

Building a Statewide Youth Movement and YO! California's 2019 Emerging Organizers Fellowship Program Evaluation Findings

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Over the last decade, youth organizing groups across the state of California have led successful local, regional, and statewide campaigns. Their success is due in part to deep investments in the youth organizing infrastructure, talented and committed youth leaders and allies, and the increasing sophistication of youth-led campaigns. YO! California (Cali) represents a critical component of this infrastructure, providing training and support for youth organizing groups across the state.

YO! Cali has hosted a fellowship program to bolster the capacities of young organizers for three years. Known as the Emerging Organizers Fellowship Program, this nine-month development opportunity offered young staff members in-person convenings, monthly webinars, local hands-on organizing, and individualized coaching. The goal was to help them not only implement campaigns, but also to advance transformational social change in marginalized communities.

This brief report presents the results of pre- and post-test surveys administered to the second cohort of fellows at the beginning of the program (January 2019) and at the end of the Emerging Organizers program (September 2019). These surveys measure the growth in organizing capacities among fellows. This report also summarizes responses to open-ended survey questions administered to fellows at the end of the program and results from an open-ended survey of their supervisors. The findings focus on the growth of 18 racially diverse fellows, aged 18-30, who completed the program. Importantly, this group includes members of diverse gender identities and sexual orientations as well. Overall, findings from this evaluation suggest that YO! Cali's Emerging Organizers Fellowship plays an important role in building an inclusive movement for racial justice in California.



Results from Fellowship Evaluation Surveys

YO! Cali's Emerging Organizers Fellowship increased the participants' understanding of key youth organizing concepts and activities. To measure the fellows' growth, we examined the results of surveys that asked participants to rate their knowledge and skill levels on a number of organizing-related topics and activities at the beginning and end of the program. For the purposes of this report, we tracked the percentage of fellows who said that their skills had been developed to the extent that they felt confident they had "significant knowledge" or the "ability to train others."

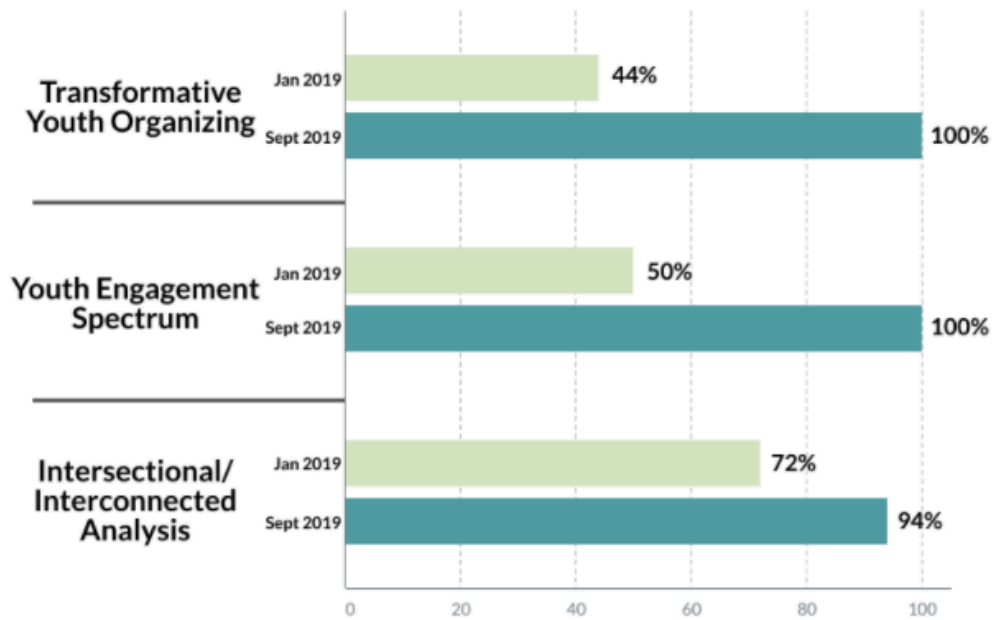
Through the fellowship, YO! Cali aimed to develop a shared understanding of transformative youth organizing that is inclusive of California's diverse population and helps build movements. To this end, the program focused on organizing-related concepts (see Figure 1). To begin, YO! Cali trained fellows in "transformative youth organizing," which they define as a holistic model of youth engagement and organizing. This model of organizing incorporates personal and collective growth and healing, community organizing, base building, and cultural strategies in order to achieve grassroots power, impact systems change, shift narratives, and strengthen social movements. Transformative organizing recognizes the interconnectedness between individual and systemic oppressions, and engages those most affected in defining inclusive solutions that address the underlying causes of social inequality. The training proved successful. In January, 44% of the fellows claimed that they had "significant knowledge" or had the "ability to train others" in transformative youth organizing. By September, all fellows said they shared this knowledge or expertise.

