

THE NEXT CHAPTER

A Vision for Thriving Youth and Communities

Together for Thriving Youth.

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Letter from the President & CEO

Dear Partners and Colleagues,

At Search Institute, we believe in the inherent value of every young person and in their capacity to shape a better world now. Young people are more likely to thrive when the relationships, opportunities, and conditions across their lives reinforce one another. Yet these experiences remain uneven and too often depend on chance.

For more than six decades, Search Institute has worked with young people, practitioners, and communities to understand what young people need to thrive. This strategic direction carries that history forward by focusing on relational ecosystems: the living, adapting patterns of relationships, opportunities, and conditions through which young people and communities continually shape one another. Our aim is to ensure that developmental relationships, assets, and opportunities are connected across settings, dependable over time, and accessible in ways that respond to young people's needs.

This direction also calls us to evolve. We will continue to produce rigorous research, useful frameworks, meaningful measures, and practical tools while learning more deeply alongside young people and communities. We will strengthen shared data and learning infrastructure so organizations can understand and improve their local contexts while contributing to a broader national understanding of what young people and the adults who support them experience. We will also help adults, organizations, and networks build the capacity to adapt, sustain, and extend relational approaches.



We will hold ourselves accountable not only for what we produce, but for whether our work improves young people's experiences, strengthens the settings around them, and builds the shared knowledge and capacity needed for lasting change.

Search Institute has an important role to play, but this work belongs to all of us. Progress depends on young people, families, practitioners, communities, researchers, funders, organizations, and public systems learning and acting together. We enter this next chapter with humility, curiosity, and resolve about what we can make possible together.

With gratitude and purpose,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Ben Houlberg". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal line extending from the end.

Benjamin Houlberg, Ph.D., LMFT
President and CEO
Search Institute



Mission

To cultivate the strengths, relationships, and opportunities necessary for young people to learn, grow, contribute, and thrive.



Vision

A world where the inherent value of every young person is known, nurtured, and activated—so youth and communities thrive together.

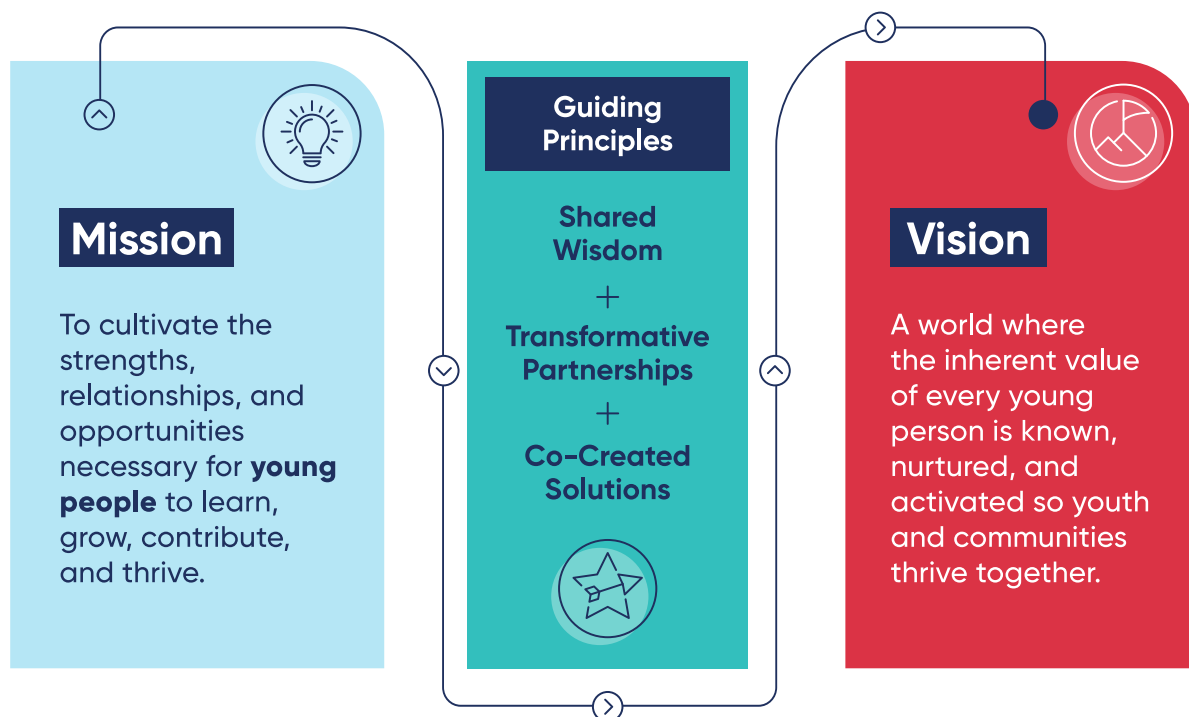
Why This Moment Matters

Young people are growing up amid rapid technological, social, and institutional change. Yet the fundamentals of human development remain. Young people need to be known, valued, challenged, supported, and connected to meaningful opportunities. The question is whether these experiences are available to every young person or left to chance.

For more than 60 years, Search Institute has worked at the intersection of research and practice to understand what young people need to thrive. This work has included surveys with more than 6 million young people, training for more than 65,000 adults, and engagement with more than 10,000 organizations. Behind these numbers are generations of data, partnerships, and stories that have shaped how communities understand and support young people.

As positive youth development took shape as a field, Search Institute helped advance a central idea: programs and services, while essential, were not enough. Communities also needed enduring patterns of relationships, resources, opportunities, and experiences that surrounded young people and reinforced their development across settings. This insight shaped our understanding of thriving as a dynamic and reciprocal process in which young people discover and express their strengths within communities that recognize, cultivate, and benefit from their contributions.

