

“Youth Initiative in Falls Church City, Virginia” by Jerry Barrett¹

Before I get into the subject of my remarks, I want to tell you a little about the site of my remarks, Falls Church City. Falls Church City is located about ten miles east of here between Fairfax County and Arlington County. It is very small compared to the two counties, with approximately 10,000 citizens in a two-mile square area.

The area was settled in 1699. In 1732, a small wood church was built in what is now the center of the city. That church was replaced with a brick church in 1763, and that church remains and is used yet today. It is called **THE** Falls Church. It takes its name from the fact that it was the church on the road to the ferry that crossed the Potomac River to Washington D.C. just below the Great Falls on the Potomac River. The church on the way to Great Falls. So the city became known as Falls Church.

The program² I started in 2014 involves high school students participating as non-voting members of Falls Church City Boards and Commissions, as well as community organizations.

I represented Falls Church on the Northern Virginia Community College Board for eight years. As Board Chair during my final year, I arranged to have a student appointed to the College Board as a non-voting member. During that year, I made an effort to get that arrangement institutionalized. As a result, a student has continued to serve on the College Board each year for the past five years.

I am on the Executive Board of the Citizens for a Better City (CBC) in Falls Church City, which is a civic organization that seeks to promote citizen involvement in city and community affairs. Several years earlier, CBC had abandoned its program of endorsing candidates for the City Council and School Board. As a result, the CBC was looking for something new to support. So I told the CBC about my Community College experience with a student Board member, and I suggested that CBC replicate my NOVA experience. I talked it up very strongly. The group liked the idea, after more discussion and time to think, we formed a committee and began working on a strategy.

¹ I was invited to speak about the Falls Church Youth Initiative at a conference conducted by Praxis for GMU School for Conflict Analysis and Resolution. This conference on conflict resolution and peace building ranging from youth violence in US to Child Soldiers in Africa. The Conference attempted to bridge the gap between practitioners and scholars in peace making and conflict resolution. The conference site was GMU main campus on August 18-19, 2017.

² The program is generally referred to as the Falls Church Youth Initiative.

First we got a preliminary OK from the Mayor, City Council, City Manager, School Superintendent, School Board, and the high school Principal. We checked with community organizations on their interest in participating. We asked the Chairs of boards and commissions if they would be willing to have a non-voting student member. Most of the Chairs were willing. There are approximately 25 boards and commissions, plus five community organizations.

An early announcement about our idea was sent to high school teachers, counselors, the PTA, and other civic organizations.

Realizing the need to coordinate with the school calendar, we scheduled recruiting and selection for spring and early summer. In the fall, the students began their assignment with a Board or Commission, following an orientation in late summer.

The program was open to all high school students, both female and male. Most application came from juniors and seniors, but a few sophomores applied as well, and some of them applied again later as juniors. Some minorities were involved each year. Absolutely, no applicants were rejected.

The student application form listed city commissions and boards. Students were asked to indicate their two favorite boards or commissions. The application also asked students to list their school activities and their reasons for volunteering.

Interviews were scheduled in spring with community and CBC members acting as interviewers. Applications and interviews showed us that all applicants were very involved in school activities.

By mid summer, each student was assigned to a board or commission. Every effort was made to respect each student's preferences. Later when the number of applications increased, it became necessary to place two students on some boards and commissions.

By late summer, some training/orientation was provided to help students understand how the city government operates. The mayor and other officials spoke to the students, as did chairs of boards and commissions. The CBC explained the students' roles and obligations as members of boards and commissions. We also pointed out the opportunities the program provided the students.

To highlight the program's importance and to enhance its visibility, the CBC:

1. Arranged for the students to be sworn-in before the City Council at a regular Council meeting, with many proud parents observing. The local weekly newspaper featured photos and a news story.
2. Invited the students, along with their parents, to attend the CBC annual meeting as honored guests.

3. Gave the students registration and a tee shirt to participate in the Annual 5K run for the City's Education Foundation.

Formal and informal discussions with students, once they had some experience, has been helpful in improving the program. Hearing what students had to say about how to run meetings, how discussion can lead to agreement, and how they learned interesting facts about topics they knew little about.

Since the program began in 2014, the number of students each year has ranged between 18 and 27.

Finally, the five goals that CBC established in 2014 have largely been met.³

Here are the goals:

1. Create opportunities for youth/students to learn about local government and civics in hands-on way;
2. Give students opportunities to volunteer in a meaningful way;
3. Enhance students' college applications;
4. Better engage parents and peers in community issues; and
5. Demonstrate our City's commitment to youth by giving them a real voice in decisions affecting us all.

³ This Youth Initiative would not have succeeded without willing volunteers from the CBC, high school students, the school system and political/civic leaders.