



# LEARNING TO LEAD:

## **The Impact of Youth Organizing on the Educational and Civic Trajectories of Low-Income Youth**

John Rogers, UCLA

Veronica Terriquez, USC

The Institute for Democracy, Education, and Access (IDEA)  
University of California, Los Angeles  
This report and related materials are available at: [www.ucla-idea.org](http://www.ucla-idea.org)

© University of California, Los Angeles' Institute for Democracy, Education, and Access, 2013

Made possible by a grant from The Charles Stewart Mott Foundation.

Recommended Citation:

Rogers, J., & Terriquez, V. (2013). *Learning to Lead: The Impact of Youth Organizing on the Educational and Civic Trajectories of Low-Income Youth*. Los Angeles, CA: Institute for Democracy, Education, and Access.

---

# Learning to Lead:

## The Impact of Youth Organizing on the Educational and Civic Trajectories of Low-Income Youth

John Rogers, UCLA  
Veronica Terriquez, USC

### Introduction

Twenty five year-old Ricardo Garcia<sup>1</sup> is a young man with a bright future. He holds a bachelor's degree from the University of California and is employed full-time at a non-profit organization working to improve the South Los Angeles neighborhood in which he grew up. Ricardo loves "connecting to people and hearing people's stories." He also has an appreciation for history and political affairs. Ricardo is particularly interested in issues such as immigration and economic development that affect his family and his community. He believes that he, in concert with other members of his community, can impact such issues through the ballot box and by sharing concerns with public officials.

Ricardo's future did not seem so promising as he entered 9<sup>th</sup> grade. "When I started high school," he now remembers, "it was kind of like a bet to see when I was going to drop out." Like most of their classmates, his sister and brother both dropped out of the same high school a few years before. Of those who did graduate, few were ready for university. Only about 5% of each class made it to the California State or University of California system.

Wanting something different for himself, Ricardo listened attentively when an organizer with the Community Coalition came to one of his classes recruiting new members. Ricardo was drawn to the idea of doing "something to change" his school, so, along with a couple of his friends, he began to attend workshops at the Community

Coalition's offices. There, speakers came to talk about the Civil Rights movement, the Chicano movement, and social justice. He recalls these talks as "an eye opener ... [they] made me look at things that I was already kind of looking at, but look at them totally differently." Ricardo began having regular discussions with other members of the Community Coalition about big issues such as "Who has power? Why don't we have power? And, what do we need to do to get power?" Over time, Ricardo became a member of the Community Coalition's high school organizing committee. He recruited new members and led meetings. Together they initiated a campaign to expand access to college preparatory classes.

As Ricardo participated in collective efforts to improve conditions in his school and across the district, he also benefited from academic support and guidance at the Community Coalition. The Community Coalition provided Ricardo with an SAT prep class and offered help with his college application. Staff from the Community Coalition even brought Ricardo to UCLA to present his insights about organizing to students in the department of social welfare. Ricardo remembers the sense of empowerment that came with telling these graduate students "about the subject they're learning in books." By the time he enrolled in college, Ricardo knew he too wanted to study social work and he felt he had the knowledge and social networks necessary for success.

Ricardo's membership in a youth organizing group while he was in high school influenced profoundly who he has become as a young

adult—his sense of self, his educational success, and his civic commitments and practices. This report takes up the question of whether Ricardo’s experience is idiosyncratic or characteristic of a broader pattern. Comparing the experiences of 410 young adults who were members of California youth organizing groups while in high school to those of a representative sample of young adults who never participated in youth organizing, we investigate the extent to which participation in youth organizing groups has a positive effect on educational, civic, and employment trajectories. We also explore what sorts of experiences in youth organizing groups during high school are associated with movement along these trajectories.

The central finding of this report is that youth organizing alumni are far more likely than comparable peers across California to enroll in four-year colleges and universities and engage in various civic activities in early adulthood. We also find that alumni of youth organizing groups are much less likely than their peers to be out of school and unemployed. Further, we

identify a number of learning opportunities and developmental supports associated with youth organizing that are related to college attendance and to a robust civic identity in early adulthood.

The report proceeds in five sections. Section one presents a rationale for examining the impact of youth organizing on the development of young adults, describing both the rapid growth of youth organizing groups in recent years as well as efforts to study this emerging field. Section two discusses the methods we used to investigate the impact of youth organizing. Section three describes our youth organizing alumni sample and the groups that these young adults participate in while in high school. The central findings of the study are presented in sections four (on educational attainment) and five (on civic identity and engagement). Our concluding section points to implications of key findings and identifies questions for future work.



## I. Youth Organizing and the Development of Young Adults

Youth organizing is a process for developing “within a neighborhood or community a base of young people committed to altering power relationships and creating meaningful institutional change” (Sullivan, Edwards, Johnson, and McGillicuddy, 2003). Members are generally high school age youth living in low-income communities and communities of color. Youth organizing groups attract new members through peer-to-peer outreach and the promise of addressing problems in their daily lives. Interested youth attend youth-led meetings and popular education activities at their school or a community-based site. These gatherings offer young people a welcoming environment, food, and academic and social supports. Over time, youth members take on leadership roles and participate in campaigns to effect social change. By creating a context in which youth practice politics, youth organizing groups promote both community improvement and youth development (Rogers, Mediratta, Shah, 2012; Ginwright and Cammarota 2007).

While there have been numerous instances of youth activism throughout American history, the current practice and structure of youth organizing has emerged over the last three decades. Youth organizing groups began to form in urban centers during the late 1980s and early 1990s against the backdrop of growing economic inequality, disinvestment in social programs, and dramatic increases in incarceration rates (Rogers, Mediratta, Shah, 2012; Warren, Mira, and Nikundiwe, 2008). In response, many activists sought to bring young people together in campaigns to advance alternative policies and insert the voices of low-income youth of color into the public sphere. Over time, youth and adult allies developed ongoing structures to sustain organizing projects after the campaigns ended. Non-profit community-based organizations were established that provided groups with a meeting place, stable staff, and capacity to secure more resources and develop longer-term strategies.

