Close
  - Convenient
  - Not around here
- *Public transit*
  - New York City [x2]
- *Capital investment*
  - What?
  - Future
  - Stocks and bonds, Wall Street stuff
  - Sounds very adult – I'm not ready for it
- *Sustainable*
  - I don't know
  - Good for the environment but also you get more back than you have invested. It doesn't cost a lot of money
  - Solar panels, recycling, environmental
- *Livable*
  - Low-income
  - Low-rent
  - Not New Jersey
  - My life
  - Middle class
- *Mobility*
  - My cell phone
  - Walking
  - Walking or commuting
  - Tram. I remember they had a really good underground tram in Montreal
- *Complete streets*
  - I don't know
  - No potholes
  - A street that has no imperfections
  - Wider sidewalks
  - Actually having sidewalks. We have none. [many participants agreed they'd like to have sidewalks]
    - I don't know where people walk their dogs around here with no sidewalks.
  - Street lights
- *What if your town was organizing around sidewalks or bike lanes?*

- o I want sidewalks but no bike lanes. Bike lanes ruin the city. I almost hit a bike the other day with my car door.
  - o [Spanish pt] I'd love that. In Amsterdam they bike more than they drive
- **Community development**
  - o I like that one
  - o Helping out little old ladies
  - o Developments where all the houses are the same
  - o Parks for the kids
  - o Buildings and stuff, but I'd prefer parks for the kids. I wish it were more about people.

Have you heard of NJTPA? What do you think they do?

- My mom mentioned them once briefly, but I didn't really pay attention
- I think they're in charge of where buses go and stuff

What would your advice be to NJTPA?

- Don't overthink it. We're a simple people. Ask us simple questions of what we want to see.
- You probably won't be able to find us if you use the internet. I didn't even hear about this group until I got the student life email. I might have seen one flyer.
- *Would you fill out a poll from student life?*
  - o If it's on our intranet, I'd fill it out. We have other polls there.
- *What would motivate you to lead a focus group like this of your peers?*
  - o Hire interns to hold seminars or questionnaires like this because yeah, I'd be more interested to go if it were people my age versus a professor or someone higher up in the company.
  - o I feel like we know how to reach each other better, how to make people follow us on Twitter. I intern for a company and run their Twitter account. I agree it's better for people to talk to others their age
  - o A lot of times you see ads like these and you can smell the old people on them. It makes a difference if a young person did it.
  - o If you hire an intern it puts you in a great position to get feedback, but also the intern is learning something about the future
- Thank you for working on the Pulaski Skyway!
- You guys are in a tough position because it's really not interesting material. When you have people like Kim Kardashian making $6 million a year for making a show. That tells you what we're interested in. It's really fluffy stuff.
- I think it's hard to reach Millennials because many of us feel like "why bother".
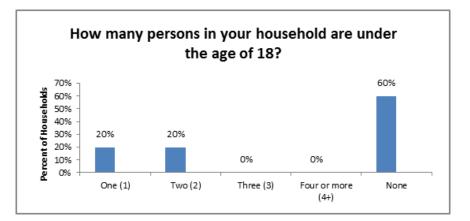- We're kind of in the middle where we don't care yet but we feel like maybe we should care.

How could we show you that we're listening?

- Incentives – the chance to win a gift card, etc.

- Advertise it in local communities
- Events like this in other towns, so people are being heard

What made you want to come here tonight?

- I wanted to know what was meant by transportation – were you talking about cars, etc?
- $40
- I wasn't interested in the topic but the $40 drew me in
- Free food, especially because I have late class after this so I knew I needed dinner.
- $40 covered my Valentine's Day expenses

Demographic Questionnaire Results – Suburban Millennial Residents

Which group best describes your age?

Do you rent or own your home?

Are you?

What race or ethnicity best describes you?

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2010 Census

What is your household income?

Do you have access to a vehicle on a regular basis?