

INNER CITY STRUGGLE'S Supporting the Leadership and Healthy Development of Eastside Youth United Students

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February 2016

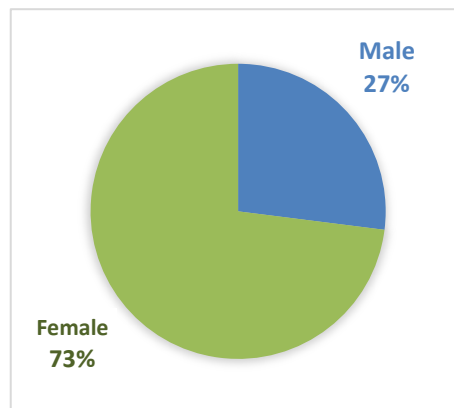
United Students seeks to organize high school-aged youth in order to build student power in the Eastside of Los Angeles. United Students comprises the youth component of InnerCity Struggle, a non-profit organization whose mission is to organize youth and families to promote social and educational justice in Boyle Heights, El Sereno, Lincoln Heights and unincorporated East Los Angeles communities. United Students is one of many youth leadership programs funded by the California Endowment that participates in Building Healthy Communities (BHC), an initiative which seeks to improve the well-being in select high poverty neighborhoods.

Drawing on 2014-2015 survey and semi-structured interview data collected as part of a broader evaluation of the BHC youth leadership programs, the purpose of this report is to provide a brief overview of United Students' youth membership and outline some of the ways young people have been involved in and benefited from this group. We begin with a demographic description of youth survey participants and lay out both how youth were recruited and why they remained in the organization. To provide information on United Students' programming, we show how youth members participated in different types of activities. We then share how members benefited from their involvement. This report also relies on semi-structured interview data to help illustrate members' experience in United Students and to list some of the group's recent campaigns.¹ We hope that this report informs InnerCity Struggle's efforts to continue its high quality youth programming, as well as provide insights for other programs and initiatives seeking to build the leadership capacity of low-income and diverse youth.

Description of United Students Members

A total of 82 youth ranging in age from 13 to 21 participated in the study, representing 89% percent of United Students core members (leaders), meaning that they actively participate in moving forward the organizing work during a particular time period. Young women outnumber young men (see Figure 1). Given that Boyle Heights is a largely Latino community, 95 percent of surveyed youth are Latino. The remaining identify as African American,

Figure 1. Gender Composition of Core Youth Participants



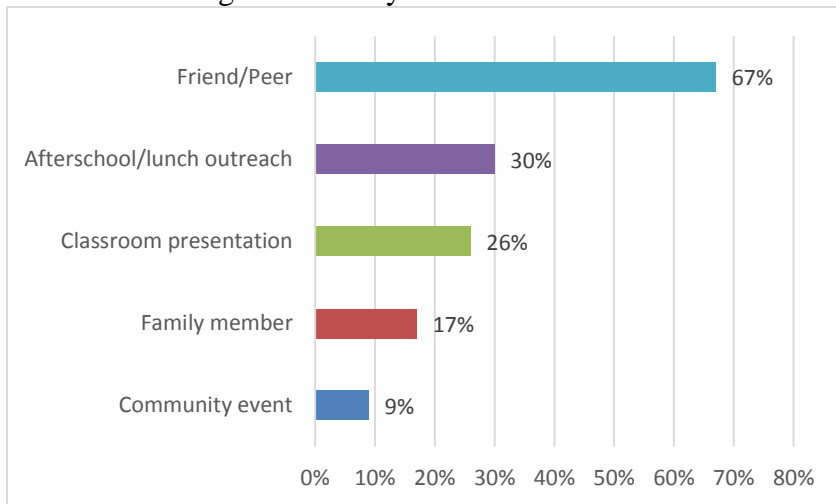
¹ To protect study participants' confidentiality, we used pseudonyms when quoting members.