As part of their efforts, youth organizers often have to explain how their work is different from other forms of youth development that are not as focused on preparing young people to collectively impact policy and systems change. Training, therefore, included an explanation of what organizers call the youth engagement spectrum, which entails different levels of youth ownership over programming (ranging from receiving services to organizing). At the beginning of the program, half of the fellows reported significant knowledge or ability to train others on this topic, but by the end of the program, all of them reported such expertise.

Finally, youth organizing in California tends to be intersectional, meaning it attends to diversities and power inequalities within marginalized communities and draws connections between various issues. Fellows also saw improvement in their expertise in intersectional/interconnected analysis (72% of fellows in January to 94% in September).

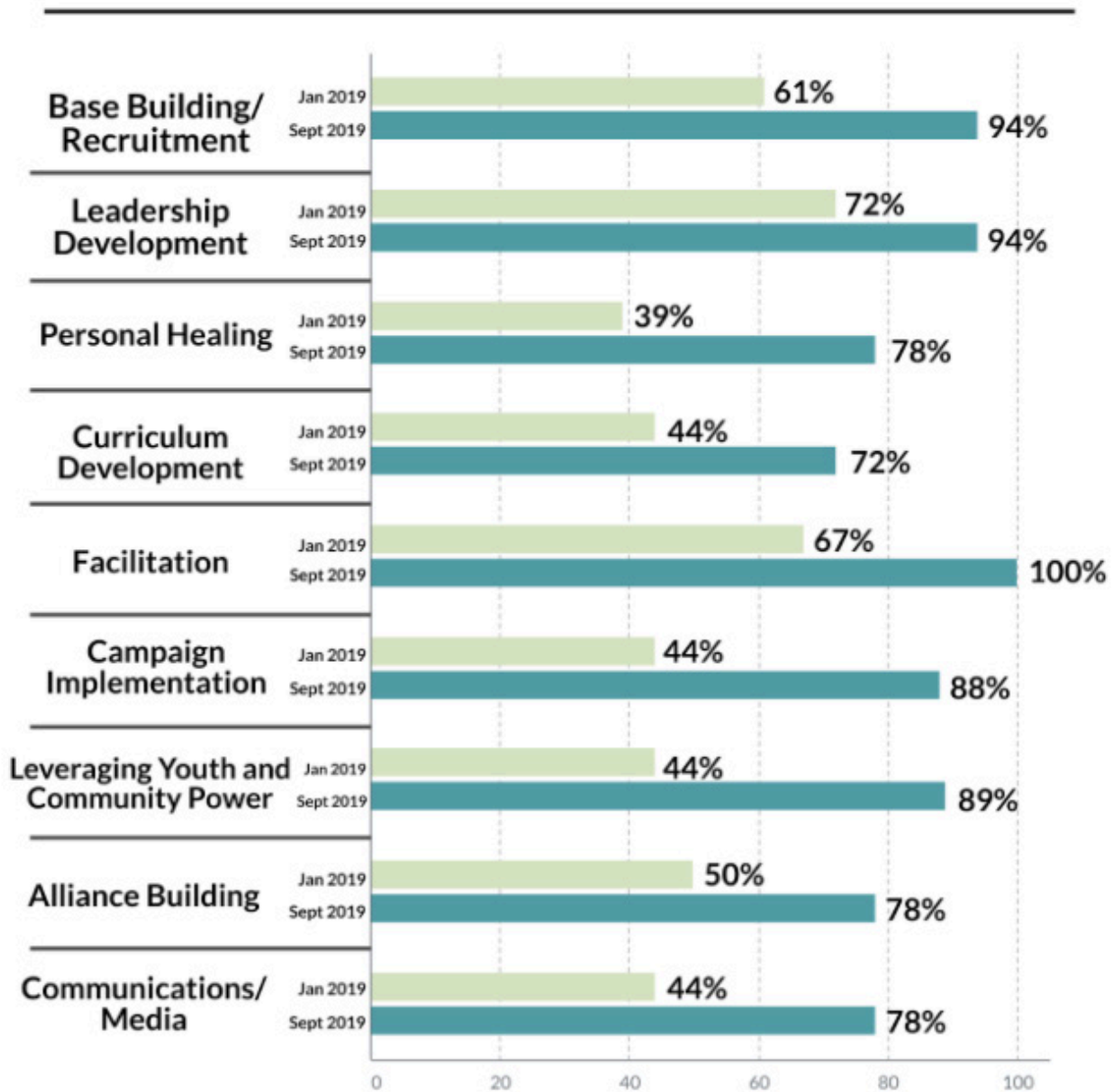


Figure 1. Level of Knowledge about Organizing Topics (N=18)
Fellows reporting significant knowledge or the ability to train others



The fellows program also successfully trained youth organizers in the nuts and bolts of organizing. Survey results indicate that fellows expanded their organizing expertise, as shown in Figure 2. They learned about base building and recruitment, with the percentage of fellows reporting “significant knowledge” or that they “can train others” in such matters rising from 61% at the beginning of the program to 94% at the end. Knowledge of leadership development and retention saw similar increases in youth confidence throughout the program, from 72% to 94%. Additionally, the percentage of fellows reporting “significant knowledge” or that they “can train others” on personal healing doubled from 39% in January to 78% in September. Facilitation skills also improved, as the percentage of fellows who reported that they were skilled enough to train others increased from 67% to 100%. In addition, fellowship participants reported increased skills in campaign implementation from 44% in January to 88% in September, leveraging youth and community power (44% to 89%), and alliance building (50% to 78%). Fellows reported a significant increase in skills related to curriculum development (44% to 72%) and communications/media (44% to 78%).

Figure 2. Level of Experience with Organizing Activities (N=18)
