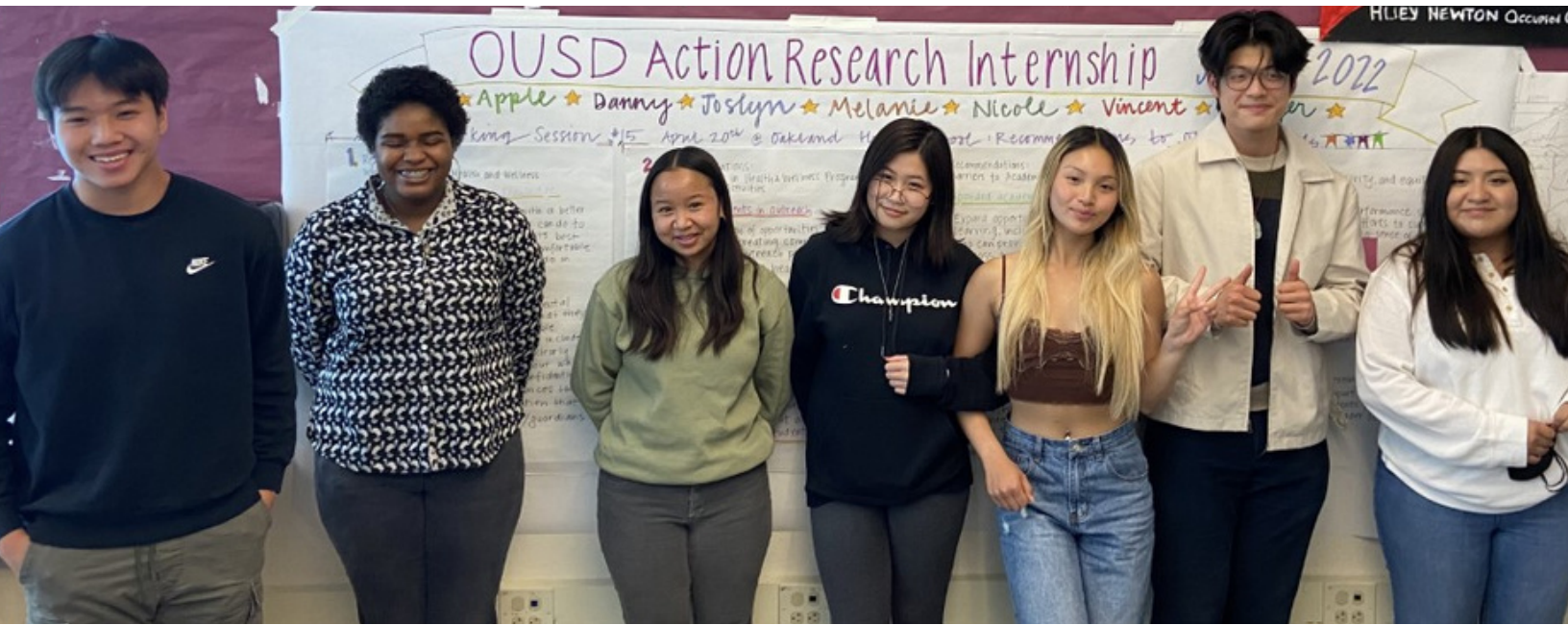


# YOUTH PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH: POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT WITH THE POWER TO IGNITE CHANGE

*Reflections on Implementation of a Youth Action Research Fellowship  
in California's Central Valley, Los Angeles County,  
and Oakland Unified School District*

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The John W. Gardner Center for Youth and their Communities (Gardner Center) is a community-engaged research center within the Graduate School of Education at Stanford University. Our work is informed by positive youth development principles and a commitment to building the capacity of community partners through research partnerships that seek to advance policies and practices that support positive and equitable youth outcomes. In our more than 20 years of work, we have engaged youth deeply as research partners and participants, including the development of our Youth Engaged in Leadership and Learning (YELL) curriculum. In recent years, the Gardner Center has developed a new approach for young people to engage in research with our Youth Action Research Fellowship (the Fellowship). This brief shares our experiences implementing the Fellowship in three California communities.

## BACKGROUND

The Gardner Center’s approach to youth action research leverages two decades of experience with youth-engaged research, adapting tools and processes to engage high school students, college students, and recent college graduates in amplifying youth voice and generating knowledge that can inform efforts to advance equitable youth outcomes. It aligns with the goals of Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR), where research “is done not just for the sake of it but to inform solutions to problems that young people themselves care about. YPAR can be useful for any young people wanting to make a difference and is an especially powerful approach for young people who are experiencing marginalization due to racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, classism, ableism, or other forms of oppression.”[1]

Youth action research offers a vehicle to meet a pair of complementary needs: good data for decision-making and positive youth development. When young people are supported to engage in research focused on their lived experience, they are empowered to share their perspectives and build competencies associated with positive youth development. When they share their research findings and recommendations with leaders of organizations who then use their work to inform policy and practice, they elevate their own voices and those of their peers while simultaneously building a sense of agency. At the same time, youth action research provides critical data and analysis that organizations can use to improve programs, engage donors and other stakeholders, inform strategic deployment of resources, and advance policy priorities.

[1] <http://yparhub.berkeley.edu/learn-about-ypar/>

## LEADING WITH CONTRIBUTION

Through its Youth Action Research Fellowship, the Gardner Center aims to support youth researchers across five foundational elements of positive youth development—competence, confidence, connection, character, and caring—by offering a research experience rooted in the critically important sixth dimension, contribution (Lerner et al., 2009; Quinn & Geiser, 2013). The value of youth contribution is embedded and elevated throughout the Fellowship experience, which supports youth researchers to participate in transforming their local contexts in partnership with an organization ready to listen and act on youth input. In this way, the Fellowship has the potential to simultaneously cultivate positive youth development and systemic or setting-level change, a goal expressed more than 50 years ago by the Center’s namesake:

*Many of our best young people today wonder whether they have any place in this vast and complicated society of ours. They feel anonymous and rootless and alienated. They are oppressed by the impersonality of our institutions. In my judgment there isn’t any quicker cure for that ailment than evidence that their society needs them.*

*John W. Gardner, 1968*

Youth action research has much to offer, both to the youth taking part in the Fellowship and to the organizations and institutions who receive and use their findings and recommendations. While many policymakers and practitioners have long recognized the need to understand youth experience, the importance of elevating youth voice has more recently gained their attention. More specifically, the breadth and depth of social, economic, and public health challenges that have taken place since spring 2020 have led those who work with or on behalf of youth in a variety of sectors to recognize that listening to young people is critical to addressing their needs and supporting their success.

