



Supporting Youth Thriving

Aligning External Assets to Meet Young People's Strengths and Needs

Heather Poparad,
Kelly Flynn,
Ashley Boat, Ph.D.,
Katherine Ross, Ph.D.

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Table of Contents

Table of Contents	2
Identifying What Young People Need to Thrive	3
About the Study	3
Participants	3
Findings	3
Who am I?	5
Identity	5
Beliefs and Mindsets	6
Sparks	6
What places, people, and opportunities do I have access to?	8
Places	8
People	9
Opportunities	10
Immediate and Long-Term Benefits of Aligning Internal and External Assets	12
Activity: Identifying Youth Strengths and Needs	13
Tool: Strengthening Program Offerings	14
About Search Institute	15

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Identifying What Young People Need to Thrive

About the Study

While the field of Positive Youth Development (PYD) has generated prolific knowledge and recommendations for youth-serving organizations and practitioners, youth have often been missing from the conversation about what it means to thrive and what they need to get there. This study aims to amplify the voices of Black and Latinx youth and the adults in their communities to understand how they envision thriving and how youth-serving organizations can act as supportive contexts to help them achieve it.

Participants

We partnered with nine different organizations that serve diverse communities and interviewed 18 young people (ages 16-24; 83% female; 56% Black, 39% Hispanic/Latino/a/e) and 13 practitioners (ages 24 to 40; 85% female; 38% Hispanic/Latino/a/e, 23% Black, 23% Multiracial, 15% White). Practitioners included individuals who were involved in evaluations/program improvement efforts and direct-service staff.

Organization	Location	Youth	Practitioners
BRIDGES USA	Memphis, TN	0	4
C4K	Charlottesville, VA	3	1
The Challenge Foundation	El Paso, TX	3	1
Elevate	Indianapolis, IN	1	1
Family Service Teen Tech Career Pathways	San Antonio, TX	3	1
The Lighthouse Black Girls Project	Jackson, MS	4	0
The Possible Zone	Boston, MA	1	2
United Way of Delaware	Wilmington, DE	1	1
YWCA of San Antonio	San Antonio, TX	2	2

Findings

Through our conversations with youth, it's clear that youth-serving organizations have the potential to be supportive contexts where young people feel safe and can explore and develop their strengths and identities.

What is thriving? While young people commonly described **well-being, stability,** and **happiness** as indicators of thriving, each young person's vision of thriving was unique

based on their identity, beliefs, values, and interests. Therefore, a first critical step to thriving is to **get to know the specific strengths, needs, and goals of the young people you serve.**

When asked about what they need to reach their vision of thriving, many young people emphasized **supportive relationships and access to opportunities and resources within the many places and spaces** that they live, learn, work, and play. They want peers, role models, mentors, and adults they can rely on. Youth-serving organizations are positioned to connect young people with those people, as well as opportunities and resources that are aligned with their interests and goals.

Young people are active agents in their thriving pathway and voiced that they **want to contribute to their communities** and use their skills and strengths to effect change. Their goals and purposes varied, but many were selecting (or looking for) programs and people to connect and engage with having those specific goals and purposes in mind.

When youth-serving organizations understand the unique strengths and sparks of the young people they serve and strategically align their offerings to support those, they are best positioned to support youth thriving. Based on what we heard from young people and practitioners, here is a framing for how you might help youth think about their internal and external assets, as well as the goals they want to set for themselves and in your program to drive thriving outcomes:

 <p>Who am I?</p>	 <p>What places, people, and opportunities do I have access to?</p>	 <p>What is my mark on my world?</p>	 <p>What does thriving mean to me?</p>
<p>The internal assets or unique strengths, values, passions, and perspectives that drive who they are and how they show up in the world.</p>	<p>The external assets or web of supporting systems that young people can rely on to help them discover who they are and who they want to be.</p>	<p>The contributions that young people bring and develop in themselves, their communities, and their world.</p>	<p>The thriving outcomes that are important to young people and their communities.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Identity ● Beliefs ● Sparks 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Places ● People ● Opportunities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Competence ● Purpose ● Agency 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Wellbeing ● Success ● Stability ● Happiness



Who am I?