Youth organizing groups have grown in size and influence in the last quarter century (Warren, Mira, and Nikundiwe 2008). While there was only a spattering of youth organizing groups active in the late 1980s, hundreds of such organizations existed by the early 2000s (Endo 2002). These groups generally include core members who participate in activities several times a week, as well as active members who participate in workshops and actions throughout the year.

As youth organizing has grown, the field has attracted the attention of educational researchers interested in its potential for advancing educational reform. (Torres Fleming et al., 2010). A good deal of research has documented how youth organizing groups shape the understandings of policymakers and effect change in local and state policy and institutional practice (Mediratta et al., 2009; Warren and Mapp, 2011). For example, successful youth organizing campaigns in Los Angeles have shaped policies on the location of new schools, the rigor of high school graduation requirements, and school discipline (Rogers and Morrell, 2010).

A number of researchers have also examined youth organizing as a context for learning and development (Kirshner, 2009; Larson and Hansen, 2005). Many youth organizing groups embody practices associated with powerful learning—they are voluntary organizations, critical in orientation, focused on real-world problems, and committed to development (Rogers, Mediratta, Shah, 2012). Researchers have found that participants in youth organizing acquire knowledge and skills necessary for participation in civic life (Watkins et al., 2007). Participation in youth organizing also forges civic commitments and enhances young people’s sense of agency (Taines, 2012; Shah, 2011; Ginwright and James, 2002).

Many researchers have hypothesized that experiences with youth organizing in high school will shape development into adulthood, but there has been little empirical evidence to date. Some research suggests that members of youth organizing groups believe that their participation will influence their future behavior. Shah (2011)



found that a strong majority of high school age members of youth organizing groups reported that their experience in organizing not only has led them to take more rigorous academic courses and achieve better grades, but also forged higher educational aspirations for the future. The youth members in Shah's study also reported that they planned to remain civically engaged as young adults.

There has only been one published study that has linked youth organizing experiences during high school with young adult beliefs and behaviors. Connor (2011) conducted a case study of 25 former participants of one youth organizing group in Philadelphia. Her interviews suggest that many of the young adults still draw upon the "critical thinking, interpersonal, communication, and introspective skills" that they first forged in the context of youth organizing while in high school. Connor's study illuminates how early experiences in one organizing group shape identities over time, but it does not address whether youth organizing impacts the educational and civic trajectories of its members. While the value of youth organizing as a strategy for political change has been well established, the evidence to date has been more limited on the value of youth organizing for the long-term development of its members. It thus is important to understand how experiences with youth organizing during high school shape the pathways members follow as they enter adulthood. That understanding is the purpose of this current study.

## II. Methods

We draw on data from the California Young Adult Study (CYAS) to investigate whether participation in youth organizing groups while in high school impacts young people's educational and civic trajectories in early adulthood. We primarily rely on information drawn from two distinct samples of 18-26 year-olds who attended school in California before the age of 17.

The first sample includes a group of 2,200 young adults who participated in a phone survey between April and August of 2011. This sample was generated through random digit dialing of landline and cell phones in California, with an oversampling of landlines located in high-poverty

census tracts. (We refer to this group below as the "general population.") When sampling weights are applied, this group is representative of California's 18-26 year-old population. Following the survey administration, researchers conducted 174 in-depth interviews in 2011-12 with survey participants largely residing in the San Francisco and Los Angeles metropolitan areas.

The second sample comes from alumni rosters of eight California community-based organizations that engage high school students in youth organizing activities. (We describe the organizations in greater detail in section three below.) We surveyed 410 young adults who had been members of these eight groups while they were in high school. We refer to this group as this group as "YO" alumni. Our research team also conducted in-person semi-structured interviews with 84 of the alumni who had participated in the survey.

The phone survey included more than 170 questions about the young adults' past and current educational experiences, their employment history, and their participation in various civic engagement opportunities. The survey also asked respondents about various demographic characteristics of themselves and their families.<sup>2</sup> The follow-up interviews explored young adults' early family life, activities during high school, and educational, civic, and employment experiences following high school. Interviews with alumni of youth organizing groups probed respondents' entry into organizing, the nature of their participation, and the effects of membership on their knowledge, skills, and identity.

In addition to the surveys and interviews with young adults, we conducted interviews with staff and former staff from the eight youth organizing groups that are represented in the study. The interviews provided contextual information on the organizations—the demographics and size of the membership, educational and civic activities, and recent campaigns. We also explored how members are recruited and retained and how and under what circumstances they take on leadership roles.

This broad body of data allows us to a) compare the trajectories of young adults who

participated in youth organizing while in high school with those who did not; and b) illuminate key conditions for youth development in the organizing groups. We use survey data to describe the educational and civic pathways of different groups of young adults—alumni of youth organizing, the general young adult population of California, including those who grew up in low-income households. This last group offers a comparison sample whose socioeconomic background is most similar to the YO alumni. In addition, we use statistical analyses to compare youth organizing alumni to young people who come from similar backgrounds in terms of age, gender, family socioeconomic background, and self-reported high school GPA. Finally, we draw on the in-depth interviews to elaborate how particular experiences in youth organizing support college access or civic engagement.

### III. The Youth Organizing Alumni Sample

The YO alumni who participated in this study were members of eight California youth organizing groups between the years 2004 and 2011. Four of the groups are based in the San Francisco Bay area: Asian Youth Promoting Advocacy and Leadership (AYPAL), Youth Making A Change (Y-MAC) of Coleman Youth Advocates, Youth Together, and Youth United for Community Action (YUCA). Three are located in Los Angeles: Coalition for Humane Rights of Los Angeles' (CHIRLA) Wise Up!, the Community Coalition's South Central Youth Empowered through Action (SCYEA),

and InnerCity Struggle. The final group, Californians For Justice (CFJ), is a statewide network with youth organizing sites in Long Beach, San Jose, and Oakland. All eight of these groups have engaged young people in organizing activities for a decade or more.

Interviews with staff illuminate the scope and intensity of youth participation. Current membership across the groups ranges from 82 for Youth Together to 250-300 for CHIRLA's Wise Up. Members generally attend a weekly meeting, often held at school sites. They also participate throughout the year in occasional workshops and become deeply engaged in political action in the context of shorter-term campaigns. Across each of these organizations, a smaller number of youth participate as core members. Core members play leadership roles, often organizing or facilitating meetings. Staff report that core members spend several hours a week engaged in organizational activities. (See Table 1.)