The design of the Fellowship provides youth with an opportunity to contribute data to continuous learning and improvement efforts in an organization or institution. While organizations often have quantitative data about the young people they serve and anecdotal feedback about programs or interventions they support, they often do not have a deep, qualitative understanding of their experiences and the ways in which their programs contribute to—or fall short of—supporting their ability to thrive. The desire for qualitative data creates a ready and interested audience for findings and recommendations, offering young people an opportunity to see their research result in action and experience their capacity to contribute to their community. In addition, organizations are often positioned to support fellows to share their findings and recommendations with educational institutions or other policymaking bodies, expanding their impact and further building their leadership skills.

## **BENEFITS FOR YOUTH RESEARCHERS**

By responding to organizations' questions as well as supporting young people to articulate and investigate their own collective interests, the Fellowship offers a comprehensive, integrated, youth-centered, evidence-based approach to positive youth development, offering youth researchers opportunities to:

- gain interviewing, critical thinking, and communication skills;
- develop deeper understanding of their community;
- strengthen their identity as leaders and their capacity to effect change; and
- build social and cultural capital through peer and professional networks.

The benefits for the youth researchers vary based on their individual background, skills, and interests. This variation is by design, as the Fellowship seeks to create a pool of researchers that reflects the community of students their research is addressing. To this end, selection criteria seeks to create a diverse pool of fellows, with varying degrees of education and research experience. The postsecondary fellows have attended a range of postsecondary institution types, inclusive of two-year and four-year public institutions as well as four-year private institutions; some had completed just one semester of college, while others had recently received their bachelor's degree. The high school fellows have attended traditional and continuation high schools; some were heading to 2-year college and some to 4-year college, and some were rising high school seniors.

In the sidebars on pages 4-9, we describe the intended benefits in more detail and from the perspective of the youth researchers, in relation to four categories: Research and Communication Skills; Social and Cultural Capital; Community Leadership and Commitment; and Perspective and Optimism.[2]

## **BENEFITS FOR ORGANIZATIONS**

A wide range of organizations can benefit from hosting a Fellowship, including school districts, schools, direct service providers, intermediaries, or philanthropic organizations that promote equitable and holistic outcomes for youth and are interested in expanding the quality of data used to inform organizational program planning and improvement—especially data that provide greater insight into youth/family experiences.

[2] Students who participate in the research as interviewees also experience benefits, albeit to a lesser degree than the fellows themselves. The interviewees are given the opportunity to share their experiences with empathetic peers, knowing that the information they share is valued and will be used to benefit their communities. Whenever possible, the final reports were shared with the interviewees, and their contributions were acknowledged at every opportunity.

While the specific program design is tailored to each organization, the Fellowship is broadly structured to support “host organizations” to:

- grow their capacity for organizational learning and improving;
- deepen their understanding of youth experience;
- expand knowledge that can support program improvement, strategy development, and donor and board engagement or investment; and
- build deeper relationships with youth who participate in their programs.

The Fellowship has provided host organizations with critical insights to inform programs and strategies. They have developed stronger connections to the youth researchers themselves, while simultaneously gleaning broader and deeper insights through the researchers’ interviews with dozens more program participants and students. Not only have organizations benefited enormously from the information the research fellows gathered and shared with critical stakeholders, but they did so while offering significant benefits to the young people they seek to support. We have heard from host organizations’ leadership and stakeholders:

*We gained a better understanding of student perceptions and we learned about what some of the struggles and barriers are for them. We gained insights into how we should move our program, how we can expand, and what our real focus should be going forward...So, it's shifted our focus.*

*This is an inspiring and thought-provoking presentation, analytic connections to universal experiences and recommendations that give educators much to act upon.*

*As an advocate for student voice, I'm excited to refer to this work as a source for pushing more student voice and collaboration on campuses!*

*I wish there were a group of fellows to make recommendations when I navigated college years ago.*

## Research and Communication Skills

The Fellowship provides an opportunity for high school and college students to enhance their understanding of research methods and improve their skills in interviewing, analysis, critical thinking, and communications. It provides them with the opportunity to develop their capacity to be better consumers of research. For some of the fellows, their interest in conducting research motivates their participation and ranks high in their estimation of the value of the Fellowship. Others appreciate the wide application of interview, communication, and presentation skills in their education and work experiences. The fellows’ own assessments of the importance of the skills they attained are informative. In their words,

*I hadn't done research. I didn't know how authors came to conclusions... being in the Fellowship helped me understand the processes... now I'm able to read something in class and I have a better understanding of what was done.*

*I actually joined an undergrad research program. They offered me that since I did an application stating that I had some experience... with this fellowship. They were impressed with my knowledge of quantitative and qualitative research.*

*I think playing the role of interviewer, interviewee, and note taker helped me. That's a lifelong process for anyone in general, practicing that skill set helps you in real life when you get a job, get interviewed.*

*Research can be both easy and hard, like the process of actual digging for information... was an arduous process but it was very eye opening and interesting, to say the least.*

*And though I won't really say I have a future in researching, it definitely opened my mind to a lot of other potential career opportunities.*

*If you are a person who struggles with working in groups and speaking to new people, I think this internship is very helpful.*

