

Youth Engagement Continuum

✘ The Funders' Collaborative on Youth Organizing's Youth Engagement Continuum describes both forms and degrees youth engagement on a developmental continuum that progresses toward authentic youth empowerment in educational, civic, and political decision-making

In a 2003 paper entitled ***An Emerging Model for Working with Youth: Community Organizing + Youth Development = Youth Organizing***, the **Funders' Collaborative on Youth Organizing**—a national collective of foundations, organizations, and practitioners that support youth organizing—proposed the Youth Engagement Continuum, a model that describes both forms and degrees of youth engagement on a developmental continuum that progresses toward authentic youth empowerment in educational, civic, and political participation and decision-making .

“There are 60 million young people between the ages of 10 and 24 in the United States today. And as we think about the development and role of youth in our society, it is worth remembering that young people grow up in communities, not just community and youth development programs. From this perspective, perhaps the most salient question is this: What would our communities and our society look like if the collective vision, leadership, energy and talents of even a small percentage of all young people were directed toward community transformation?”

Vera Miao, Project Director, Funders' Collaborative on Youth Organizing, February 2003

The model builds on decades of research and practice in the fields of community organizing and positive youth development. In contextualizing the continuum, the paper provides a brief historical survey, along with detailed analyses of related fields, including the following summary of the fundamental characteristics of traditional community-organizing models:

- A practical method of power analysis—the study of the organized financial resources, human authority and knowledge promoting social, political, and economic conditions.
- An identifiable constituency or geographic place.
- An identifiable set of issues, problems, or challenges.
- A clear institutional or individual target with the power to fix, change, or solve community problems.
- Strategies and tactics that include some form of direct citizen participation.
- Members who identify leaders, make decisions, and implement strategy.
- Opportunities to train leaders, develop relationships, and build sustainable networks and organizations.



The Youth Engagement Continuum was developed by the Funders’ Collaborative on Youth Organizing (FCYO) in 2003. “In explicitly acknowledging the marginal social and political status of teens and young adults, and by providing young people with the tools necessary for them to challenge systems and institutions on their own, youth organizing pushes the adult-determined boundaries of traditional youth work,” according to the FCYO.

The Youth Engagement Continuum

The Youth Engagement Continuum features four developmental levels or progressive degrees of youth engagement—Intervention, Development, Collective Empowerment, and Systemic Change—and five forms of youth participation aligned with the developmental progression: Youth Services (Intervention), Youth Development (Development), Youth Leadership and Youth Civic Engagement (Collective Empowerment), and Youth Organizing (Systemic Change):

1. Youth Services

The provision of services to youth occurs when peers or adults provide interventions intended to address youth problems, but those interventions do not build the knowledge, skills, or capacities that empower youth to solve problems on their own.

“Youth services organizations or programs provide treatment and supports needed to address problems young people encounter. The services approach defines young people as clients instead of active participants or members. The work strives to intervene in a young person’s life to confront personal problems. Within a youth services framework, the inherent strengths or skills young people possess are overshadowed by the academic, psychological, or economic obstacles they face. Success is measured by an organization’s ability to help individual young people overcome personal barriers rather than seeing such barriers as part of a collective struggle for improved life chances. Youth services are usually offered as crisis intervention or prevention.”

2. Youth Development

Youth development occurs when youth leaders and adult allies create the conditions for youth to build the knowledge, skills, and capacities that empower them to solve problems on their own.

“Youth development requires that young people have stable places, services, and instruction. But they also need supports—relationships and networks that provide nurturing, standards, guidance, as well as opportunities for trying new roles, mastering challenges, and contributing to family and community. Without these conditions, positive youth development cannot and does not occur. Any individual, institution, or organization that seeks to work with youth in a sustained manner must be mindful of the youth development framework and integrate these principles into their efforts.”

3. Youth Leadership

Youth leadership development occurs when youth receive the education, training, and other forms of support, advocacy, and encouragement they need from youth leaders and adult allies to move beyond personal problem-solving to understanding and envisioning their potential role in community problem-solving.

“Youth leadership development helps young people look beyond their personal needs and interests to see their relationship to a collective group, organization, or community. Youth workers who practice youth leadership development create spaces for young people to contribute to the well-being of others. Active study of leadership is incorporated in program activities, and youth are supported to build ethical codes to guide their relationships within the world. Special attention is paid to deepening historical and cultural understanding of their experiences and community conditions. Youth are able to practice leadership through meaningful roles within the organization, serving on boards, as staff members, or as peer trainers. Further, skills training and community projects provide youth with additional outlets for decision-making and problem-solving.”

4. Youth Civic Engagement

The development of youth civic engagement occurs when youth leaders and adult allies support youth to move beyond the development of leadership skills and civic awareness to assume active leadership roles in collective problem-solving and civic processes.

“Youth civic engagement is defined as young people developing the skills and habits needed to actively shape democratic society in collaboration with others. What makes this approach unique is its emphasis upon engaging young people in a democratic process, both inside the organization and within the broader community. Small groups of young people come together to identify issues that they want to address. Skills training and political education are tied to ongoing policy analysis and advocacy around issues that youth identify. Youth move from an individualistic space of ‘what can I do by myself’ to a collective space of ‘what can we do together.’ This shift is important as groups of young people—via local youth councils and local advocacy groups—learn how to navigate political systems of community and government.”

5. Youth Organizing

The development of youth organizing occurs when youth leaders and adult allies create the conditions for youth to self-identify community problems and prospective solutions, and then self-organize to address those problems in real-world contexts.

“Youth organizing is a youth-development and social-justice strategy that trains young people in community organizing and advocacy, and assists them in employing these skills to alter power relations and create meaningful institutional change in their communities. Youth organizing relies on the power and leadership of youth acting on issues affecting young people and their communities. Young people themselves define issues, and youth-organizing groups support them as they design, implement, and evaluate their own change efforts. Employing activities such as community research, issue development, reflection, political analysis, and direct action, youth organizing increases civic participation and builds the individual and collective leadership capacity of young people.”

The Process of Youth Organizing

The paper also provides a detailed analysis of the youth-organizing process:

- **Development and Skill Training:** Youth receive political education and training in

organizing skills such as meeting facilitation, public speaking, media relations, issue research, data collection, or social-media and person-to-person mobilization.

- **Outreach and New Member Recruitment:** Youth learn strategies for community outreach and recruitment, such as through peer-to-peer networking, event organization, and service-oriented projects.
- **Community Assessment and Issue Identification:** Youth learn methods of political and community research, as well as data collection, analysis, and presentation.
- **Campaign Development and Implementation:** Youth learn how to identify the goals and desired outcomes of an organizing campaign; determine the authority figures, public officials, or power brokers who will need to be influenced; and deploy the tactics of political persuasion, such as community education, media pressure, public testimony, negotiation, counter-proposals, and demonstrations.

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References

Edwards, D., Johnson, N. A., & McGillicuddy, K. (2003). ***An Emerging Model for Working with Youth: Community Organizing + Youth Development = Youth Organizing***. New York, NY: Funders' Collaborative on Youth Organizing.

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