The vast majority of survey and interview respondents in the study are alumni of six of the eight organizing groups. This uneven participation rate reflects differences in the availability of alumni contact information at the time of the study. Two of the groups—Youth Making A Change of Coleman Advocates and Youth United for Community Action—produced a relatively small number of participants due to their limited contact records (telephone numbers, email addresses, other social media contact information) for alumni. (See Table 2 for study participation rates by group.)

Youth Organizing Groups	# Members	# Core Members
Asian Youth Promoting Advocacy and Leadership (AYPAL)	120-200	24
Californians for Justice (CFJ)	229	105
InnerCity Struggle (ICS)	100-125	30-40
South Central Youth Empowered through Action (SCYEA, part of Community Coalition)	150-200	35-40
Wise Up! (part of CHIRLA)	250-300	18
Youth Making a Change (YMAC, part of Coleman Advocates)	250	25
Youth Together (YT)	82	12
Youth United for Community Change (YUCA)	175	12-20

The eight youth organizing groups in this study serve a higher proportion of youth of color, immigrant youth, low-income youth, and females than is found in the randomly selected comparison group, hereinafter referred to as the general population. These demographics are reflected in our YO sample. The organizing alumni are more likely to be Latino, African American, or Asian American than the general population of California young adults. Only 1% of the organizing alumni identified as white, compared with 35% of California’s young adult population. Similarly, the organizing alumni are substantially more likely to be immigrants (27% to 16%) or the children of immigrants (55% to 38%) than their peers. More than twice as many (88% to 38%) YO alumni than the general population come from low-income backgrounds. We identify low-income students as those who were eligible for free and reduced lunch or whose parents relied on public assistance while they were in high school. Almost two thirds of YO alumni (64%) are female, even though females represent just less than half of the total young adult population. (See Table 3 for a summary of the demographics of the YO alumni compared with California young adults in the general population.)

There are similarities and differences between the high school experiences of YO alumni and other California young adults. YO alumni are roughly as likely as other young adults (16% to 17%) to have been enrolled in high school classes for students learning English as a second

language, but they are substantially less likely (2% to 7%) to have been in the special education program. YO alumni are slightly more likely than their peers (54% to 47%) to report that they received mostly “A” and “B” grades in high school, but less likely (13% to 20%) to report that they had been suspended or expelled. Differences in grades and discipline outcomes might reflect a selection bias—that a distinctive group of young people join YO groups. But it is also possible that experience in YO groups promotes academic achievement and pro-social school behavior or other strategies through which youth avoid punitive school discipline. Table 4 provides and compares the high school academic and other experiences of YO alumni to all California young adults in the general population, as well as to those who are from low-income backgrounds.

Interviews with alumni and organizing staff shed light on the question of whether members of YO groups represent a selective group or are similar to the broader pool of students attending their high schools. Only a third of the alumni interviewed indicated that they joined YO groups because they already had an interest in political and social change. Many more reported that they joined because they were recruited by friends or for other social reasons. In addition, staff across most groups indicated that they purposefully try to engage students with diverse interests and backgrounds and different levels of academic engagement and success. A staff member at AYPAL noted: “We recruit young

**Table 2: Youth Organizing Alumni Survey and Interview Sample Compositions**

Youth Organizing Group	Survey Respondents	Interview Respondents
AYPAL	61	12
CFJ	69	13
WISE UP! (CHIRLA)	57	10
SCYEA (Community Coalition)	58	13
ICS	68	15
YMAC (Coleman Advocates)	22	6
YT	59	12
YUCA	16	3



	<b>Youth Organizing Alumni</b>	<b>CA General Population</b>
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	36%	52%
Female	64%	48%
<b>Race</b>		
Latino	58%	44%
White	1%	35%
Asian/Pacific Islander	23%	11%
Black	11%	6%
Other	7%	4%
<b>Immigrant generation</b>		
1.5 generation	27%	16%
2nd generation	55%	38%
3rd generation+	19%	46%
<b>Socio-economic status</b>		
Raised by parent w/ college degree	15%	35%
Poverty background	88%	38%

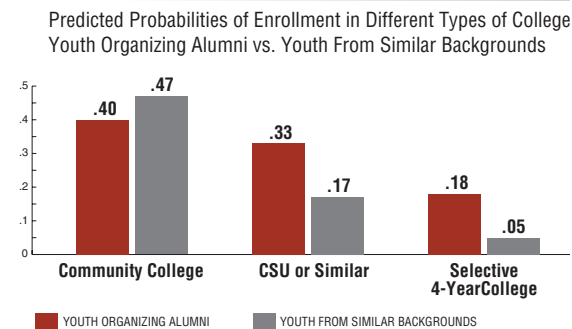
	<b>Youth Organizing Alumni</b>	<b>CA General Population</b>	<b>Low-Income Young Adults</b>
<b>High School Placements</b>			
Special Education	2%	7%	12%
English as a Second Language	16%	17%	32%
<b>Grades</b>			
Received mostly As and Bs	54%	47%	35%
<b>Disciplinary Experience</b>			
Suspended/Expelled	13%	20%	25%

people who have potential for leadership and they don't have to be academically inclined. It's really about having a combination of different sets of skill in people." Similarly, at InnerCity Struggle, staff strategically "schedule classroom presentations in classes that would have a good

mix of students, from your students that are excelling academically, to your students that are really struggling academically."

## IV. Academic Outcomes for Youth Organizing Alumni and Comparable Peers

Figure 1



YO alumni survey participants are significantly more likely to attend a four-year college when compared to young people from similar backgrounds. The above graph shows the likelihood of college attendance for low-income youth whose parent(s) did not obtain a bachelor's degree.<sup>3</sup> Results from this statistical analysis indicate the likelihood of attending a CSU or similarly ranked school is 33% for YO alumni compared to 17% for similar youth from the general population. The difference is also striking when it comes attending a selective university, such as a University of California school, Ivy League, or similarly ranked institution. The likelihood of attending a selective college is 17% for YO alumni compared to 5% for the general population.