Asian American/Pacific Islander, Native American, and/or other. Most youth—88 percent—come from an immigrant family with at least one foreign-born parent. Most also come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Specifically, 91% were raised in a low-income family, and 94% have parents who did not obtain a bachelor’s degree.

Participant Recruitment and Retention

Trained in grassroots organizing, United Students' members recruit their peers into the organization. As survey results indicate, when asked to share one or more ways in which they first heard about their group, most (67 percent) reported learning about United Students from friends or peers (see Figure 2). Youth also commonly learned about United Students through afterschool and lunch outreach and classroom presentations.

Figure 2. How youth learned about their BHC-affiliated youth group

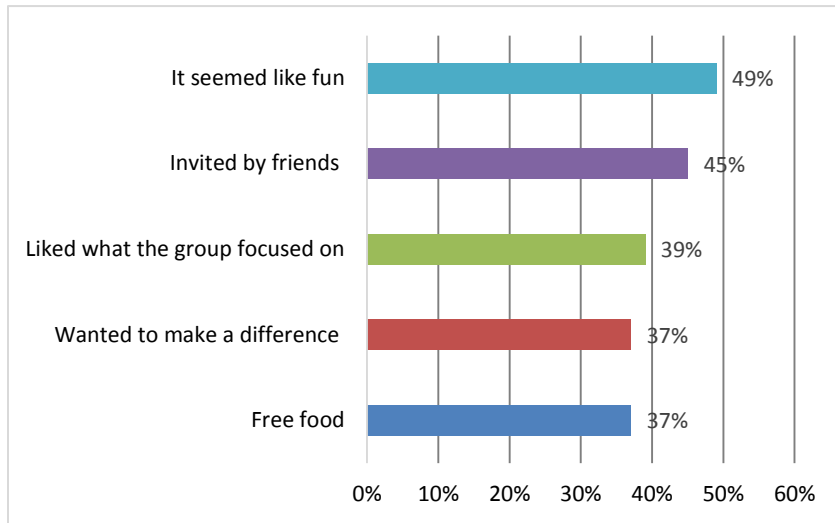


“I only began going to ICS because my friends wanted me to go. Since I liked what they were doing to help la Raza, I kept going back”

– Lino Diaz, 19

Members were asked to choose one or more reasons why they joined their organization. As Figure 3 shows, almost half (49%) were drawn to United Students because the group seemed like fun. Many – 45% – also became involved because they were invited by friends, evidencing the importance of peer outreach in recruitment. Notably, a significant proportion joined United Students because of concern for advancing the interests of their community. Thirty-nine percent liked what United Students focused on, and 37% wanted to make a difference. Another 37% also joined because of the free food. These findings suggest that while United Students draws young people who want to help their community, youth themselves play a major role in recruiting members to the group. At the same time, United Students attracts members by creating a fun community environment and offering something to eat.