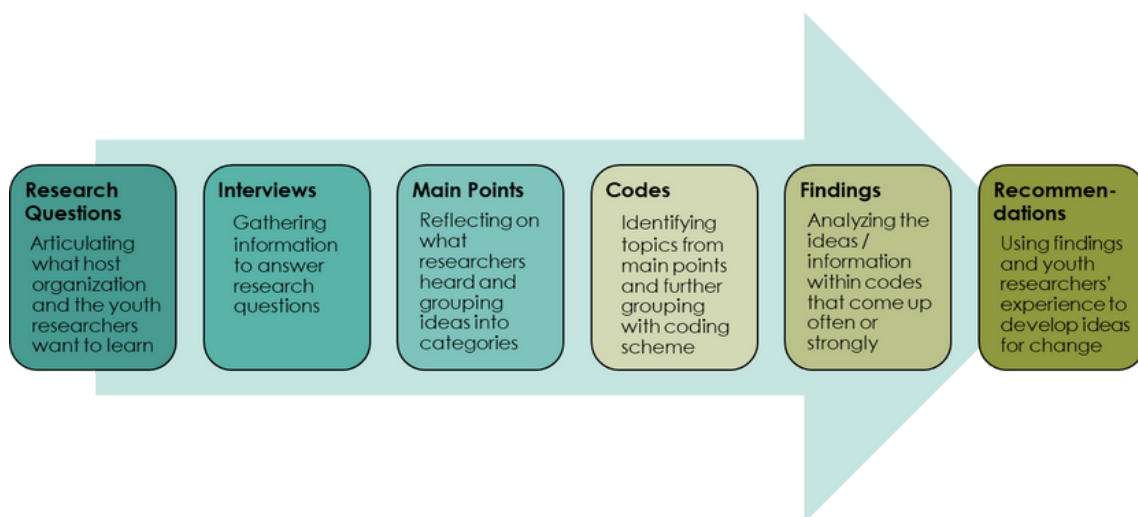
## THE FELLOWSHIP PROCESS

To reach these outcomes and gain these perspectives, the youth researchers take part in a guided field experience, including weekly, virtual sessions that scaffold and support the process from start to finish (see Figure 1). During these sessions, the Gardner Center team provides training to conduct interviews, analyze data, develop findings, and prepare recommendations. Between sessions, the youth researchers engage in work individually, in pairs, or in groups to:

- develop the research questions;
- create an interview protocol;
- prepare for interviewing;
- conduct peer interviews;
- write reflective memos that identify main points from interviews;
- code interviews;
- develop findings and recommendations; and
- work with the Gardner Center to develop and practice presentations.

At the conclusion of the Fellowship, the fellows present their work to the host organization and other key stakeholder groups. These groups have included board members, staff members, and donors of the host organization; local K–12 and higher education leaders; local college access and attainment organizations; and attendees at national conferences.

The importance of youth conducting the research is underscored by a commitment to fairly compensating the fellows for their time, so a stipend for the work is provided.



*Figure 1. Process Overview*

A more detailed description of the process follows.

## Social and Cultural Capital

In addition to valuable competencies, the Fellowship builds social and cultural capital among peers, establishing a group of students who are brought together to work toward a common purpose and building on their shared interests, backgrounds, and experiences. In addition, the Fellowship connects them with adults from organizations that directly and/or indirectly support them on their educational journeys. Further, when the fellows present their work to board members, donors, educational leaders, and other professionals, they can connect in important ways—engaging with these audiences as knowledgeable experts who have valuable information to share.

These connections may be described as “bridging capital,” linking students to resources and experiences, and “bonding capital,” establishing trusting relationships with individuals and communities who support their development. As Milbrey McLaughlin (2018) describes, “Bonding capital—secure connections to a positive social group—galvanizes bridging capital” (p. 178). In the fellows’ words,

*I was very excited to do a collaboration with Stanford. It gave me a sense of opportunity and I felt excited... And having an experience with other marginalized folks helps you feel thankful for where you are and at the same time motivated. It was a reminder that we faced the same struggles, and despite obstacles we overcame it. We talked about community engagement and belonging—I felt that. And it bolstered my sense that change is possible.*

*It's been really great and I really enjoyed participating in this fellowship because it gave me the opportunity to connect with my peers and to share not only my story, but to amplify the voices of other students, especially students who come from low-income and marginalized backgrounds. Something that we really discussed during these past few weeks is just the fact that research is a form of care and I can't think of a better group of people to tell the stories of other students.*

## Research Questions

To develop a set of research questions, the fellows:

- Meet with the host organization’s leadership to understand their research interests and how they will use information gleaned from research
- Work individually and collectively to consider the fellows’ interests and develop their own research questions

The fellows’ first major task is to develop a small number of research questions that reflect their own interests and those of the host organization. To allow for a strong set of research questions that can be answered through peer interviews, the Gardner Center team shares the concept of a tri-level lens, one that “assumes that changes in system-level factors will stimulate and support (or frustrate) changes in settings, which in turn will (or will not) lead to positive changes in youth outcomes” (Dukakis et al, 2009, p.2). The tri-level lens offers a framework for the fellows to use as the host organization shares the questions that the Fellowship might address. At this stage, we also invite the host organization to explain how the organization plans to use the results of the research.

After hearing the organization’s questions, the Gardner Center team guides the fellows through a process to determine how to shape those questions into “researchable” ones, as well as developing one or more additional research questions based on the fellows’ collective interests, resulting in a combined set of research questions. The importance of developing a set of research questions which reflect both the host organization’s questions *and* the fellows’ questions cannot be overstated. The host organization’s questions are essential because these are the questions that they need answered in order to inform strategic and programmatic decisions and ultimately improve outcomes. The fellows’ questions bring new and important perspectives to the research effort and build their sense of ownership of the research process.

## Interviews

Preparing for and conducting a set of interviews with peers is central to the process. After the Gardner Center team works closely with the host organization to recruit a randomly selected group of interviewees, the fellows:

- Practice by interviewing friends and family
- Develop interview questions individually and refine them collectively, resulting in a draft interview protocol that aims to answer the research questions (in some cases, the individual development of interview questions is used to identify the fellows' priorities to create a realistic set of research questions to be addressed)
- Interview each other using the draft protocol to develop key skills and collect first round of data
- Conduct interviews with peers (typically 4-6 each)
- Take detailed notes during interviews led by other fellows
- Write reflection memos that articulate the main points from each interview, using their note takers' notes and their own

After conducting practice interviews with family and friends with a Gardner Center-created protocol, the fellows work individually to draft interview questions they think would answer the research questions. Then, together with the Gardner Center team, the fellows develop an interview protocol to conduct interviews with peers who are other students or program participants. The fellows conduct interviews in pairs, with one fellow leading the interview and one taking notes, which they later use to create reflection memos.

The process of interviewee selection and recruitment varies by host organization. Ideally, the host provides information about program participants from which the Gardner Center randomly selects a set of interviewees, schedules interviews, and offers logistical support to fellows to conduct interviews. That said, there are cases when information about program participants or students is not available and cases where the Gardner Center has played a more active role in recruitment and logistics.