Why are alumni of YO groups far more likely than comparable peers to have gone on to four-year colleges and to not be out of school and out of work? Interviews with alumni and staff from YO groups point to three broad reasons. First, YO groups promote a context for learning. They offer direct academic support and create opportunities for young people to acquire skills and develop intellectual interests in the context of campaigns. Second, YO groups provide members with holistic and culturally relevant college counseling and guidance. Third, YO groups encourage members to see college-going as connected to a broader political and community empowerment agenda.

## Supporting development of academic skills and intellectual interests

As the YO groups in our study work to advance social change, they also promote their members' academic success. This concern with academics is related to a more general interest in the welfare and development of youth members. Staff of YO groups noted that it would be "morally unjust" or a "contradiction" of core principles for their organization to involve young people in campaigns for social improvement without simultaneously helping these youth to grow as individuals. In addition, the commitment of some YO groups to redressing educational inequality has led them to emphasize school success. For example, staff at Californians for Justice tells its members: "Hey, we're about educational justice and we can't have you dropping out because of challenges at school."

The organizing groups in our study provide youth members with tutoring and homework support during their after-school programs. Most groups establish a regular time and place when members can work on school assignments and access assistance (as needed) from staff, many of whom have college degrees. Several groups also developed personalized programs to help students with their schoolwork. For example, InnerCity Struggle creates an "individual empowerment plan" for each of its members that identifies academic challenges faced, outlines steps for improvement, and specifies how and when staff members will provide help.

In addition to assisting young people with their schoolwork, YO groups engage members in relevant and rigorous lessons about social change and inequality that foster a commitment to intellectual discussion and critical analysis. For example, Lien, an AYPAL alumni recalls "we watch documentaries and then read articles about what's going on around the world. It's like receiving all this information that isn't given to us at school. There are so many injustices and AYPAL has educated us on what's happening around the world." Lien also adds that her experience allowed her to draw links between global and local issues. Meanwhile, Abdiel, a member of YUCA, discussed how he

learned the importance of data collection and analysis in campaigns. While working on an environmental justice campaign, Abdiel claims that data collection and statistics proved critical in understanding how “toxic waste factories are affecting our community, and other low-income communities of color.”

Alumni of YO groups also point to a variety of skills they developed in the context of organizing campaigns that contribute to their academic success. Sandy, a 22 year-old college student, notes that she learned to think creatively about difficult problems at the Community Coalition. The organizing staff encouraged members to “brainstorm different solutions,” a strategy she still uses today when she approaches a research paper. Reuben, another alumni from the Community Coalition, recalls that, in the course of the campaign to expand college access in Los Angeles, he had to plan actions, write op-eds, and speak publicly. “It really kind of helped shape who I am as a person, my values and my work ethic, and developed a lot of leadership skills, my potential to think critically and to write, and to speak, and to articulate goals and solutions and problems.”

### Providing culturally relevant college guidance and mentoring

The YO groups in our study provided members with strong college guidance and support. These counseling services likely played a particularly important role for youth growing up in low-income families in California. Throughout the period of this study, California public schools offered few counseling services; California ranked last of all states in the number of students served by each counselor (Rogers et al 2011). Yvonne, an alumni from Youth Together, recalls that her high school counselors “were always busy and you always had to get an appointment.” Similarly, Cliff, an alumni of Californians for Justice (CFJ), notes that while his high school counselors “couldn’t really afford the time,” CFJ staff walked him through the college application process, reading his essay and providing timely feedback.

Alumni highlighted several types of college information that they accessed through their YO groups. Many alumni learned about the importance of college preparatory courses from their groups. Organizing staff helped youth





## YOUTH ORGANIZING STAFF AS ROLE MODELS

*I always feel like that's where the youth can really make that connection, where it's like, okay, so I guess I could connect with you because you're also, your family is also from Mexico, or I can connect with you because you're also Black. But it's like when you're someone who is like, oh, you also went to Fremont High School, and you graduated from UCLA and now you're working here at the Community Coalition? And you tell them, yes, go to college, okay. ... [It] helps to create this sense of understanding and trust that maybe someone else might not be able to get from another youth, from another staff member right away. I think it's so important that when we present these role models to the youth and we have people come speak to the youth about their experiences and try to motivate them that as much as possible that they are people who not only look like them, but also grew-up in South LA.*

-Staff, Community Coalition

*Yes, we talk about ... what schools we went to a lot, and we also always bring it back to the fact that a lot of us, we were first generation college students. I was a first generation, and so the only one in my family out of immigrant parents, right, to go to college. So for them to hear that, it's like instantly they just see themselves, they see themselves in us, right, and vice-versa. ... So I think that's really powerful because a lot of the times students feel like colleges, like something that's not like attainable, it's kind of something in the distance. But when you let them know like, hey, I came from a school that was very similar to yours, 50% push out rate, and I went to Berkeley and I graduated in four years, and I was the first in my family to go to college, yes, it was scary but I did it.*

-Staff, InnerCity Struggle



to track the courses they needed to qualify for four-year colleges and they encouraged young people to see these classes as part of a broader project of college access. Organizing groups also provided members with information on scholarships and financial aid, offering specific details to undocumented immigrant students who faced restrictions due to their citizenship status. “Wise Up!,” one alumni noted, “was really about inspiring us to go to college, even if we didn’t have papers.” In addition to talking with members about college, all of the groups in our study regularly led trips to college campuses. These trips often included meetings with current college students who previously had been members of these same organizing groups.

In addition to being conduits of information, YO staff served as mentors who had already navigated a path to college. Vanessa, an alumni from Wise Up!, remembers feeling a deep connection to one staff member who “had gotten out from that community that I came from and gone off to Berkeley.” Diana, from InnerCity Struggle, recounts: I had never been around people who were in college, who were going to UCLA, who were going to USC. ... Being in those spaces kind of made you realize that maybe college was a possibility, and even though you had 60 percent dropout rate at your high school, there was still kids making it out.”