Young people are in a constant state of discovery. One of the biggest opportunities and challenges of adolescence and young adulthood is figuring out who they are. As a supportive adult, you can walk alongside youth and support this stage of discovery. In order to nurture a young person's thriving, you can learn about their internal

assets; where they're coming from, what values they bring, and what sparks their own curiosity and drive in life. By taking the time to **understand the identities, beliefs and values, and sparks** of the young people you work with, you can build meaningful and authentic relationships and **tailor your programming to match their unique strengths and needs**.



It's one thing to want our students to succeed, but it's going to be a very different task if we don't understand what they're bringing with them when they come into the building.

-Nadia, Practitioner

Identity

Each and every young person has a unique, multidimensional, and evolving identity. Identity includes a young person's **past** and foundation—their family and cultural histories that shaped them—their **present** sense of self—ways of expressing who they are, groups that they associate with, and awareness of their own positionality or how they fit into their communities—and their **future** self—their vision for who they are striving to become.

My identity is just continuously evolving and developing. Because I think my identity is... It's a combination of things. It's my culture, it's my past, it's my parents, it's my environment, my friend group, my surroundings, so I think it's a combination of things that make me who I am.

-Sonia, Young Person

Beliefs and Mindsets

Beliefs, values, and mindsets are central to who we are. Young people talked about **beliefs and mindsets towards themselves, others, and their overall worldview**. First, having self-confidence and centering their own needs and values helps young people take care of themselves and align their actions and behaviors accordingly (e.g., practice self love). Second, placing a high value on others and connecting to a community is foundational to building positive relationships with peers and adults and a strong sense of belonging. Finally, many young people express having a growth mindset as an important foundational strength to looking for growth opportunities and seeking out ways to expand their perspectives and experiences.

I feel like everybody needs something to keep them grounded. At the end of the day, everybody needs to go have a little bit of hope in something.

-Swansetta, Young Person

Sparks

A key component of who every young person is are their **individual talents, interests, and passions** that spark their joy, creativity, and motivation. We call these things sparks. Sparks are often what brings young people to youth programming (an opportunity to explore a topic in more depth than they might be able to in school or at home) and sparks are often what keeps them coming back. Discovering the sparks of the young people that you serve is an important part of figuring out who they are and how to best support their journey to thriving.

I'm very interested in activism. Ever since I was a kid, I've always been like, "I want to be a teacher." But it was never really about teaching. It was always about helping people. And now that I've grown older, I've seen myself participating in more, like the [local social justice] march. Or my city held a protest downtown, and I was able to go. So really just standing up for people who are not able to do it for themselves.

-Claudia, Young Person

Practice Insight: Youth programs have a unique opportunity to support the exploration of identity, beliefs, and sparks through exposing youth to diverse people, perspectives, and experiences.

Youth-serving practitioners can remain open-minded, see young people for their authentic selves, and be nonjudgmental as young people discover different beliefs or sparks or try on different identities. Supportive adults respect a young person's autonomy and journey in figuring out who they are by being affirming of their unique selves. Programs can also think about the staff they hire, being mindful of bringing in adults that reflect the identities of the young people (e.g., race, gender, cultural identity) and adults who align with young people's vision of their future selves (e.g., strong role models and mentors). Youth-serving practitioners can learn about the generational assets—or the strengths and characteristics that young people bring and values that have been passed down to youth from their family histories. Remember, being open and authentic is a two-way street. When appropriate, share about yourself and your own identity, beliefs and mindsets, and sparks with your young people.

Resources

- The following activities help you get to know the young people you work with: The [Identity Wheel](#) helps you understand different aspects of a young person's identity, [Navigating By Our Stars](#) will deepen your understanding of young people's values, and [Roses and Thorns](#) is an activity for checking in with youth.
- Learn about the [Developmental Assets Framework](#), and use the accompanying measures to understand what strengths young people have within themselves and in their families, schools, and communities.
- Find a strength-based survey to quickly find out more about the young people that you work with. Use this [searchable resource](#) to find a measure that aligns with the youth in your program.



