

CREATING A LEADERSHIP PIPELINE

Youth Organizing to Prepare for College and Career Opportunities

Youth organizing groups have made progress in creating “leadership pipelines” that not only provide youth with strong leadership development within their organizations, but also lead to college enrollment and paid positions in the social justice movement. For these efforts to reach their full potential, funders and other stakeholders must make significant new investments.

This section is part of the Developing Youth Power Series, based on a study of youth organizing groups in California that was conducted by the [CU Boulder Research Hub](#) between 2021 and 2024.

What's In This Section?

Social movement and civic capacity building can be strengthened through strong leadership pathways nurtured by youth organizing groups. A 2010 brief for funders by Shawn Ginwright explored these issues and argued for an intentional “pipeline” that would enable youth to transition into subsequent roles as organizers and community leaders. By 2021, a national scan of youth organizing reported both significant progress in this area and continued challenges related to limited infrastructure supporting leadership pathways and transitions into new movement roles (Valladares, et al., 2021).

This leadership pipeline and other forms of post-secondary support were an important theme in our study. This section shares some of the strategies organizers described:

- Youth organizing groups help prepare youth for college and career.
- Youth organizing groups develop pathways to organizing and social justice leadership.

This section also describes some of the daunting challenges to developing these pipelines mentioned by participants. A leadership pipeline calls for strong and stable funding, including budgets for staffing, but funding for this type of infrastructure is often limited.



Organizing Strategies for a Leadership Pipeline

Preparing Youth for College and Career

Although we did not ask explicitly about academic or career support, we did learn that youth organizing groups were attuned to and supportive of youth's future endeavors and cultivated opportunities for youth to meet their college and career goals. A youth organizing group leader shared:

"We created our own scholarship plan to raise funds to support those that were admitted to a community college or a four-year university. We want to incentivize that dream and [support] the professional development and career goals [youth] have for themselves."

Another organizer, in an interview, described how they provide case management and academic intervention in which youth and academic advisors work to create academic action plans aligned with the goals of each specific student. They also provide services such as weekly tutoring, financial aid workshops, study skill workshops, college tours, standardized test preparation support, college application support, and scholarship opportunities.

Some participants also mentioned that their commitment to core youth development outcomes, like helping youth access college and transition into careers, is not adequately recognized by funders and youth development agencies.

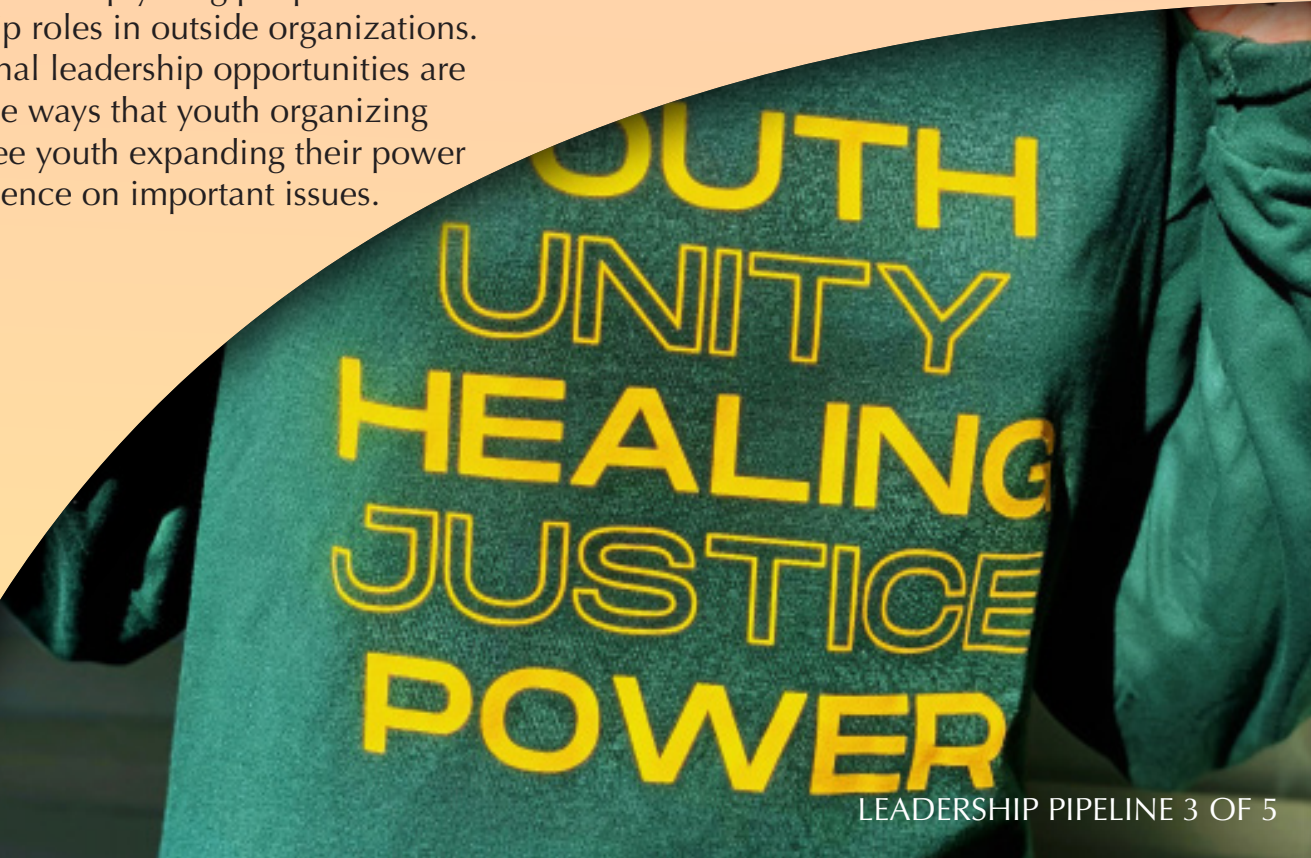
Developing Pathways to Organizing and Social Justice Leadership