Figure 3. Reason for joining United Students

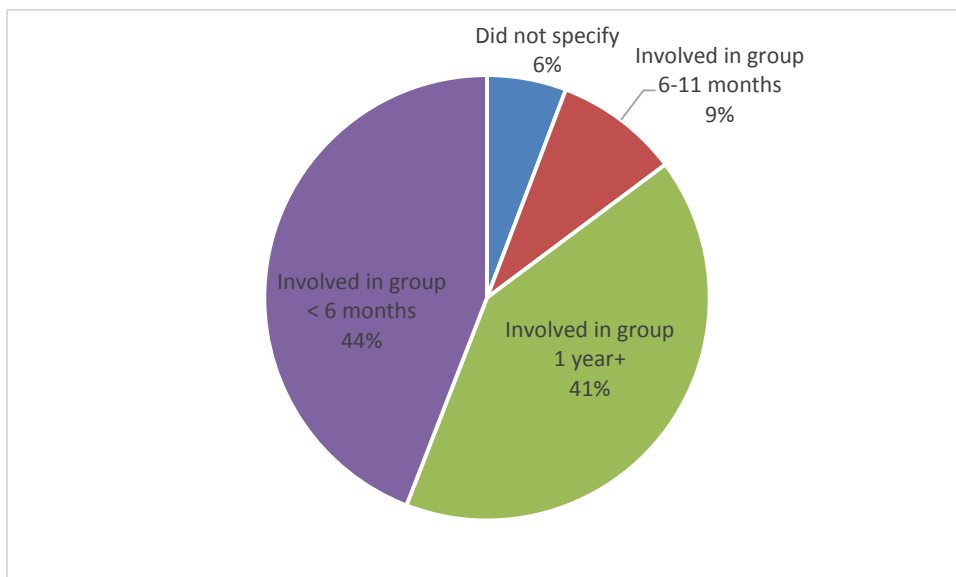


“It’s super cool how we get to hang out with friends and have a good time while at the same time still know we are making a difference; I think that’s why many of us keep going to the United Student meetings.”

-Mayra Perez, age 18.

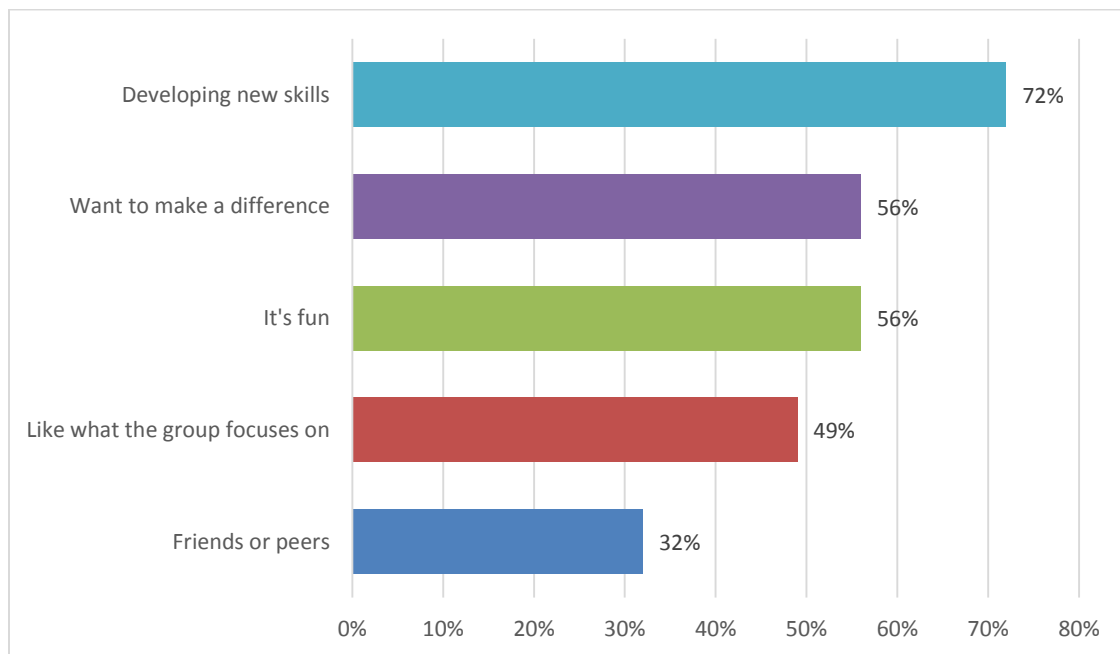
The retention of members is important to building any organization. Notably, 41% of United Student members had participated in the group for a year or longer. The remaining percentage of youth had joined within the last year or did not specify how long they had been with United Students (see Figure 4). Members who have been part of United Students longer likely play a role in developing the leadership capacity of newer members. As Stacey Herrera, 19, a long-time United Students member, indicated, “I remember when I first started I was helping the other members with campaigns. Now new members help me. So it’s cool how we all teach each other. I guess that’s why we all feel like a family.”