## Community Leadership and Commitment

Building young peoples' identity as leaders with the capacity to effect change is a critical element of the research fellowship. This development starts with deepening fellows' understanding of educational experiences in their community and the issues to be researched. It also includes supporting them in their analysis, which illuminates the ways in which their own experiences are similar to and/or different from their peers. Through their participation, fellows tend to develop greater awareness of the resources in their community, including where they are lacking; they also tend to reflect on the ways in which their community has supported them and the ways in which they might give back. In the fellows' words,

*The Fellowship was a combination of hearing new peoples' experiences. I know my experience and my friends' and people close to me... but doing these interviews, I realized I knew really very little, less than I thought I knew about experiences of low-income, first-gen students. I knew my experiences but not others, other perspectives.*

*It helped put my experience into perspective... I realized ways I've been lucky and benefitted from programs, relationships in ways that other people haven't... gender, citizenship, parents' citizenship status... I hadn't thought about that before having these types of conversations and I think when we were doing the reflective memos, piecing all the interviews together, that's when it became really clear.*

*For me it was just interesting hearing that incoming, first-gen students from multiple backgrounds were having the same experience... I had heard from Cal State, local students about their experiences, but seeing that across the board at UCs and other Cal states and privates... They were having the same experiences dealing with financial aid and lack of counseling and support—that was eye-opening.*

## Community Leadership and Commitment, cont.

While the Fellowship supports the development of knowledge, skills, and habits known to be characteristic of strong leadership, we also recognize that leadership is embodied in different ways, and we encourage fellows to develop their own individual approach. When describing the outcomes of the YELL program more than twenty years ago, Gardner Center researchers noted the “program demonstrated that youth leaders are no different than adult leaders; they vary in their focus and style but approach their chosen issues with strength and passion” (Strobel & Nelson, 2007, p.1). By owning the research process—determining the questions, interviewing peers, conducting the analysis, developing recommendations, presenting their findings, and seeing their efforts lead to action that will benefit their communities, fellows are encouraged and supported to become the type of leader they choose. In their words,

*Being a community leader has always been the plan, even if I didn't know it. There's no going back now. I can't close off the part of me that this fellowship has introduced me to. Now that I'm aware of my power, I MUST use it.*

*The Fellowship definitely made me think about things differently... I think it really helped strengthen and reconnect my own personal commitment to supporting and empowering people from our communities. It's definitely something that I'm going to take forward.*

*[The Fellowship] opened my eyes to how under-resourced the Central Valley is. It's one thing to say it and one thing to do research and really get it... Once I heard students' stories, it really opened my eyes... I am more motivated to make a change.*

*A lot of immigrant parents assume you are going to college to be a doctor or a lawyer... They see it as all about the money. But for me it's who I want to be, I want to be a helper in the world, support my family and my community.*

*I think it's really important that we can have a conversation and let [administration] and faculty members know that we can't do this on our own, you know, students, we are hardworking, and we are capable of finding resources, but we need additional support.*

## Main Points and Codes

Once the Fellows have conducted the interviews and written the reflection memos, the Gardner Center creates a collective main points document, organized by research question. The fellows then:

- Use the collective main points document to create a set of codes (a set of topics or ideas that arose during the interviews)
- Analyze their reflection memos for the interviews they led, identifying which codes were discussed in each of their interviews
- Enter this analysis into a code tally sheet

During this part of the process, the Gardner Center team uses the weekly session(s) to coach fellows to develop a set of analytic codes based on the collective main points document. With a jointly developed coding scheme, each fellow then analyzes the reflection memos, the first step toward creating a collective analysis of the interviews. They then enter this analysis into a code tally sheet. Through this process, fellows gain insight into ideas and perspectives that have emerged across all the interviews, not just those they have personally conducted.

## Findings and Recommendations

Using this code tally sheet, the Gardner Center team determines which themes are most prevalent and identifies main points across all interviews that align with those codes. The Gardner Center team then coaches the fellows to review main points from the most frequently used codes to:

- Identify patterns in the ideas shared within and across high frequency codes
- Draft findings based on the patterns they have identified
- Select illustrative examples of the findings from their own experience or from their interviews

The fellows' findings are combined into a collective findings document, which is edited with support from the Gardner Center. Using the collective findings document, fellows:

- Consider how their own experience reflects the findings
- Develop recommendations that address findings and are informed by their own experiences
- Work together, with support from Gardner Center, to refine an actionable set of recommendations



## Sharing with Audiences

The Gardner Center team enters the findings and recommendations drafted by the fellows, along with additional information about the research process, into templates for a project memo and a set of slides to be used for the fellows' presentation(s) to key audiences, including but not limited to the host organization. These materials also include biographical statements and photos of the fellows.

The memo is sent ahead to audiences prior to each presentation, and available electronically. This allows the fellows to refer to the full content of their findings and recommendations without going into detail about each one. After the presentations, which typically take around 30 minutes, the fellows field questions related to their findings and recommendations, as well as their experience in the Fellowship.

## REFLECTIONS

Since the Gardner Center's inaugural work developing the YELL curriculum, we have been committed to the power of youth inquiry to create change. The Youth Action Research Fellowship has furthered this commitment. It has allowed the Gardner Center to support youth to explore their own research questions and build their research skills, while enhancing our own and our organizational partners' understanding of their experiences and perspectives.

The approach described in this brief offers an opportunity for continuous learning and improvement in organizations, an opportunity for researchers to engage youth in their work, and an opportunity for youth to contribute meaningfully to their communities. We have learned a great deal each time we have implemented the model, and we expect to continue learning and improving as the approach is adapted in a range of contexts. The Fellowship has been a gift to those of us at the Gardner Center who have had the privilege of working with the fellows. With each new cohort, we have had the opportunity to engage with and learn from inquisitive, committed, insightful, and hard working young people.