Fellows reporting significant knowledge or the ability to train others



Program Strengths and Recommendations

As part of the YO! Cali fellowship evaluation, participants responded to a series of open-ended questions in September 2019 about the strengths of the program and areas of potential improvement. In this assessment, fellows reported that, overall, they found the fellowship program very helpful.

The program helped youth organizers foster safe relationships with other fellows and staff members, connect with allies throughout the state, stretch the boundaries of their comfort zones, and understand their identities and roles within their home organizations and the broader movement. The program also helped participants advance their professional and organizing efforts by showing them how to create a work plan, navigate organizational transitions, and strengthen the youth curriculum.

In September, the fellows reported that they had already begun using their new skills to improve their organizations and campaigns. For example, we received reports that different fellows had educated youth about the importance of visual representation, used peer coaching to increase motivation, organized team-building and community-bonding activities to create a welcoming environment, and developed new strategies for base-building and crafting a strong curriculum.

Fellows reported that they had become more confident in their organizing skills and in their abilities to stand up for youth, problem solve, address issues head-on, and build relationships with fellow staff members. After the program ended, fellows also felt a greater sense of belonging in their home organizations and a renewed sense of purpose in the broader movement, as they were reminded of why they initially engaged in youth organizing.

In their final survey, fellows mentioned the aspects of the program that they found most helpful. Coaching was frequently praised as being particularly useful in developing fellows' organizing skills and knowledge. Fellows reported that coaches were good listeners, offered thoughtful feedback, and provided useful guidance for attaining goals. They also lauded the opportunity to build a community with other fellows and connect with organizers from across California. Additionally, support at the local level was one of the most helpful aspects of the program. Self-care sessions, healing practices with a spiritual focus, and interactive challenges were also very much appreciated.