Figure 4. Length of time involved in United Students



Youths' reasons for remaining involved in United Students do not exactly overlap with their reasons for joining. Figure 5 shows that 72% remained involved because they were developing new skills. Meanwhile, 56% also stayed involved because they wanted to make a difference, and 49% stayed involved because they liked the focus of the organization. Youth likely felt that they were developing the capacity to contribute to the well-being of their communities. At the same time, members also stayed involved for social reasons as 56% of respondents thought the group was fun and 32% noted ties to peers as a key factor contributing to their ongoing involvement.

Figure 5. Reasons for staying involved



Members' Involvement

We asked respondents if, through United Students, they had participated in any of a list of activities. The list was based on activities commonly reported among BHC groups across the state of California. Results suggest that United Students orients their members towards a postsecondary schooling. Notably, 74% of survey respondents reported involvement in college preparation activities through this group (see Figure 6). United Students also offers members leadership opportunities. For example, 30% of survey respondents made a public presentation, 35% reported making important decisions, and 28% collected signatures or canvassed.

Figure 6. How Youth Participated in United Students	
Prepare for or succeed in college	74%
Made important decisions	35%
Made a public presentation	30%
Collected signatures/canvassing	28%
Performed or showcased art	21%
Facilitated restorative justice circle	18%
Wrote about community issue	11%
Physical exercise at least once a week	9%
Planned a meeting or event	9%

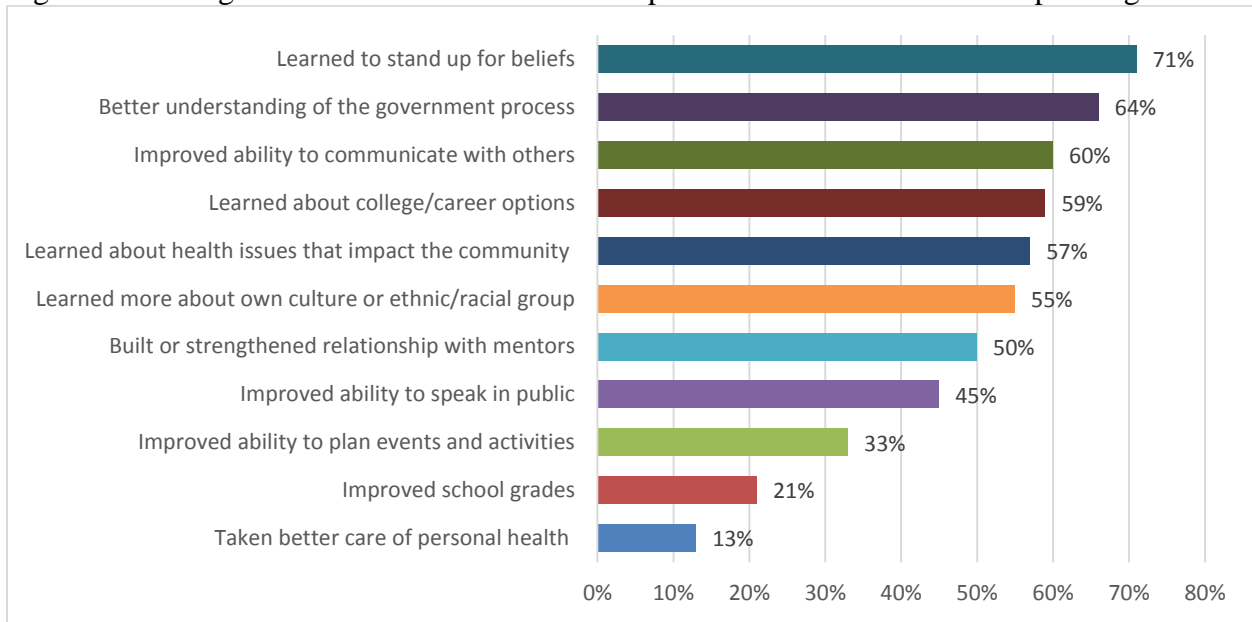
How Members Benefit From Their Involvement