## Perspective and Optimism

Youth are experts in their own experience, but they are not necessarily knowledgeable about research techniques and frameworks. By valuing their expertise and supporting them to authentically tell their stories in the context of rigorous inquiry, we leverage positive youth development in service of advancing youth outcomes. Framing the research with a tri-level lens allows fellows to embrace an asset-based approach, one that is by nature both critical and optimistic about the future. It focuses on using data for strategy and improvement to support youth in current systems while simultaneously working to change those same systems. In their words,

*[The Foundation] is already making a different structure—so our work is [affecting] change already. When you see change right away, that helps. Often as an undergrad you don't see that... other people are interested—that is a positive engagement that makes me want to do more.*

*When I finished, I felt proud, like I did something good... realizing that I contributed to it and helped improve things for future [scholarship] recipients. I have done community service things, but never like this. This was the first time I felt like I was contributing to something big.*

*I feel very empowered by the research opportunity. I have done research in San Francisco and different places, but never... in my own hometown. There is an incredibly low amount of research done on the Central Valley overall, so to contribute to that—to provide attention and resources to an area that really deserves it—felt powerful. It made me feel powerful. In high school... it feels like an unjust system—but also unchangeable—and this Fellowship made me realize that I have more of a voice, more power than I realized initially... [A] lot of what is instilled in us is accepting things the way things are—to be obedient and accept the way the world is. But entering higher ed and now coming back to be part of this Fellowship taught me that I can question those things.*

The last few years have left many young people on the sidelines, lacking engagement, connection, and agency. The Youth Action Research Fellowship is a chance for young people to grow, to develop, and to contribute. It offers positive youth development experiences that center youth voice and enhance the effectiveness of youth-serving organizations. By describing the Fellowship approach and the experience in three different contexts (see pages 11-18) and highlighting the voices of fellows (see sidebars on pages 4-9), we hope to bring the impact of this approach to life and to spark others to think about how they might adapt it for other researchers, practitioners, and policy makers focused on issues that impact youth.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We are grateful to College Futures Foundation for believing in the vision and funding the pilot, at a time when it was difficult to find optimism amid the chaos brought by the pandemic in the spring of 2020. We appreciate our first partner, the Kern Community Foundation, for supporting the early development of the program, and we appreciate the California Community Foundation for partnering with us to take this model even further, centering youth voice in a community planning process to strategically refresh their Los Angeles Scholars Investment Fund at its 10-year milestone. We are thankful to the Stuart Foundation for supporting our work with Oakland Unified School District, which in turn embraced the Fellowship as an integral component of our multi-year research-practice partnership.

We would like to express appreciation to Professor Milbrey McLaughlin and the many others at the Gardner Center who have pursued this work relentlessly, laying the groundwork for the Youth Action Research Fellowship described in this brief. Our colleague Kristin Geiser has championed and supported this work, and has been an invaluable contributor. And special thanks to the amazing young people who committed their minds and hearts to do this research in service of their communities, as well as the many students who participated as interviewees.



# KERN COMMUNITY FOUNDATION ACTION RESEARCH FELLOWSHIP



Supported by funding from College Futures Foundation, the Gardner Center piloted the Youth Action Research Fellowship with Kern Community Foundation (KCF) in summer 2020, after having worked with KCF for several years to support their work in scholarships and support programming for college students from low-income backgrounds, many of whom are students of color and first in their family to attend college. All KCF scholarship recipients with at least one year of college experience were invited to apply for the Fellowship, and six were selected from the applicant pool to participate in the 10-week Fellowship. Five of the fellows were students or recent graduates of a California four-year public college/university and one attended a private, out-of-state college.

## Research Questions

After hearing from KCF's director about the Foundation and its interests, the fellows worked with the Gardner Center team to create a set of research questions that addressed KCF's interests in understanding student experience related to their scholarship outreach, process, and support. In particular, the Foundation was interested in how it could improve outreach and application processes and to what extent and how its scholarships had been helpful to recipients. KCF also wanted to learn more about the challenges faced by scholarship recipients during college and the supports they found helpful, as well as gaps in supports and how KCF might address those gaps. College Futures expressed interest in better understanding the factors that make college students feel connected to their campus. To these questions, the fellows added their own. They were most interested in better understanding what motivates KCF scholarship recipients to pursue postsecondary education and how KCF scholarship recipients perceive themselves as students.

## Interviews

Thirty-six interviewees were randomly selected from among current KCF scholarship recipients, excluding only those recipients who had received a scholarship for just one year. The interviewee pool reflected the scholarship recipient pool in several important ways, including the percentage of students who are first-generation college-going (more than 70%) and who have an EFC of \$0 (around 60%).<sup>[3]</sup> The interview pool was also analyzed in terms of type of postsecondary institution attended (predominantly public, 4-year institutions) and gender (more than 60% female).

## Main Points and Codes

Fellows documented the main points from the interviews, organized into 6 categories:

1. KCF Scholarship Outreach, Process, & Support
2. Purpose of a College Education
3. Challenges & Supports During College
4. Academic Identity
5. Connectedness/Sense of Belonging
6. Scholar-Identified Needs

<sup>[3]</sup> EFC is "Expected Family Contribution." An EFC of \$0 means a family has no ability to contribute to the student's education. <https://www.valuecolleges.com/resources/faqs/what-does-expected-family-contribution-mean/>

## Findings and Recommendations

The KCF fellows documented detailed findings in their memo to the Foundation and interested parties. A few example findings follow.

### **Scholarship Outreach, Process, & Support**

*Most interviewees described the scholarship as a critical support for college success, reducing financial pressures so they could reduce work hours and student loan burden, and better focus on academics. In addition, many shared that the scholarship served to motivate students to work hard so that they maintain their Grade Point Average (GPA) to meet the requirements for scholarship renewal. For many, the scholarship also provided a sense of accomplishment and validation, as well as affirmation that they could and should attend college. As such, it strengthened their college-going identity.*

### **Sense of Belonging/Connectedness**

*Interviewees identified two primary factors contributing to their sense of belonging: relationships with peers/friends and campus environment/safe spaces. Some interviewees described how their college experience changed once they connected with peers and developed friendships, establishing relationships that offered support and made them feel that they belonged on their college campus. Interviewees explained that student organizations and institutional programs offered opportunities to build relationships and create connections between students from similar backgrounds and between students with similar academic/career interests.*

The findings led to recommendations for KCF; high schools and their districts; parents; and colleges and universities. The detailed set of recommendations is included in their memo. Some example recommendations follow.