What places, people, and opportunities do I have access to?



Young people grow and thrive within a web of connected environments—like home, school, work, online spaces, and their communities.

Both youth and youth-serving practitioners shared what made their youth programs feel supportive and meaningful. They pointed out that these programs don't exist in isolation. Instead, they often connect with and are strengthened by other parts of young people's lives. When these environments work together, they create a larger support system of supportive places, people, and opportunities—or ecosystem— that helps young people thrive.

Places

Youth-serving programs play a valuable role within this larger ecosystem of supportive places. When these programs provide a safe, welcoming space where young people feel a sense of belonging and community, they become more than just a place to spend time—they become a foundation for growth, learning, and belonging. **Programs are especially impactful when they respond to youth needs, elevate youth voices, and build bridges to other supportive environments.**

We work in partnership a lot with communities and schools, and they're more like a holistic approach. They try to help the family as well as the student.

-Angelica, Practitioner

Practice Insight: Your program isn't just a safe space—it's a connector

Youth-serving programs often sit at the intersection of many parts of a young person's life—and that makes them uniquely positioned to bridge gaps between settings that don't always talk to each other. By intentionally building bridges between your program and other key spaces—like school, work, family, or community—you help young people experience more consistent support, deeper relationships, and smoother pathways toward their goals.

Resources

- Reflect on how to [engage families](#) within your youth program.
- Map and reflect on how to leverage [community resources](#) and opportunities to support young people in your program.

People

Young people grow through their relationships with people. These include connections with teachers, coaches, classmates, friends, family members, neighbors, mentors, youth program staff, or other adults within young people's communities.



Each relationship in a young person's life can play a unique role,

and that role may shift depending on what the young person needs at a given time. For example, a teacher might offer encouragement and academic support during a tough semester, while a coach or afterschool mentor helps build confidence and life skills like goal-setting and perseverance. A supervisor could become a role model for professionalism, offering a glimpse into future career paths. **These connections**—big or small—**work together to support a young person's growth**, especially when they feel seen, valued, and supported.

I definitely believe that the path to success is not by one individual. It's a group of people... If you have good people around you, and people who support you, that's really important to success...

-Javier, young person

Practice Insight: You're in a unique position to foster relationships

As someone who works closely with young people, you're often one of the few adults they trust and feel comfortable with. That trust puts you in a powerful position—not just to support them directly, but to connect them to new people, opportunities, and ideas they might not encounter otherwise. Whether it's introducing them to someone in your

network, or simply encouraging them to try something new, these small acts can help expand their world. You don't have to have all the answers—you just have to be willing to make the introduction. Sometimes, that spark of connection is what helps a young person imagine a different future.

Resources

- Learn about the [Developmental Relationships Framework](#), which highlights five elements of building strong relationships with young people.
- Help young people [map their web of support](#) to better understand the supportive relationships they have in their lives and what role you can play within that network.
- Listen to the [Rooted in Relationships podcast](#) to hear stories and insights about relationship-building from renowned researchers and youth-development experts.

Opportunities

Young people need opportunities to explore their passions, identify their goals, and build skills in support of their success. These opportunities can come through youth programs, but also through school, jobs, or community activities. What matters most isn't where the opportunities happened—it was how they helped youth build useful skills, explore new possibilities, and form meaningful relationships.

Youth shared a wide range of experiences that supported both practical and personal growth. They talked about learning everyday life skills like budgeting and cooking, developing social-emotional strengths like confidence and time management, and building professional skills that prepared them for future jobs. When youth programs create space for this kind of learning they're helping young people build a foundation for the future.

Career Pathways, they really help me a lot. They taught me how to do my resume, how to do interviews, how to basically talk in front of people... And then also, they provide internship opportunities. Last summer I was actually able to go to a clinic as an internship opportunity.

-Narta, young person

Practice Insight: You can provide opportunities aligned with youth sparks

Young people thrive when they're connected to learning opportunities that feel meaningful and personally relevant. One of the most powerful things you can do is take time to understand each young person's unique interests, strengths, and future goals—what sparks their curiosity and drives them.