The scale of this work has revealed a persistent gap between what we know matters and what young people consistently experience. By focusing on relational ecosystems, this direction carries our history forward and moves us from knowing what matters to strengthening and continuously improving the conditions young people and communities need to thrive together.



Relational Ecosystems for Thriving



Thriving does not emerge by chance. It develops within **relational ecosystems**: the living, adapting patterns of relationships, opportunities, and conditions through which young people and communities continually shape one another.

Meeting basic needs and ensuring safety and stability are essential, but young people deserve more. Strong relational ecosystems make developmental relationships, supports, and opportunities **connected across settings, dependable over time, and accessible in ways that respond to each young person's needs and context**. Their quality is reflected in whether every young person—especially those systematically excluded from opportunity—can belong, exercise agency, grow, contribute, and thrive.

Three overlapping dimensions help explain how these ecosystems support development:

- **Developmental Relationships: How development happens.** The everyday interactions through which young people experience care, support, challenge, shared power, and expanded possibilities.
- **Developmental Assets: What young people develop and can access.** The internal strengths young people develop and the external relationships, supports, opportunities, and resources they can access and use.
- **Developmental Contexts: Where development is shaped and sustained.** The settings and organizational conditions that influence whether relationships and assets are accessible, culturally responsive, connected, and sustained.

Together, they show how development happens, what young people develop and access, and where those experiences are reinforced or disrupted.

What Youth Thriving Looks Like



Search Institute believes every young person has inherent value, carries strengths and potential, and deserves the conditions necessary to thrive.

Within relational ecosystems, thriving is the dynamic and reciprocal process through which young people discover and express their strengths, identity, purpose, and potential within contexts that know, affirm, encourage, guide, and benefit from their growth and contribution.

We look for evidence that thriving is taking root through four interrelated expressions:

- **Belonging & Connection.** Young people feel known, valued, safe, and connected through supportive relationships and a sense of belonging to people, places, and communities.
- **Sparks, Meaning & Purpose.** Young people discover and pursue interests that cultivate curiosity, motivation, direction, and connection to something larger than themselves.
- **Agency & Voice.** Young people believe their actions matter and develop the confidence, skills, voice, and opportunities to shape their lives and influence the world around them.
- **Character & Contribution.** Young people develop and practice the virtues, commitments, and habits that support integrity, empathy, moral courage, and contribution to their communities and the common good.

These expressions overlap and reinforce one another. They are not an exhaustive definition of thriving or substitutes for academic, health, economic, or other important outcomes. Rather, they offer a developmental perspective on how young people engage with opportunities, navigate their environments, and move toward outcomes that matter across sectors.

How Search Institute Works



To turn this vision of youth thriving into everyday reality, Search Institute partners with organizations, networks, and communities to cultivate and nourish relational ecosystems.

Our work across every initiative is anchored in three core commitments that serve both as our operating foundation and as standards of accountability with our partners:

Shared Wisdom: We focus on bringing together developmental science, practitioner expertise, lived experience, and community insight to continuously drive learning and improvement.

Transformative Partnerships: We cultivate long-term, trust-based relationships that unify organizations, systems, and communities around a collective responsibility for youth and community thriving.

Co-Created Solutions: By designing approaches, tools, and strategies directly alongside youth, families, practitioners, and community members, we ensure our collective work remains culturally responsive, deeply relevant, and sustainably owned by those it serves.

What Success Looks Like



Our commitments matter only if they contribute to meaningful change. We will look for progress across four connected outcomes. Together, they show whether young people's experiences are improving and whether the people, organizations, and systems around them can sustain and extend that progress.

These outcomes depend on many actors working within changing conditions. Search Institute will assess its contribution to progress, test the assumptions behind this strategy, and adapt as evidence and experience accumulate. Across all four outcomes, young people and communities help set priorities, interpret evidence, and shape decisions. We will continually ask who participates, who benefits, and whose knowledge guides the work.

IMPACT

Youth and Communities Thrive Together

Young people thrive within communities that provide strong relationships and opportunities—and communities thrive as young people contribute to and strengthen them.

INFLUENCE

Practice and Organizational Conditions Change

Practice and organizational conditions increasingly reflect relational and asset-based approaches.

RELATIONAL ECOSYSTEMS

The Core Unit of Change

Relationships, opportunities, and conditions become more connected, dependable, and accessible so young people and communities can thrive together.

LEVERAGE

Funding and Resources Align

Funding, resources, and partnerships align to sustain and extend progress.

LEARNING

Shared Wisdom Guides Action

Shared wisdom strengthens local action and builds knowledge for broader impact.

Let's Cultivate What Thriving Requires

Thriving should not depend on whether a young person happens to encounter the right adult, program, or opportunity. It must be cultivated through relationships and conditions that are connected, dependable, and accessible across young people's lives.

No organization can create those conditions alone. The next chapter belongs to young people, families, practitioners, communities, funders, researchers, organizations, and public systems learning and acting together.

Bring your wisdom. Strengthen the relationships and conditions within your reach. Help align practice, investment, policy, and public understanding around what young people and communities need to thrive.

Together, we can make thriving less dependent on chance and more deeply rooted in the relational ecosystems we create and renew together.

Join Us

- **Learn with us:** Join us as learning partners by sharing your expertise and lived experience.
- **Strengthen relational ecosystems:** Partner with us to intentionally strengthen the relationships, conditions, and supports that help young people thrive.
- **Co-create Solutions:** Work alongside us to co-create tools, strategies, and approaches grounded in your community's strengths, culture, and vision.
- **Carry the learning forward:** Apply and extend our shared learning to influence practice, policy, and narratives about what young people need to thrive.

Together, we can create a world where every young person is seen, supported, and thriving—today and for generations to come.