### **For Kern Community Foundation**

*Create an engaging, connected network of KCF scholarship recipients, by college or across colleges. The network could: allow scholars to take leadership roles in the network that could be part of a continuation of the KCF fellowship or internship; serve to connect current scholars with scholarship alumni through a digital database; and use the KCF website to highlight current and graduating scholars via “where they are now” stories.*

### **For High Schools and their Districts**

*Strengthen college-going culture school- and district-wide, including the following ideas for high schools: provide greater preparation for college, including study skills and college knowledge (i.e., information about how to navigate the college experience); offer information about careers and preparation for careers (e.g., internships, job interview skills, resume development); promote college to students early on (freshman and sophomore years) so that they know what to expect their junior and senior years; develop alumni nights where college students or graduates can share their stories with high school students and their families; create KCF scholarship recipient clubs, beginning in high school, where applications may start early in the school year to ensure that all students receive necessary information; establish connections with local colleges in order to support mentorship and advising between high school students and college students; and promote a college-going culture in the classroom.*

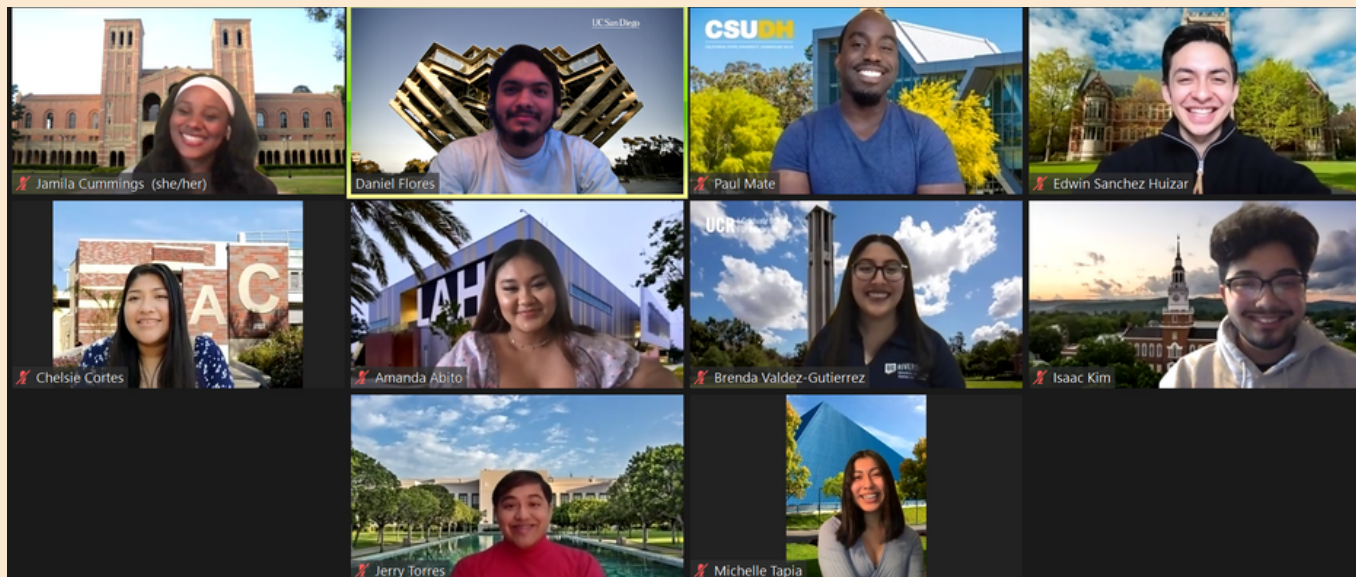
### **For Colleges and Universities**

- *Navigating College. Ensure that students, especially first-generation students, receive support necessary to navigate college structures and systems; and that they access the departments or specialized programs, such as EOP[4] and CAMP[5], where students find culturally relevant guidance.*
- *Academic Support. Provide students, especially first-generation, low-income students, with more tutoring and academic supports for upper division courses.*

[4] EOP: Educational Opportunity Program. The CSU’s Educational Opportunity Program (EOP) provides admission, academic and financial support services to historically underserved students throughout California. (<https://www.calstate.edu/attend/student-services/eop>)

[5] CAMP: College Assistance Migrant Program. The College Assistance Migrant Program (CAMP) assists students who are migratory or seasonal farmworkers (or children of such workers) enrolled in their first year of undergraduate studies at an IHE. (<https://oese.ed.gov/offices/office-of-migrant-education/college-assistance-migrant-program/>)

# LOS ANGELES SCHOLARS INVESTMENT FUND (LASIF) ACTION RESEARCH FELLOWSHIP



As the 10-year milestone of California Community Foundation’s Los Angeles Scholars Investment Fund (LASIF) approached, the LASIF team began planning for a strategic refresh of the initiative. Based on a commitment to center youth in a meaningful community process, the team engaged the Gardner Center to implement a participatory youth action research project designed specifically to inform the organization’s vision and strategic plan. In the winter/spring of 2021, the Gardner Center partnered with the LASIF team to support ten scholars in a 13-week Youth Action Research Fellowship, engaging ten LASIF grantees (i.e., college access and success organizations) to nominate program participants who had completed at least one semester of college to participate in the Fellowship. The fellows attended (or recently graduated from) four-year public institutions, two-year public colleges, and four-year private colleges and universities.

## Research Questions

After hearing from LASIF’s director about the initiative, the upcoming strategy refresh, and the questions LASIF sought to answer in order to inform the strategic refresh, the fellows worked with the Gardner Center team to create a set of research questions addressing LASIF’s interests in understanding student experience related to barriers, challenges, and supports for college access and completion. After considering LASIF’s questions, the fellows identified additional questions of their own, reflecting their interest in better understanding student attitudes about college going, college knowledge, and college counseling during high school, as well as student experiences related to career exploration opportunities.

## Interviews

Each of the organizations represented by a fellow provided a list of program participants who were eligible to be interviewed. The only criterion was that the program participants were currently enrolled in postsecondary education. The ten organizations differ in size, so the pools from which the interviewees were randomly selected varied from fewer than 20 to more than 700, for a total of almost 2,000 participants. From these lists, the Gardner Center randomly selected a subset of individuals to be interviewed. The organizations then reached out to the individuals on the lists of interviewees and scheduled four or five interviewees for each fellow to interview, for a project total of 56 interviews. More than 60% of the interviewees identified as Latinx, with 11% identifying as Black or African American; 9% Asian; 2% American Indian or Alaska Native; 2% White; 2% multiple races/ethnicities; and 2% other. The organizations did not have these data for 13% of interviewees. While the demographic information collected did not include complete information related to whether interviewees’ parents attended college, many interviewees shared that they were the first generation in their family to attend.