The organizing staff not only provided an inspiring image of a young adult role, they also offered contextual information particularly relevant to the college experiences of a person of color from a working class community. For Cynthia, an alumni from InnerCity Struggle, this meant that she entered college with confidence that she had the “inside scoop” of how a Latina could navigate a primarily white University.<sup>4</sup>

The quality of relationships between youth and YO staff members created a unique context for guidance and support. Empathy and bonds of trust enabled organizing staff to “push” youth members in a manner that they experienced as encouraging rather than harsh. At times, this push came in the form of questions that prompted youth to think about their long-term plans. Eduardo from Youth Together explains:

*“The organizers would always ask those questions that nobody would ask, like ‘What are you doing with your life? What are you planning to do after high school? What do you want to do?’ Just having somebody ask those questions helped me out because I never really thought about anything like that. I was always, ‘Ok, it’s just high school,’ but I never thought about what would go on after high school. I probably wouldn’t be in college now if it weren’t for Youth Together.”*

Another type of “push” came in the form of organizing staff persuading youth that they could pursue a college pathway. Hugo, a Wise Up! alumnus, recalls a common refrain among members: “Oh, I won’t get accepted and I’m not competitive.” But, he notes, the daily message of hope and possibility from one staff member, “led me to believe that anyone can do it.”<sup>5</sup>

### **Connecting College-Going to Broader Empowerment Agenda**

In addition to providing academic supports and guidance, YO groups encourage young people to view learning as both a political and a personal project. “We have a whole set of curriculum that’s around educational justice. Part of that curriculum is the understanding of the history of the education system and understanding the power of education. This curriculum is instilled on the students by everyone on staff,” acknowledges a Youth Together alumni member who eventually joined the staff. A staff member at CFJ explains this process in more detail: “Constantly looking at ... the systemic barriers to young people ... not achieving an education,” motivates members to “look at their own experience” in a new way. They realize, “It’s not that I don’t have a desire to go on to higher education. It’s not that I don’t value education. It’s that there’s a lot of systemic barriers.” We can see the relationship between participating in educational justice campaigns and personal academic commitments in the comments of Juan, a recent alumnus from YMAC. At weekly meetings preparing for an educational justice campaign, Juan and his fellow members discussed explanations of the achievement gap. The discussions addressed “how some schools don’t give you what you need ... [and] ... if you didn’t get an education ... how your life would be.” These discussions led Juan to understand that



“sometimes you have to fight more for the things that you want in your school,” *and* “you got to go to school, you got to be on time, you got to do [your] work and all that.”

## V. Civic Outcomes for Youth Organizing Alumni and Comparable Peers

This section reports on the civic beliefs and practices amongst YO alumni and other young adults in California. Before turning to our findings, it is important to note that many scholars have tracked a broad decline in civic participation over recent decades, particularly among young adults—with a drop in voting rates, participation in voluntary associations, and citizen knowledge of policy issues (Galston, 2001; Gibson & Levine, 2003; Putnam, 2000). Moreover, in our era of growing economic inequality, civic engagement has grown more and more unequal (American Political Science Association, 2004). This inequality plays out amongst young adults, with stark differences in civic knowledge and patterns of civic participation by social class and educational background (American Political Science Association, 2004; Levinson, 2012).

There is a growing body of work documenting the relationship between this broader civic inequality and the experience of young people. For example, Joe Kahne and Ellen Middaugh (2008) have shown that African American and Latino students and students in low-track classes are less likely than their peers to participate in civic simulations, discuss current events, or meet civic role models. Kahne and Middaugh call this the civic learning opportunity gap. Other scholars have highlighted inequalities in civic learning opportunities beyond the school day (Hart and Atkins, 2002; Watts and Guessous, 2006).

Youth organizing represents a potential strategy for equalizing the opportunities for civic learning and development and energizing civic participation. It targets low-income urban neighborhoods and provides opportunities to practice politics. By galvanizing and directing civic energy, youth organizing aims to provide

youth who otherwise have little formal power with the capacity to address immediate problems and challenge the status quo.

Does youth organizing have a lasting effect on civic beliefs and practices of young adults who participated in organizing groups while in high school? To begin to answer this question we compare civic outcomes across three groups of young adults: YO alumni, the general population, and low-income young adults from the general population. Again, this last group offers a comparison sample whose socio-economic background is most similar to the YO alumni.

Table 5 compares organizational membership and participation across these three groups. Alumni from youth organizing groups are far more likely than other young adults to participate in organizations. This pattern holds true for school, community, and political organizations, with differences in political organizations most pronounced. The one exception to this general pattern is participation in religious organizations; such participation is universally low across the samples. Importantly, alumni of youth organizing groups are more than twice as likely as other youth adults to report participating in decision-making within organizations. This finding suggests a greater depth to the participation of youth organizing alumni and indicates that these alumni are more likely to take on leadership roles.

Table 6 compares volunteerism across these four groups. YO alumni are almost twice as likely (55% to 29%) as other young adults to report that they have volunteered “very often” or “somewhat often” over the past year. Notably, only 29% of the youth organizing sample report that they did not volunteer at all. By contrast, 54% of the total random sample did not volunteer, and 61% of low-income young adults in the general population did not volunteer.

Table 7 examines civic beliefs. Youth organizing alumni are more likely than their peers to report that there are issues in their community they care about, that they can make a difference, and that they feel connected to others working to effect

	Youth Organizing Alumni	CA General Population	Low-Income Young Adults
<b>Organizational Membership and Participation</b>			
Belongs to an organization	56%	30%	23%
Belongs to a school-sponsored organization	29%	15%	9%
Belongs to a religious organization	8%	11%	10%
Belongs to a community-based organization	49%	20%	16%
Belongs to a political organization	36%	5%	4%
Helps make decisions for an organization	45%	19%	15%

	Youth Organizing Alumni	CA General Population	Low-Income Young Adults
<b>How often have you volunteered in the last 12 months?</b>			
Very often	25%	10%	9%
Somewhat often	30%	19%	17%
Not very often	15%	16%	12%
Rarely	1%	1%	1%
Did not Volunteer	29%	54%	61%

	Youth Organizing Alumni	CA General Population	Low-Income Young Adults
<b>Percent responding "Strongly Agree"</b>			
There are issues in your community that you care deeply about	80%	44%	40%
You believe you can make a difference in your community	68%	42%	37%
You feel connected to others working to improve society	55%	33%	32%
In the USA everyone has an equal chance to succeed	19%	44%	54%

change. Indeed, most youth organizing alumni answered each of these questions affirmatively. Yet, this sense of civic agency sits alongside a more critical view of the opportunity structure in the United States. Only 19% of youth organizing alumni agreed with the statement, "In the USA, everybody has an equal chance to succeed." By contrast 44% of the random

sample agreed with this statement and 54% of young adults who grew up poor agreed with this statement.