- For younger adolescents, this might mean creating space to explore new interests, test out different roles, and build foundational skills.
- For older youth and young adults, the focus often shifts toward more targeted opportunities—like internships, leadership roles, or job experiences—that align with their specific educational or career paths.
- You don't have to create all these experiences alone. Partnering with local businesses, clubs, and community organizations can open doors and expand what's possible.

Resources

- Support young people in understanding the importance of building a network of relationships through this [youth-friendly video](#) on social capital.
- Check out these [approaches](#) to expanding young people's possibilities.
- Explore the [Youth Opportunity Toolkit](#) to gain a better understanding of how youth-serving organizations, like yours, can support young people in building a web of support.

Immediate and Long-Term Benefits of Aligning Internal and External Assets

An important step for youth-serving organizations is also engaging young people in identifying their short- and long-term goals for thriving. You can think about short-term goals as the **competencies, purpose, agency, and sense of belonging** that young people acquire from engaging in relationships and opportunities in youth serving spaces. What do your young people hope to accomplish in the short term as a result of their participation in your program? You can think about long-term goals as the **north star outcomes** that we are all aiming for, such as **success, well-being, happiness, and stability**. Here are some guiding questions that you can think through with the young people you serve:



Activity: Identifying Youth Strengths and Needs

Use these question cards to facilitate a conversation that helps you get to know the young people you work with. Print out this page and cut along the lines so that you have ten individual question cards. When using these cards with young people, you can flip them all face down and take turns selecting cards at random, or you can let the young person read the prompts and pick and choose which questions they want to answer.

What types of skills or qualities do you have that help you be successful?	What resources or opportunities do you have to support your future success?
What types of skills or qualities do you have that help you in being healthy?	What resources or opportunities do you have to support your health and wellbeing?
Is there anything that you still need in order to be successful? In order to be healthy?	What are your favorite things about yourself? Your family? Your community?
What are some things that have been a challenge for you? Your family? Your community?	Who are your biggest advocates and supporters? How do they help you?
Where, and with whom, do you feel like you belong?	How can this be a space where you feel comfortable being your true and authentic self?

Tips for using the question cards

- This activity is best used to facilitate one-on-one or small group conversations.
- Don't push young people to answer questions that they don't know how to answer or don't feel comfortable responding to. When appropriate, you might be able to use those moments to highlight the strengths you see in them.
- Take notes of young people's responses to these questions. Use your notes to be intentional in your relationships with youth and connecting them to meaningful resources and opportunities. You can also collectively examine your notes from all of your conversations with young people to gain insight about common strengths, challenges, and experiences of the young people you serve.

Tool: Strengthening Program Offerings

Use this worksheet to consider the alignment between your program’s offerings and the strengths and needs of the young people you serve. Start by identifying young people’s strengths and needs related to their wellbeing and success. Then, consider the resources and opportunities that your program currently offers. From there, review your notes and identify any gaps in your program’s ability to support young people. Finally, consider resources and opportunities that exist in your community that you can connect young people with to help close those gaps.

		Youth Strengths & Needs	Program Offerings	Other Community Resources
Health & Wellbeing	Strengths			
	Needs			
Success	Strengths			
	Needs			

Tips for completing this worksheet

- Consider a variety of sources that you can access to identify strengths and needs: you can use this as a follow-up activity to [Identifying Youth Strengths and Needs](#) and/or rely on other sources such as survey responses and insights from the conversations that you have with young people in your program.
- Complete this worksheet in collaboration with colleagues. After it’s completed, develop a plan for how your program can effectively connect young people to resources and opportunities that you identified in the greater community



About Search Institute

We collaborate with schools and youth-serving organizations to conduct applied research, co-design solutions, and create an environment where each and every young person can thrive. Through professional learning experiences, surveys, measurement tools, and support for continuous improvement, we build capacity and inspire change.

Search Institute

800.888.7828

info@searchinstitute.org
searchinstitute.org

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