## Main Points and Codes

Fellows documented the main points from the interviews, organized into 7 categories:

- Attitudes about College Going
- Barriers and Challenges for College Access During High School
- Supports During High School
- College Knowledge and College Counseling During High School
- Barriers and Challenges for College Completion
- Supports During College
- Career Exploration

## Findings and Recommendations

The LASIF fellows documented detailed findings in their memo to the Foundation and interested parties. A few example findings follow.

### **Barriers and Challenges for College Access During High School**

*Academic barriers were noted almost as frequently as barriers related to college costs, with a majority reporting that they felt academically unprepared for college by their high school. A common theme was that while some students wanted to improve academically, there was limited opportunity to do so due to a lack of resources. For example, students pointed to limited seating in AP courses, no tutoring available on campus, and a need for EL support. Similarly, the majority of first-generation students reported that they struggled with the use of academic language, and particularly with writing essays. Balancing academics, work hours, and/or extracurricular activities was another barrier noted by many.*

*The majority of interviewees also described social and emotional barriers, with almost all sharing that they experienced impostor syndrome, insecurities about their own academic abilities, or concerns about the lack of diversity they might encounter. Some shared their experiences with mental health challenges such as unhappiness, worry, and loneliness and some described feeling pressure to disprove social stigmas.*

### **College Knowledge & College Counseling During High School**

*One of the most mentioned aspects of high school college and career counseling by interviewees was the challenge of accessing the staff. Many interviewees reported a low frequency of contact with their high school counselor and meetings that were generic rather than in-depth or individualized. Some students who experienced challenges accessing their high school counselors reported that they turned to their college access organizations for college guidance instead.*

*Some noted that advising content seemed to focus more on four-year universities, requiring students needing to find information about other options to look elsewhere. This emphasis sometimes extends beyond counseling to the broader school culture. For example, when schools celebrate college acceptances, those who have chosen to attend community college are automatically excluded.*

The findings led to recommendations that would be relevant during high school and others that would be relevant during college, along with a set related to career exploration. The detailed set of recommendations is included in their memo. Some example recommendations follow.

### **During High School: College Counseling**

*Community organizations should have academic counselors on their teams. While high school counselors are overworked and often inaccessible, academic counseling from organizations could be more efficient and easily accessed. Because organizations are community-oriented, students are more likely to feel comfortable and honest about any questions and concerns they may have. If enough resources were in place, counselors and community organizations could come together to provide more support for more students.*

### **During College: Preparing College for Students**

*Our findings highlight that barriers are not tied to individual deficits but rather are the result of a system that is failing first-generation students. It is not that first-generation college students are not ready for college. It is that colleges are not ready for them. Many students are navigating college for the first time. The lack of accessibility and diversity in these institutions has contributed to the additional academic, financial, social, and emotional challenges that these students face. In an effort to increase diversity and accessibility, college access organizations can start by developing relationships with college admissions staff to share with them the many talents and the particular challenges that first-generation low-income students face. In doing so, college access organizations can create pathways of enrollment for their scholars and help diversify institutions.*

### **Career Exploration and Compensation**

*Most students want to be compensated for their time spent on internships or other work experiences, but some appeared to be uncomfortable advocating for themselves. We need to normalize paying students for their contributions in the workplace. LASIF and community partners should offer grants/stipends for unpaid internships and other career exploration experiences.*

### **Sharing with Audiences to Inform Strategies, Program Design, and Action**

The fellows presented their findings and recommendations to the first meeting of the LASIF Strategic Refresh Advisory Committee and staff from CCF and the organizations supported by LASIF. Notably, this work centered youth voice in the process leading to the proposed strategic shifts. LASIF articulates the strategy shift as moving from:

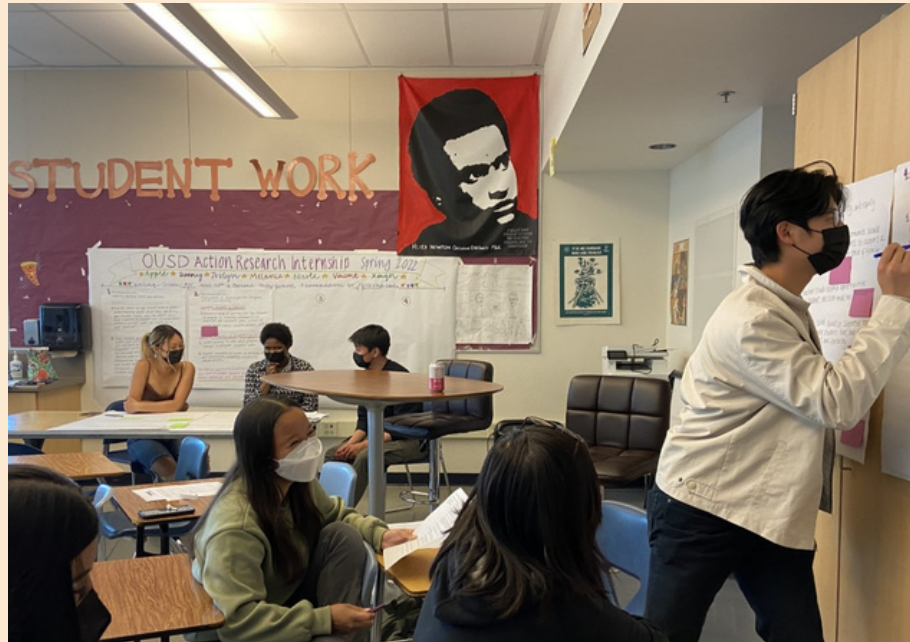
- Individualized supports to systems building partnerships
- Bachelor's degree prioritization to multiple postsecondary pathways
- Scholarships for direct costs to innovative and responsive student aid
- Data collection for assessment to collaborative inquiry for continuous improvement[6]

In addition to influencing LASIF's strategic refresh, the fellows have had opportunities to share their presentation and insights with broader audiences who are interested in their findings and recommendations specifically and with those who are interested in the Fellowship and the LASIF refresh process more broadly.

[6] <https://www.calfund.org/wp-content/uploads/LASIF-2022-Request-for-Proposals-1-13-2022.pdf>



# OAKLAND UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT ACTION RESEARCH INTERNSHIP



In spring of 2022, the Gardner Center implemented a model of the Youth Action Research Fellowship for high school students in Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) as part of a multi-year research-practice partnership. The district selected one traditional high school and one continuation high school from which to recruit up to eight interns for an 18-week paid internship, developed to support a longer-term partnership between OUSD and the Gardner Center.

## Research Questions

The district was interested in better understanding barriers and opportunities associated with health and wellness supports for high school students. In addition to these topics, the interns developed their own topic areas, prioritizing their interest in barriers to academic success and student sense of belonging and equity at OUSD high schools.

## Interviews

School staff at three Oakland high schools played a critical role in interviewee recruitment. They distributed recruitment materials and encouraged students to participate. In addition, the interns reached out to peers to participate in the interview process. The only criterion was that the participants were currently enrolled at a high school in OUSD. Participant recruitment was challenging for live interviews (virtual or face-to-face), so we offered potential participants the option to respond to the interview questions in writing. Interns conducted the majority of the interviews (39) with students who attended two schools, with the other 13 attending three schools.

## Main Points and Codes

The interns documented the main points from the interviews, organized by research question:

1. How can high schools and/or the district improve student health and wellness?
2. How can high schools and/or the district increase participation in health, mental health, and wellness programs, services, and activities?
3. What do students think are the barriers to academic achievement at OUSD high schools?
4. How do students feel about their sense of belonging, inclusivity, and equity in OUSD schools?



## Findings and Recommendations

The interns developed detailed findings for each research question and shared them in their memo to district and school leaders. Findings related to:

1. Health and Wellness Programs
  - Health and Wellness Programs Offered
  - Health and Wellness Programs Used
  - Positive Perceptions of Health and Wellness Programs
  - Negative Perceptions/Barriers to Accessing Health and Wellness Programs
  - Changes of New Programs Wanted
2. Outreach for Health, Mental health, and Wellness Programs, Services, and Activities
  - How Students Usually Hear About Programs
  - Most Effective Outreach Methods Currently Used
  - Ideas for Better Outreach
3. Barriers to Academic Achievement
  - Factors that Encourage Students Academically
  - Factors that Discourage or Limit Students Academically
  - Ideas for Better Supports
4. Sense of Belonging, Inclusivity, and Equity
5. School Capacity to Promote Student Sense of Belonging/Inclusion
6. When Students Feel Most Included at School
7. When Students Feel Most Excluded at School
8. Ideas for Improving Students Sense of Belonging/Inclusion
9. School Capacity to Make Sure Students Have What They Need
10. School Capacity to Account for Different Backgrounds
11. Language Barriers as Factor in School Equity
12. Ideas for Improving School Equity

The interns' findings, drafted within these categories, led to a detailed set of recommendations, included in their memo. Some example recommendations follow.

### ***Building Adults' Skills and Knowledge: Health and Wellness***

*Provide adults at the school with a better understanding about what they can do to gain students' trust so that they are more comfortable communicating about health and wellness. School's wellness professionals should try to interact and build relationships with students just as other staff do. The college center staff walk around and give presentations and encourage students to join their weekly mail list where college info is given and there is a check in. This could be applied to wellness programs.*

*Train teachers and staff about the mental health experiences of youth, so that they are well equipped to handle situations or circumstances where students feel vulnerable. This includes how and when adults can/should clearly communicate with students about what information they can hold confidentially and under what circumstances they can/must disclose information that students share with parents or guardians. A course or training session regarding the mental health experiences of youth should be a requirement prior to teachers receiving their credential.*

### **Building Adults' Skills and Knowledge: Teaching and Learning**

*Provide more learning opportunities for teachers to learn what students need. For example, how to understand students, what students need to learn, how to structure lessons, how to build community, how to create environments where students' strengths are acknowledged, and how to create genuine connection. Reflecting on their own experiences, some interns recalled factors that hurt their academic motivation, sharing that if you are trying as hard as you can but not catching up and others are doing better than you, it's demotivating. When you have students feeling competitive academically, they lose focus on learning and doing their best and putting in the effort to grow. When you focus on grades and rank and doing better than someone else, you lose motivation. Teachers should be trained to address this kind of situation.*

### **Inclusion, Sense of Belonging, and Equity: Caring Adults**

*Assessments of adults' performance should include evidence of their efforts to support a "culture of compassion." Students feel included when they are encouraged by their teachers to get involved in school activities and organizations; when adults at school solicit and value their view; and when teachers themselves are involved in school events. Students are discouraged when they themselves are mistreated or when they see other students mistreated by adults. In one case, an interviewee noted that many teachers are very harsh with non-English speaking students. They have seen teachers mistreat these students, with one teacher describing a Chinese speaking student as "horrible". These types of teacher engagement and behaviors should be considered during professional reviews of performance.*

*Teachers should expand opportunities for student decision-making in all classes. Interns noted that classes such as leadership and yearbook give students a great deal of decision-making power, while also earning credits and building a sense of belonging. They would like to see this expanded into other types of classes.*

*Adults at school should be supported to understand their students' lives and offer appropriate support and flexibility. Possible approaches include: frequent check-ins with teachers to build a caring relationship and boost their confidence; structured and recurring opportunities to provide feedback to adults; and assignments that allow students to share their identity (hobbies, likes/dislikes), learning styles, and needed accommodations.*

### **Sharing with Audiences to Inform Strategies, Program Design, and Action**

The interns presented their findings and recommendations to 13 district and school staff, including the Director of Community Schools & Student Services, the Chief Academic Officer, and the Director of Behavioral Health. Many in attendance expressed their enthusiasm for bringing the work back to their teams and incorporating the findings and recommendations into their programs. We anticipate the interns' work could have ripple effects over the coming years, hopefully impacting decisions made and actions taken in OUSD and its high schools. In addition, the Gardner Center is cultivating additional opportunities for the interns to share their presentation and insights about the internship with other audiences.



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