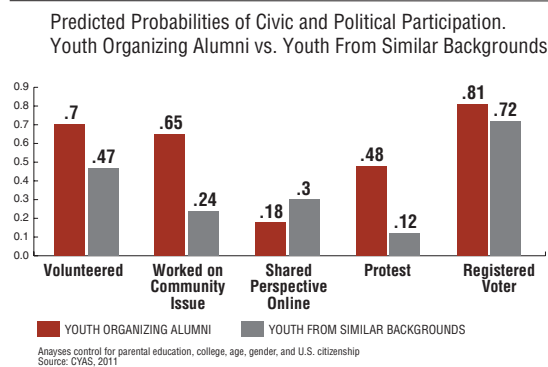
Table 8 compares civic and political participation across the four groups. YO alumni are roughly twice as likely as other young adults to report having worked on an issue affecting

**Table 8: Civic Actions Completed Within the Last Year**

	Youth Organizing Alumni	CA General Population	Low-Income Young Adults
Worked on issue affecting own community	65%	27%	21%
Shared perspective on social or political issue online	56%	30%	24%
Participated in a protest or rally	51%	13%	12%
Registered to vote	75%	68%	61%

their community (65% to 27%) or shared perspectives on social and political issues online (56% to 30%). They also are almost four times as likely (51% to 13%) to have participated in a march or protest. YO alumni who are U.S. citizens are somewhat more likely to have registered to vote than citizens in the general population.

Figure 2



YO alumni are significantly more likely to participate in civic and political activities when compared to other youth from similar backgrounds. The above graph illustrates the likelihood of participation in a range of activities, after accounting for differences in youths’ college enrollment and demographic background. We found it important to account for youths’ college enrollment in analyses since postsecondary education can increase an individual’s civic and political participation, and YO alumni are more likely to go to college than similar young people from the general population. These findings suggest that YO groups motivate their members to become actively engaged in their communities after they graduate from high school.

### Interview data show a distinctive pattern of civic engagement

Our interview data illuminates patterns of participation across youth organizing alumni and other young adults in California. We asked youth organizing alumni and other young adults: “Do you think that you or other people around your age can make a difference in the community? Or in politics? Why do you think that? Could you give examples of how you or people your age have made a difference?” In line with survey results, YO alumni were more likely to say that young people can make a difference. Yet, more striking is the discrepancy in answers to the follow-up question. Over a quarter of interviewees from the general population who believed young people can make a difference were unable to provide a concrete example of such action. Here is a typical response: “Like I don’t know any examples. But I’m pretty sure somebody can make a big difference, even if they’re young.” By contrast, only 1% of youth organizing alumni could not offer an example of young people making change; many provided extraordinarily detailed accounts from their own experience.

Alumni from youth organizing groups also provided very different answers than other young adults to the question, “What does it mean to be politically engaged?” One key difference is that youth organizing alumni were much more likely than other young adults to talk about political engagement as collective, as opposed to individualistic, action. Over 90% of the youth organizing sample defined political engagement in collective terms, meaning they spoke about young people coming together to solve a problem or exert collective force, whereas only half of other young adults did so. Further, when young

adults in the random sample spoke of collective action, they often did so with little specificity or clarity. In contrast, the alumni of youth organizing groups often offered rich descriptions of joint political action. Ann, a 25-year-old alumni, represents a case in point:

*“To be politically involved is to really understand our own individual agency and then our own agency as a collective. ... To be involved, we need to feel the sense of connection with each other, and connection to like the fact that things don’t need to be the way they are. Like if you’re sick and tired of being sick and tired ... the next step is not to sit there and think about that—I think the next step is to really get up and figure out how to change that. And who else is willing to change it with you?”*

We also see differences in the sorts of actions young adults associate with political engagement. YO alumni are more likely than the general population to talk about electoral engagement—participating in voter education and get out the vote activities—than simply voting. They also are more likely to discuss empowered deliberation—interacting with public officials,

deliberating, or participating in decision-making. And they are far more likely to speak of protests, rallies, marches, and organizing. Further, while many young adults talk about the importance of being informed, youth organizing alumni are much more likely to note the importance of analyzing (rather than simply accepting) mainstream sources of information and gathering additional information themselves.

### Youth Organizing as a Site of Robust Civic Development

Why do so many alumni of YO groups speak in similar terms about the power of collective action? Why do youth participants believe, in the words of one staff member, “that they’re part of something greater?” And, how do experiences in YO groups while in high school shape participants’ beliefs and identities?

YO groups invite and enable new members to participate in what some theorists term “publics” or spaces where people come together and forge relationships of commonality, recognize and





examine their shared concerns and hopes, and articulate their interests through joint action. The publics created by YO groups do this and more. They are shaped by a consciousness of the subordinate social position of their members and a recognition of the need to challenge dominant social relations and prevailing understandings for the purpose of individual and political transformation.<sup>4</sup>

YO groups not only constitute a public, but they are committed to developing new members as part of that public. At some level, all publics must concern themselves with integrating new members. But, there is something distinctive about this process in youth organizing groups. New member development is one of the core purposes of these groups. And this developmental focus centers on enabling young people to be vital members of the public. We can thus talk about YO groups as developmental publics.

In our interviews with YO alumni, many young adults articulate a narrative of growth from someone who is shy and inward-focused to a

vital participant in collective action. The youth develop in the course of participating in the work of organizing—recruiting other youth, conducting door-to-door campaigns in the community, speaking in public, and developing social change campaigns. Each of these activities calls for a complex set of skills and ways of being that youth develop in the context of participating. It is not easy for young people to take on these new roles, but they are propelled forward through intrinsic motivation and support of older members and staff.

One activity that is important to this process of growth is recruitment of new members. The act of reaching out to potential new members prods young people to develop a public voice. Alicia, a 20 year-old alumni, recounts: “They would also make us – well, not make us but they would ask us if we wanted to phone bank. We would call other people reminding them about our weekly meetings. And then they would, I don’t know – show us how to not get so nervous when we’re talking in front of people. ... they had made me a stronger person because before I would just – used to be in this shell.”