Fellows offered many suggestions for improving the overall content of the fellowship program. In the next program, participants suggested that YO! Cali should build in more opportunities for connecting regionally. For example, regional retreats and panels could show how youth organizing groups in different regions and contexts operate and help staff members build more robust networks. Fellows would also like more hands-on experience, site visits, group activities, and opportunities to connect with other staff and the alumni network to help incorporate their new knowledge. Additionally, in their surveys fellows offered suggestions for future trainings, including how to resolve conflicts and develop accountability processes, how best to involve youth in organizations and campaigns, how to fund youth programs, and how to report on organizing outcomes.

Fellows also gave feedback about other aspects of the program that could be improved. While coaching sessions were very helpful overall, fellows suggested that the coaches stay on top of scheduling, be more consistent, and meet face to face with fellows in order to have a greater impact. For in-person retreats, fellows suggested more free time and breaks so they can bond with other fellows and rest, a wider variety of food, a different retreat location, and more fellow-led workshops. During webinars, participants would have liked more time to discuss and debrief in small groups, allowing fellows to connect with their peers and further explore important topics. Fellows urged YO! Cali to communicate the importance of webinars and retreats to home organizations, but also suggested that staff should take greater pains to avoid scheduling conflicts when planning events. Looking forward, the fellows mentioned that they would need more support from their home organizations as they transition out of the program.

Feedback from Supervisors

In September, supervisors were asked to complete an open-ended survey to give a general assessment of the program. Like the fellows, supervisors overwhelmingly reported that the YO! Cali fellowship program was useful.

Supervisors reported that they decided to participate in the program to broaden their staff's knowledge about different kinds of organizing work, to build community among youth organizing groups in California, and to help their staff develop organizing capacity and skills. Overall, the supervisors' goals were met. They reported that by the end of the program, fellows were more confident and strategic, had a deeper understanding of how their work connected to the broader movement, and showed more initiative. The fellows also stepped more fully into their positions and began taking on more leadership roles in projects. Supervisors also reported that their organizations' connections to other youth organizers had increased. Overall, supervisors believed that the YO! Cali fellowship program helped advance their organizations' work.

There were a few aspects of the program that supervisors found particularly helpful. Supervisors applauded regular check-ins and emails from YO! Cali Fellowship Director Ashley Uyeda, appreciating her understanding of groups' varying capacities and strengths. Supervisors also felt that webinars were helpful and efficient.

Supervisors did provide suggestions for improvement. In terms of programming, they expressed a desire for training on grant writing and fundraising, leadership styles, public speaking, and outreach. The biggest suggestion that supervisors offered, however, was the need for more communication and training on how to support fellows during and after the program. From their viewpoint, fellows sometimes struggled to apply what they learned in the YO! Cali fellowship program to their work at their home organization. Time management was another issue, as fellows had trouble scheduling meetings with their coaches and arranging training dates. Supervisors requested access to the training materials that fellows received, as well as any internal training materials supplied to coaches, so that they could continue supporting staff members after the program ended. Overall, supervisors expressed that training fellows needs to be ongoing, and that they themselves need training on how to be good supervisors in order to help their fellows get the most out of the program.



Extending the Leadership Pipeline

Evaluation results indicate that the YO! Cali Emerging Organizers Fellowship Program offers young staff members invaluable training, expanding their abilities to lead campaigns across the state. Survey results consistently showed that fellows' capacity to train their younger peers on organizing topics and activities increased over the nine-month period. The tailored training and coaching that organizers received played an important role in building confidence and increasing their leadership in campaigns. Additionally, the networks and relationships developed through the fellowship were invaluable; they helped align organizations and advance movement-building across the state.

Given the program's success in expanding young staff members' abilities to drive social change in their own communities and beyond, the Emerging Organizers Fellowship Program represents a key element of California's youth power infrastructure. In the short term, the program helps facilitate youth power locally and across the state in ways that are inclusive of California's diverse population. As participants become older and advance in their careers, the program will likely influence other social movements and progressive politics in California and beyond. This research therefore speaks to the importance of ongoing training for young organizers. Investments in the leadership development of Black, Indigenous, and other people of color can be instrumental in advancing social justice.



This research was funded by The California Endowment, and published by the USC Equity Research Center.