Survey results indicate that United Students supports the healthy development of their young members. We asked members to rate how their organizational involvement impacted different aspects of their personal development—did it have *no impact*, *very little impact*, *some impact*, or *a lot of impact*? Figure 7 shows the percent that reported that their organizational involvement had “a lot” of impact on each of the areas of personal development included in the survey. Results suggest that participants overwhelmingly learned “a lot” that enabled them to stand up for their beliefs—71 percent indicated that this was the case. Fifty-seven percent learned about health issues that impact their community, and another 64 percent developed a better understanding of government processes. Additionally, many improved their ability to communicate with others (60 percent) and built or strengthened trusting relationships with mentors (50 percent). These findings suggest that United Students may have a positive transformational effect on the lives of their members.

“United Students has helped me understand a lot about my community like why things are as bad as they are, but they also help us come up with solutions on how we can change our community for the better.” – Stacey Herrera, 19

“The staff are always on our case like ‘when are you going to sign up for SAT prep classes’ and ‘when are you going to start your personal statement.’ They just won’t quit which is good because I’m ahead of the game.”-Julian Rivera, 19

Figure 7. The degree to which United Students impacts its members: Percent responding "a lot"



Recent Youth-Led Campaign Victories

As United Students members have personally benefited from their involvement, they have also developed their capacity to lead grassroots campaigns to improve community well-being and expand educational opportunities in the Eastside.

In fact, the cohort of United Students who participated in this study has contributed to the long list of InnerCity Struggle’s winning policy campaigns. Among the most notable recent victories was the approval of the LAUSD School Board’s “Wellness Centers Now!” Resolution in 2014. The “Wellness Centers Now!” Resolution set aside \$50 million for the construction of school-based comprehensive wellness centers to provide primary and preventative care, as a way to address the specific health needs of high-need students. United Students have followed up on this victory by securing a commitment for a local wellness center at Roosevelt High School in Boyle Heights.

United Students members who participated in this study have also joined their predecessors in working in coalition with other Los Angeles groups to reduce the education achievement gap of high-needs students, including low-income students, English learners, and foster youth. In one of their major victories in 2014, United Students successfully worked with their allies to pressure the district to pass the “Equity is Justice” resolution. This resolution requires the adoption of the Student Need Index as the central guide for the distribution of Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) funds, helping assure that the schools with the highest need are prioritized for receiving additional resources. Then in June of 2015, United Students worked with other groups to secure

the passage of the 'Equity in A-G' School Board Resolution which aims to increase access to college preparatory courses for students in low-income communities and provide students with interventions and supports so that they graduate. This win reinforces an earlier victory, the passage of the original A-G Resolution in 2005, which has been associated with an increase in the proportion of LAUSD high school students completing the 4-year college entrance requirements.

In summary, this research evidences InnerCity Struggle's United Students ongoing track-record of promoting the healthy development of low-income students, and engaging them in successful grassroots efforts to promote educational justice and community well-being. United Students serves an example of an effective youth development and community organizing program that may be emulated in other communities.





USC Program for Environmental and Regional Equity (PERE) conducts research and facilitates discussions on the issues of environmental justice, regional inclusion, and social movement building. PERE conducts high-quality research that is relevant to public policy concerns and that reaches those directly affected communities that most need to be engaged in the discussion. A faculty affiliate of USC PERE, **Veronica Terriquez** is an Associate Professor of Sociology at the University of California Santa Cruz and is leading the BHC Youth Program Evaluation. **Gabriela Dominguez** is an undergraduate student at the University of Southern California's Department of Anthropology.

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For a statewide and other reports on BHC youth programs, please see:
<http://dornsife.usc.edu/pere/bhc-youth-leadership/>