Outreach also encourages youth to hear the interests of others and listen to them more empathically. Ryan, a 24 year-old alumnus, states: “I learned ... how to be an effective recruiter ... not recruiting in the sense of just trying to get folks to just do things or come to meetings, but like, able to really, like, talk to somebody and be like, ‘Yo, this is what’s going on. Like, what do you think about that?’”

Similarly, outreach to neighbors in the community places youth in novel and challenging situations that elicit agency and prompt the development of new social scripts. Tanya, an alumni from YUCA, notes: “I think if you can knock on somebody’s door who’s in their house minding their business, and think that you’re probably selling ‘em something, in the ghetto where you need to be safe not to open your doors, you kinda have to be confident. You really have to be confident ... that they will accept you when they understand why you’re going: ‘Hi ... [I’m] not here to sell you anything. Please don’t slam the door.’ ... I think that gave me confidence, and I think I learned the ability to speak to a diverse public.”

Tanya makes this process of forging a new identity sound easy. Other alumni acknowledge how difficult it is to take on new and challenging public roles. We hear this dynamic from San, an alumni from AYPAL: “I was really close minded and kind of shy. But AYPAL made me more outgoing and a lot more understanding. AYPAL really just taught me to fight for what you want.” San, like others, found the courage to step out of his comfort zone and speak up at rallies, meetings, and other public events.

Responsibilities for public speaking also stretch members to think about what it means to communicate effectively, particularly in group settings. For some members, this reflection helps craft a more productive, public identity. Cassandra notes: “I was able to learn how to control myself verbally. I got kicked out of like tons of classes, but after working with YMAC, I’m able to understand when is a good place to speak up and when isn’t, and how to better utilize my opinion than to just be angry about everything. Like you can’t make any change if you’re just angry about everything.”

## VI. Summary, Implications, and Emerging Questions

Our study finds that YO groups in California powerfully shaped the trajectory of young people from high school into early adulthood. Participation in YO groups while in high school is associated with a number of positive outcomes for low-income youth of color. Alumni of YO groups are more likely than their peers to move on to four-year colleges and universities and three and a half times more likely to enroll in the most selective higher education institutions. They also are more likely to volunteer, to participate in civic organizations, and to take a variety of political actions ranging from sharing information to marching in protests. Further, YO alumni are far more likely than their peers to believe in social change and understand what actions they can take to improve their local community and make the world a better place.

YO groups support these positive outcomes by providing members with an array of developmental opportunities. Groups establish engaging and culturally relevant contexts for members to acquire academic skills and access guidance and counseling. They also offer young people with role models from their communities who use their strong relationships to provide additional encouragement and push that might not be so effective were it to come from teachers or other adults. In addition, YO groups foster a sense of intrinsic motivation for young people to participate in the group that, along with the supportive environment, propels members to engage in actions that stretch themselves and forge deep civic commitments.

### Implications

The findings from this study suggest that youth organizing groups are powerful institutions for reasons that extend beyond their impact on educational policy and practice: They also can be important sites for learning and development. We say “can be” because the ten organizing groups in our study do not represent the entire universe of youth organizing. Certainly there are differences across groups that likely shape their ability to promote educational and civic outcomes. It is important to note that all the

youth organizing groups in our study have been operating for at least ten years. Their longevity is evidence of organizational capacity and likely has supported the development of expertise grounded in experience. The following implications thus are intended to apply to youth organizing groups with a well-established track record.

First, philanthropic organizations and local governmental agencies interested in college access and civic engagement would do well to provide sustained support to youth organizing groups. Youth organizing groups thus are positioned to address unequal learning opportunities in school or civic life. While there are many organizations that work on these issues, youth organizing groups can be particularly well situated to engage low-income youth, youth of color, and immigrant youth, and to do so in a way that will transform young people's trajectories.

Second, in addition to enhancing the capacity of existing groups, philanthropic organizations and local governmental agencies should consider supporting new or up-and-coming youth organizing groups. Staff at the well-established youth organizing groups represent an invaluable resource for this process. Indeed, the developmental focus of youth organizing groups means that staff members in the established groups are reflective about the core ideas underlying their work and are skilled in communicating these ideas to broader audiences. We saw strong evidence of this capacity in the course of our interviews with staff members.

Third, organizations that support youth organizing groups should focus attention on the developmental outcomes of these groups (in addition to the policy changes these groups effect). Attending to these outcomes will require funding for new forms of record keeping and assessment that allow groups to track the educational and civic engagement of their members (and alumni) over time. It will be critical to develop such tools in a manner that ensures the privacy of members and does not undermine the relationships and the sense of community that undergirds the work of organizing groups.

Fourth, organizations interested in supporting high school students' progress toward college and adult civic engagement—public schools, college access programs, and other youth development programs—should study youth organizing groups to inform their own practice. Certainly, not all of what youth organizing groups do can or should be transposed into other settings. The point here is that youth organizing groups present a unique approach to critical issues of engagement, motivation, and support; understanding this approach can enable other adults who work with youth to take a fresh look at their own practice. Much would be gained from structured opportunities for youth organizing staff to meet with educators and other adults to discuss different approaches to youth development.

### **Questions and further work**

We hope that our study encourages new research on youth organizing that responds to some of the following questions.

First, in what ways are members of youth organizing groups similar to and different from other students at their high schools? In what ways are these similarities and differences tied to particular recruitment strategies?

Second, earlier we noted that the youth organizing alumni were less likely to report having been suspended than other youth adults. Is this difference due to selection bias (that is, students with serious behavioral issues are less likely to join youth organizing groups)? Or is the difference due to practices within youth organizing groups that enable young people to avoid punitive discipline from school officials? If the latter is true, what are these practices?

Third, what practices (for example, popular education workshops, outreach, public speaking, door knocking, or participation in campaigns) are associated with the development of civic knowledge, skills and identities? Does this differ across organizations?

Fourth, what processes, structures, and resources do organizations use to develop the capacity of staff to advance youth learning? How does this differ across organizations?