Participants shared many examples of youth organizing alumni taking leadership through staff roles in the organization. Several participants described how they embodied this pathway in their own trajectories—starting in the organization as youth and continuing into their current leadership positions. For example, three participants from different organizations were organizers as high school students prior to obtaining full-time employment in the organization. They talked about organizational philosophies that intentionally fostered a leadership pipeline.

Other leadership pipeline opportunities mentioned in the focus groups and interviews included fellowships, paid summer positions, and internships for youth who were no longer within the target age-range to remain as “youth”. Interview participants also noted the desire to help young people find leadership roles in outside organizations. Transitional leadership opportunities are one of the ways that youth organizing groups see youth expanding their power and influence on important issues.

One participating leader used the term “boomerang effect” to characterize their effort to instill a strong sense of pride and local historical knowledge that would accompany young people in future endeavors and motivate them to stay connected to their communities. They challenged the dominant narrative that success meant leaving the area. The boomerang effect was fostered in three ways:

- Weekly workshops that exposed and connected youth to various career opportunities within the organization and the broader community.
- Preparing and supporting youth to translate their organizing skills in other career pathways.
- Raising historical and critical consciousness to cultivate a sense of pride in their hometown and the Filipino community’s contributions to it.



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Challenges and Takeaways

Challenges

Establishing and nourishing a leadership pipeline calls for strong and stable funding and staff infrastructure. For example, a focus group participant highlighted the tensions between providing stipends to youth and organizational capacity to establish a robust leadership pipeline.

“I know a lot of organizations are preparing youth [for] leadership and start building them up. At times it’s hard, because of our funding, to keep youth, support them through a stipend, or even hiring them. That’s something that we have seen. The main takeaway is, how do we ensure that we build our youth not just for a stipend or to hire them on as an assistant, but prepare them to one day start their own organizations?”

Another participant highlighted the inability to consider a leadership pipeline due to the challenges of obtaining funding as a new youth organizing group.

“The challenges of securing funds as a relatively new organization are real. A lot of funders want to fund organizations that have seen wins. It’s hard for new organizations to be able to secure wins when we are struggling with our capacity and resources and development work. It pushes us, and other new organizations, into a corner where we can’t do the base building work, do the leadership development, and secure that win when funders are not funding us.”

Similarly, an interviewee spoke to this goal of building stronger infrastructure for leadership and career pathways:

“I think one of those infrastructure pieces that we’re really interested in is around career pathways for young people into organizing. Not just like program side organizing, but also thinking about what are other movement roles, in terms of finance, operations, communications, development.”



Takeaways

Youth organizing groups have intentionally worked to establish transferrable skills for college and career success by cultivating accessible opportunities such as alumni mentorship and scholarships. They have also begun creating opportunities for continued full-time employment in the youth organizing sector. This means offering strong leadership development within organizations and supporting transitions into other paid positions in the social justice movement, whether as organizers, trainers, accountants, coders, or more.

These efforts are laudable and show progress in the youth organizing field. As Ginwright (2010) highlighted, and the youth organizing groups echoed, a leadership pipeline is critical for many reasons. But it cannot be established, nourished, and sustained without the support of funders who see the importance of funding staff roles that cultivate college and career transitions, and create new positions for emerging leaders. The youth organizing leadership pipeline calls for investment from all stakeholders to facilitate robust career pathways.