Fifth, while our study focused on young adults (ages 18-25), we are interested in the longer-term impact of participation in youth organizing groups as well. Do differences in educational and civic trajectories widen or narrow a few more years out? Are alumni from youth organizing groups more likely (than other similar young adults) to return to school in their late 20s? Are alumni from youth organizing groups more likely to demonstrate civic leadership and substantial civic contributions in their late 20s?

As we consider these and other questions, it seems only fitting to give the final word to 25

year-old Sandra, an alumni of Californians for Justice.

*“Not everyone is gonna be an organizer right? ... They wanna be a doctor or they wanna do something else or whatever and the only thing we can really give them ... is really like a sense of the world and how it should be or could be and their place in it and that you can change that. And I think like that type of relationship building and that type of world view is something they can stay with forever even if they never organize again.”*





## REFERENCES

- American Political Science Association. (2004). *American democracy in an age of rising inequality*. Task Force on Inequality and American Democracy. Washington, DC: APSA.
- Conner, J. (2011). Youth organizers as young adults: Their commitments and contributions. *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, 21(4): 923-942.
- Dewey, J. (1927). *The Public and Its Problems*. In J.A. Boydston (Ed.), *John Dewey: The Later Works, vol. 2 of the collected works*. pp. 235-372.
- Endo, T. (2002). *Youth engagement in community-driven school reform*. Oakland, CA: Social Policy Research Associates.
- Fraser, N. (1990). "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy." *Social Text*. 25/26:56-80.
- Galston, W. (2001). Political knowledge, political engagement, and civic education. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 4, 217-234.
- Gibson, C., & Levine, P. (2003). *The civic mission of schools*. New York, NY: The Carnegie Corporation of New York.
- Ginwright, S., & Cammarota, J. (2007). Youth activism in the urban community: Learning critical civic praxis within community organizations. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 20, 693-710.
- Ginwright, S., & James, T. (2002). From assets to agents of change: Social justice, organizing, and youth development. *New Directions for Youth Development*, 96, 26-46.
- Habermas, J. (1962/1991) *The structural transformation of the public sphere: An inquiry into a category on bourgeois society*. Boston: MIT Press.
- Hart, D., & Atkins, R. (2002). Civic competence in urban youth. *Applied Developmental Science*, 6, 227-236.
- Kahne, J., & Middaugh, E. (2008). *Democracy for some: The civic opportunity gap in high school* (CIRCLE Working Paper No. 59). Medford, MA: The Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement.
- Kirshner, B. (2009). "Power in numbers": Youth organizing as a context for exploring civic identity. *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, 19, 414-440.
- Larson, R., & Hansen, D. (2005). The development of strategic thinking: Learning to impact human systems in a youth activism program. *Human Development*, 48, 327-349.
- Levinson, M. (2012). *No Citizen Left Behind*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Mediratta, K., Shah, S., & McAlister, S. (2009). *Community organizing for stronger schools: Strategies and successes*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Education Press.
- Putnam, R. (2000). *Bowling alone: The collapse and revival of American community*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.
- Rogers, J., Mediratta, K., and Shah, S. (2012). "Building Power, Learning Democracy: Youth Organizing as a Site of Civic Development." *Review of Research in Education*. 36:43-66.
- Rogers, J., Bertrand, M., Freelon, R., Fanelli, S. (2011). *Free Fall: Educational Opportunities in 2011*. Los Angeles: UCLA IDEA, UC/ ACCORD.
- Rogers, J., & Morrell, E. (2010). "A force to be reckoned with": The campaign for college access in Los Angeles. In M. Orr & J. Rogers (Eds.), *Public engagement for public education: Joining forces to revitalize democracy and equalize schools* (pp. 227-249). Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press.

- Shah, S. (2011). *Building transformative youth leadership: Data on the impacts of youth organizing* (Occasional Papers Series on Youth Organizing No. 11). New York, NY: Funders' Collaborative on Youth Organizing.
- Sullivan, L., Edwards, D., Johnson, N. A., & McGillicuddy, K. (2003). *An emerging model for working with youth: Community development + youth development = youth organizing*. New York, NY: Funders' Collaborative on Youth Organizing.
- Taines, C. (2012). "Intervening in Alienation: The Outcomes for Urban Youth of Participating in School Activism." *American Educational Research Journal*. 49:1:53-86.
- Torres-Fleming, A., Valdes, P., & Pillai, S. (2010). *Youth organizing field scan*. New York, NY: Funders' Collaborative on Youth Organizing.
- Warner, M. (2002). "Publics and Counterpublics." *Public Culture*. 14:1:49-90.
- Warren, M. and Mapp, K. (2011). *A Match on Dry Grass: Community Organizing as a Catalyst for School Reform*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Warren, M., Mira, M., & Nikundiwe, T. (2008). Youth organizing: From youth development to school reform. *New Directions for Youth Development*, 117, 27-42.
- Watkins, N., Larson, R., & Sullivan, P. (2007). Bridging intergroup difference in a community youth program. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 51, 380-402.
- Watts, R., & Guessous, O. (2006). Sociopolitical development: The missing link in research and policy on adolescents. In S. Ginwright, P. Noguera, & J. Cammarota (Eds.), *Beyond resistance: Youth activism and community change* (pp. 59-80). New York, NY: Routledge.

## Endnotes

- 1 We use pseudonyms when referring to young adults in this report.
- 2 The phone survey was conducted by the Social Science Research Center at California State University, Fullerton.
- 3 This graph is based on multinomial logistic regression analysis that accounts for respondents' gender, age, and self-reported high school grade point average.
- 4 For a broader discussion of "publics," see Dewey, 1927; Habermas, 1962/1991; Fraser, 1990; and Warren, 2002.







NO LEFT  
TURN

**CLOSE THE...**  
WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 11, 2010  
10:00 AM - 12:00 PM  
1000 PAVILION BLVD, LOS ANGELES, CA 90015

**OUR HEALTH...**

**BUILD**



**Withdraw yo pe...  
from Big Ban...**

**We bout to  
HELLA HELLA  
OCCUPY!**

**Bring money back...  
ties**



## **The Impact of Youth Organizing on the Educational and Civic Trajectories of Low-Income Youth**

John Rogers, UCLA  
Veronica Terriquez, USC

A Report to the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation