

Article

Empowering the Collective: Redefining Youth Activism and Political Dynamics Within Nonprofit Organizations

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Abstract: This study explores the “nonprofitization” of youth climate organizing from the perspective of six youth activists who participated in designing a pilot environmental activism program for a large science museum located in Northern California. Through case study methodology, the authors explore how adultism and institutional control stifled youth activism and the ultimate success of their initiatives. Our analysis highlights the institutional practices, intergenerational value gaps, and inadequate understanding of social movement principles from the partner site that reified colonial hierarchies of knowledge and prevented genuine support and collaboration with youth in climate activism. Factors such as profit motives, a desire for control, generational gaps, and a failure to see youth as equals contribute to this problem. We conclude by proposing alternative institutional practices with youth that center on intergenerational power-sharing to counter the trend of nonprofit organizations greenwashing youth social movements.

Keywords: youth climate activism; epistemic justice; climate change education; coloniality; youth movements



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1. Introduction

In recent years, youth activism¹ has emerged as a dynamic and transformative force in global social and environmental movements. Young people have led initiatives such as Fridays for Future, which have mobilized millions worldwide to demand urgent climate action (Wallis & Loy, 2021). Youth survivors of the Parkland school shooting started the March for Our Lives movement, shaping significant debates on gun control in the United States (Braun, 2019). Young people are at the forefront of local, national, and international movements—not only raising awareness of social injustices but also influencing policy changes, galvanizing public opinion, and redefining the role of youth in public discourse (Christens & Kirshner, 2011; Terriquez, 2014).

The impact of youth activism extends beyond the immediate demands of youth organizations. Historically, youth-led initiatives have been catalysts for broader societal change, challenging entrenched power structures and advocating for a more just and equitable world (A. M. Liou, 2022; Wilf, 2023). In the present political moment, young people have further augmented their power and voices through creative political expression

on the Internet. Memes, short-form videos, and other viral media content have emerged as potent forms of political commentary, often distilling complex issues into accessible and relatable formats that resonate with a wide audience (Yamashita & Robinson, 2016). These digital expressions have not only increased the visibility of youth-led movements but have also disrupted traditional media gatekeeping, allowing young people to set their own terms for generational discourse and reach global audiences directly (Alcantar, 2022).

Despite this, educational institutions and nonprofits have attempted to co-opt, tame, or outright suppress youth resistance (Mirabella, 2022). For example, schools and universities have enforced policies that discourage political expression, from dress codes banning protest symbols to expulsion for student participation in anti-war protests (Wood, 2025). In the present political moment, the second Trump Administration is weaponizing xenophobic “outside agitator” narratives to demonize student activism and free speech on college campuses, using executive powers and militarized violence to repress, surveil, and retaliate against young activists (ACLU, 2025).

Nonprofits, while operating programs that serve as crucial third spaces for compulsory school-aged youth (Cohen, 2024), have played a role in diluting the radical demands of youth movements to fit within more palatable or fundable frameworks. The “nonprofitization” (Kwon, 2013) of youth social movements has stifled young activists’ genuine expressions and political beliefs, as institutions exert financial and creative control over youth-led initiatives and programming (Atkins et al., 2020). Nonprofit organizations frequently equate “youth leadership” and “youth empowerment” with participation in duty-based citizenship practices or job-training programs that celebrate youth as a would-be workforce (Kwon, 2013). The neoliberalization of nonprofit organizations due to their reliance on private donors, corporate funding, and governmental grants is fundamentally at odds with counter-hegemonic youth activism, which necessitates youth agency, resistance, and power.

Adult-led nonprofit institutions frequently cannot and do not fully support or understand the goals and principles of youth movements, leading to a disconnect between institutions’ goals and youth visions within programmatic settings (Gordon, 2021). This trend raises important questions about the role of nonprofits and educational institutions in youth-led activism. As such, this study examines the experiences of six youth activists who participated in designing a pilot environmental activism program for a large science museum in Northern California to explore the following research questions:

- How do adult-led nonprofit organizations impact the autonomy and effectiveness of youth-led climate activism initiatives?
- How do adult-led nonprofit organizations’ institutional practices or policies impact youth agency and learning?

1.1. The Politics of Youth Activism

Young people who engage in activism are often “regarded as a raw force to be harnessed and disciplined on a pathway into responsible democratic civilization [and] democratic adult citizenship” (Tuck & Yang, 2014, p. 10). However, youth who engage in organizing and activism “theorize and enact their own theories of change, producing alterneity” (A. M. Liou, 2022). When adults attempt to make sense of youth activism using dominant theories of change— even if those theories are “socially progressive” or “socially just”—they often erase the agency and political autonomy enacted by youth through their resistance and actions (A. M. Liou, 2022; A. Liou & Literat, 2020; Tuck & Yang, 2014). Furthermore, when adults romanticize youth organizing and valorize young people for resisting in a way that aligns with their adult theories of change, these analyses are reductive,

incomplete, and often reify adult–youth power dynamics through “totalizing” narratives of youth (Fine, 2014).

Within organizing spaces, youth activists also experience age-based power dynamics and struggles at the hands of adult “allies” (Gordon, 2007, 2009; Taft, 2015). Adults often attempt to regulate what qualifies as “political” and “legitimate” in both digital and physical forms of activist participation. Youth activists note that adults are prone to theorizing youth activism around a “discourse of exceptionality” (Gordon & Taft, 2011, p. 1506) or judging youth organizing based on their own “idealized cultural image” of activism (Clay, 2012, p. 10). Additionally, due to legal restrictions based on age, adults often “create the spaces, facilitate the conversations, and dictate the distribution of material resources for youth” (A. M. Liou, 2022).

Younger activists regularly identify the adultism of older activists as an inhibiting factor in their activist praxis (Clay, 2012; Gordon, 2009; A. M. Liou, 2022; Taft, 2011). In intergenerational organizing spaces, they articulate a critical tension between adult and youth organizers and express that they are often developing their activist identities in relation to the adult–youth power dynamics that manifest in their social spaces (Gordon, 2009; Taft, 2011). Youth activists “not only see themselves as different from adults for reasons of age and generation, but they also suggest that these differences [make youth] more effective” in certain aspects of activism and organizing, such as giving each other the time and space to explore their ideas, visions of justice, and identities and at collaboration (Taft, 2011, p. 61).

Youth activism, therefore, is necessarily shaped by adultism, or “the oppression experienced by [...] young people at the hands of adults and adult-produced/adult-tailored systems” (LeFrançois, 2014, p. 47). Young people exist in and between many “sites of control” (Boggs, 2011, p. 141), where they are controlled by adult actors and systems of domination. The social construction of youth as categorically “in process” and oppositional to adulthood also defines how young people are educated, punished, parented, and legally understood in our society (Lesko, 2001). Adultism demands and rewards youth obedience while simultaneously pathologizing youth critique and rebellion, which reifies power dynamics between young people and adults (A. M. Liou, 2022).

1.2. *The Nonprofitization of Youth Activism in the U.S.*

In the U.S., dominant notions of “youth” have historically been shaped by white, “middle-class, reform-minded adults” who sought to create an ideal childhood through institutional frameworks (Lombard, 2005; Illick, 2002). During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, amid rising immigration rates and challenges to race-based citizenship, these adults addressed their social anxieties around race and class through reform efforts targeting youth of color, immigrant youth, and working-class youth (Kwon, 2013). Progressive-Era social reformers established the first juvenile courts and created various interventions and programs aimed at “delinquent” youth, believing that exposure to white, upper-middle-class values would “civilize” children with historically marginalized identities (Kwon, 2013; Lombard, 2005). As a result, the framing of immigrant youth, working-class youth, and youth of color as subjects of suspicion and regulation became enshrined in institutional policies and objectives.

As the field of youth development emerged, scholars and practitioners alike created programs reifying youth as objects in need of social control, creating programs aimed at channeling youth into socially responsible futures. Nonprofit organizations, which had steadily taken over “areas of service which used to be provided by the [...] state” (e.g., education, health, poverty, youth policy), aligned with youth development discourses that asserted that youth’s participation in their programs would improve individual and societal

outcomes (Deželan & Yurttagüler, 2021). However, since these organizations provided essential services and relied on private sector and governmental funding, they were both implicitly and explicitly discouraged from engaging in counterhegemonic political advocacy and, thus, radical social change (Deželan, 2023). Youth “participation”, “engagement”, and “voice” in nonprofit and youth development programs became intertwined with the private interests of foundations, corporations, and elites aligned to colonial power structures.

As the field of youth development emerged, scholars and practitioners alike positioned young people as objects in need of social control, creating programs aimed at channeling youth into socially responsible futures (A. M. Liou, 2022). Nonprofit organizations aligned with youth development discourses, asserting that their youth programs improve individual and communal outcomes (Ginwright et al., 2006). However, youth and their allies have critiqued youth development programs and nonprofit organizations for diluting youth activism and reifying the idea that youth agency results from participation in neoliberal practices (A. M. Liou, 2022; Kwon, 2013; Tuck & Yang, 2014). In their view, these narratives bind youth action to conventional political participation such as “duty-based” citizenship practices, self-discipline, and obedience to larger structures and institutions of governance. Youth “participation”, “engagement”, and “voice” in nonprofit and youth development programs and are funded by foundations, corporations, and other organizations aligned with colonial power structures; thus, power still resides in dominant systems, and youth are trained to “sound and look like good citizens” (Tuck & Yang, 2014).

In *Black Awakening in Capitalist America*, Allen (1990) discusses how liberal white philanthropic organizations, such as the Rockefeller, Ford, and Mellon Foundations, contributed to the suppression of radical Black liberation movements in the late 1960s and early 1970s. By selectively funding and promoting moderate, reformist elements, such as those advocating for Black capitalism and electoral politics, these foundations created a climate that marginalized and alienated more radical approaches to Black liberation. The nonprofit industrial complex (NPIC) similarly limits youth activism. The neoliberalization of nonprofit organizations has shifted institutional goals from public advocacy to market-driven “service provision”, subjecting youth in nonprofit spaces to restrictive and competitive funding, bureaucratic controls, and performance metrics that prioritize efficiency and palatability over authentic youth change-making (Deželan, 2023; Deželan & Yurttagüler, 2021). Furthermore, limited access to competitive funding prevents smaller, non-institutionalized youth movements from sustaining their efforts. As governments withdraw social services and impose financial and legal barriers on youth voice in the present, independent youth organizations face expulsion from policymaking, fear of retaliation for activism, and reduced access to sustainable resources (Christens et al., 2022; Deželan & Yurttagüler, 2021), while youth who participate within nonprofit programs related to “youth activism” face youthwashing (Frost, 2021), depoliticization, and reduced democratic participation (Deželan, 2023).

The nonprofit industrial complex significantly influences the radical possibilities of youth activism by imposing constraints that prioritize funding stability over transformative action. This dynamic not only limits the scope of youth-led initiatives but also exacerbates existing power imbalances between youth and adults in activist spaces. As youth activists continue to navigate these challenges, it is crucial to critically examine the role and restrictions that philanthropy and nonprofit institutions contribute to the landscape of youth activism in a colonial–capitalist system.

2. Methods

2.1. Context

In Summer 2023, Author 5 (Aleks) was hired by a large science museum in Northern California (Museum) to create and act as program manager for a new youth climate activism after school program called Climate Activists Regenerating Earth (CARE).² Authors 1–6 were six of fourteen middle- and high school-aged youth who applied, interviewed, and were accepted by the Museum to serve on its Youth Leadership Council (YLC), tasked with co-design, development, and leadership of the CARE program, with Aleks as Museum staff support.

The Museum's key demographic for CARE was local youth, ranging in age from 13 to 18, who self-identified as youth activists and were interested in engaging peers to take greater climate action and regenerate the natural world. The institution's intention in creating this program was to utilize its resources and reputation to connect young climate leaders with researchers, legislators, industry professionals, and community activists for intergenerational learning, skillshare, and co-creation of environmental solutions. Though secondary school-aged youth could participate in other Museum internships and volunteer programming, CARE was the Museum's first program that was youth-led and activism-specific; the Museum hired Aleks to fulfill the program's sole staff position, given their doctoral research and experience with youth organizing and intergenerational solidarity.

In order to ensure the approach to this youth program was guided by youth needs and interests, Aleks conducted 14 listening sessions with 45 individuals who self-identified as youth climate activists who had participated in environmental advocacy for at least one year. The purpose was to hear directly from youth about their needs and desires and to inform the program's shape. Youth in these listening sessions overwhelmingly (93%) reported interest in taking greater climate action than they currently do. Youth also shared that while there are climate-related opportunities visible to them at school, they often are unaware of options for taking their advocacy "to the next level, beyond volunteering" (youth participant). Furthermore, youth named adults as one of the biggest obstacles to their climate work due to expressed issues like gatekeeping, lack of awareness around youth interests, and limiting beliefs around youth abilities.

Across the board, youth who participated in listening sessions articulated that an "ideal youth climate program" would connect young people with each other across geographies and form a youth coalition dedicated to environmental awareness and action. According to youth, CARE should be youth-led and "less talk, more action", where youth leaders would (1) be in community with one another, (2) spend time developing a relationship with the natural world, (3) deepen their climate and biodiversity knowledge to better advocate for the planet, and (4) engage their peers and communities in taking collective action for the climate.

In order to ensure that youth would be the primary driving force of CARE and allow program goals to change dynamically year-to-year, Aleks proposed that the Museum create a Youth Leadership Council (YLC) to co-create strategy and lead program implementation with their support. In order to be selected for the YLC, each youth applicant, including the four youth authors, had to complete an online application that detailed their past experiences with climate justice and environmental advocacy, their experiences and challenges working within a group, and what they could contribute to the co-creation of a youth-led climate activism program at the Museum. The selected youth were then interviewed in a group setting by Aleks, where interviewees had to work with peers to create a climate justice event for teens in their local community. Of 37 youth who applied, 14 youth were selected for the YLC. Of the YLC's inaugural members, 79% identified as people of color, 64% identified as young women, and 21% identified as gender non-conforming or non-binary.

Additionally, 79% of the YLC were public school students, with 14% of the YLC attending private school and 7% being homeschooled. In total, 29% of YLC members qualified for free or reduced lunch.

Once selected, the YLC members attended a group orientation facilitated by Aleks to establish group camaraderie as well as their collective goals and community norms for the school year. Our initial goals for the year were to “help make [the Museum] more green”, “engage in disruption”, cultivate a large community and social media following, partner with local celebrities to raise awareness about environmental issues, etc. (see Appendix A). However, as we will explore in our case studies, several institutional obstacles, policies, and power dynamics hindered our ability to create the program as intended and be authentically responsive to youth perspectives and issues.

2.2. Participants

Participation in this study came at the premature conclusion of the program’s first year (2023–2024), after the Museum suspended CARE, disbanded the YLC, and fired Aleks due to our coordination of a youth-led protest in support of the Museum’s workers union (Case Study 3). As YLC members documented our experiences and perspectives of the year’s activities leading up to our suspension, we noticed patterns of greenwashing, neoliberal practices, and youth tokenization by the Museum that we wanted to explore and analyze on both a deeper and systemic level. With Aleks’s encouragement, we felt that there was value as youth to document our experiences and contribute directly to research about youth activism, as academic research about youth is overwhelmingly dominated by the voices of adult researchers.

Of the original fourteen YLC members, six chose to participate in the study (see demographic information in Table 1). The age range of youth participants was 15–18 years, with a median age of 17 years. Aleks, our sole adult participant, was 33 years old.

Table 1. Overview of participants.³

Participant	Age	Pronouns	Racial/Ethnic Identity	Activism Focus Prior to CARE
1	16	she/her	Multiracial, Filipino and white	climate
2	17	she/her	South Asian, Indian	climate change, marine science
3	17	she/her	Asian American, Japanese	environmental justice, marine science
4	18	she/they	Asian American, Chinese	climate, environmental justice
5	18	she/they	Asian American, Chinese, and Vietnamese	climate and social justice
6	18	they/them	White	environmental justice, educational equality
Aleks	33	they/them	Asian American, Taiwanese	Immigrants’ rights, racial justice

Reasons that the eight remaining YLC members did not participate in the study were 1. having alternate summer plans (e.g., job, camp, internship) (four youth) and 2. already being an inactive YLC member by the time of the study (four youth).

2.3. Data Collection

For the seven youth and adult participants, our intergenerational research meetings occurred on a weekly basis. We met virtually on Discord, as it was a digital platform that all participants were familiar with, and the digital component promoted accessibility for our group, which was geographically dispersed over a large metropolitan area in Northern California. For the first several weeks of our research meetings, Aleks created a short research curriculum so that all participants could establish shared language and knowledge; youth and adult participants read about a diversity of research methodologies

as well as existing academic scholarship on youth activism in preparation for our weekly, 90 min meetings. During the meetings, we summarized key takeaways from the readings, discussed individual reflections and connections to our YLC experiences, and took collective notes on how we would build upon or incorporate these ideas in our own study. All decisions made in the group were arrived at using consensus-based decision making (Taunyte, 2008) amongst youth participants, which was a community agreement we had established together during our YLC term.

As a result of our discussions, we decided our study would focus on our experiences as “youth leaders” at the Museum, the contradictions between the Museum’s expressed and enacted values, and how our experiences in CARE connected to systemic issues that disproportionately impact young people (e.g., adultism, the nonprofit industrial complex, repression of student activism). We decided that case study methodology would be appropriate for this study, since we could use our shared experiences to provide detailed, in-depth examinations of relational and structural power dynamics that we faced at a nonprofit educational institution, mirroring common challenges to youth activism in U.S. society at large.

The three case studies were unanimously chosen by participants through consensus-based decision making. Once we chose our desired case studies, our weekly Discord calls shifted to a new structure for data collection, focusing on one case study at a time. To begin documenting a case study, participants shared their personal account of that case, including reflections on key actors, chronology of events, supporting messages and documents from our YLC Discord server, and how the events impacted the individual’s personal activist identity, mental health, and understanding of CARE’s goals. We took collective notes on these reflections and then outlined components necessary to the case study at hand. Then, we engaged in collaborative writing on a shared document, where we “collaged” our accounts together to highlight overlapping facts and details. Throughout collaborative writing, we responded to each other’s contributions with comments, affirmations, and questions to encourage feedback. Time was reserved at the end of each research meeting to read through our collective account, ask questions of each other, and discuss whether our account was complete or needed to be worked on at the next research meeting.

It is essential to acknowledge the limitations of this study, particularly given its demographic focus on a specific group of high school youth in a large, progressive U.S. city in Northern California. The experiences and outcomes discussed may not be universally applicable, as youth engagement can vary significantly based on the organization, context, and individual lived experiences.

2.4. Data Analysis

Our analysis consisted of three consecutive and iterative processes. First, we each examined the case studies and took notes, highlighting key quotes and developing brief summaries. Then, inspired by grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), we read across the data, identifying recurring conceptions and patterns, such as “youth tokenism”, “protecting institutional reputation”, and “control vs. agency”. Finally, by reflecting on the data as a whole, we coalesced these subthemes into three emerging themes related to youth activism and its tensions within neoliberal nonprofit organizations: core themes that illuminate the key challenges we faced as youth activists working within a nonprofit organization, specifically the institutional mismatch between expressed and enacted values; tokenization and control over youth; and limitations of adult policies in radical youth movements.

3. Case Studies

3.1. Study 1: Instagram and Logo/Adult Control and Restriction over Branding and Outreach

In order to effectively organize youth and engage our target demographic for CARE's first public event, the YLC wanted to create a social media presence on Instagram. However, according to institutional policies set in place by the Museum, individual researchers and Museum programs did not have proper authorization to create social media accounts because "unofficial" accounts could potentially impact the Museum's revenue and general image. Therefore, the YLC was barred from posting about our events, public workshops, and other science education and communication materials to social media and other youth. While the Museum offered to publicize our first event for us on the Museum's official Instagram account, they stated that the only way they could do so was using an Instagram story, a temporary post that only lasts for 24 h. The story they posted did not include the flier YLC designed, nor CARE's name, but instead pictures of youth of color unaffiliated with CARE. Afterwards, Aleks scheduled several follow-up meetings between the YLC and the Museum's Social Media division to discuss obtaining an authorized account, but our meetings were continually pushed back and, later, canceled.

Around the same time, the YLC was tasked by the Museum's Branding division with creating a logo for CARE, which we were told would be a contribution to the legacy of the Museum's first youth-led program. The YLC was told that we would not be able to decide the logo's color scheme or font face, due to Museum policy around institutional branding. However, the YLC brought its ideas within these constraints to an initial one-hour meeting with Museum staff to provide feedback about CARE's brand identity and mascots to inform the Museum's first draft. After more than a month's wait, the Museum shared three possible logos. None of them felt aligned with our vision, as they did not capture any of the direct feedback that the YLC had provided in our branding session. Multiple YLC members described the options as "juvenile" and "baby-ish".

The YLC compiled further feedback, including an illustrated mockup of our desired CARE logo, for the Museum. The Museum did not get back to us with an updated logo draft for five additional months. Despite the YLC's clear guidance and feedback, the presented logo was different from and more juvenile than the logo we had created. YLC members felt disappointed and unheard, since "we repeatedly attended meetings to give our opinions and ideas, yet none of them were applied". At the follow-up, we gave further, more specific critiques. However, by the end of our first year, we still had not heard further updates from the Branding division or received a finalized logo to represent the CARE community.

3.2. Study 2: Institutional Partnerships and Collaboration with Climate Polluters

In April, while we were planning a public Earth Day event for local youth and families, the Museum announced its sponsors for its annual fundraising gala. Sponsors for this event included PG&E, JP Morgan Chase, McKinsey, United Airlines, Visa, and Deloitte, whose collective carbon dioxide emission was 115.8 million metric tons in 2023 alone. Although the Museum claimed to have a mission heavily centered on regeneration, sustainability, and connection to the natural world, multiple members of the YLC felt that the Museum was negating that commitment by accepting donations and sponsorships from major climate polluters.

The YLC felt that this topic was an urgent one that we needed to address as youth climate activists affiliated with the Museum. We collectively decided that we would create and drop a banner with the names and logos of the top sponsors and corporate polluters invited to the event, featuring the startling statistics of how much carbon dioxide was released by these companies in the previous year. The message was tied together with a touch of sarcasm, "Thanks to our sponsors" written above a globe encased in flames

(see Appendix B). The goal of our action was to point out the discrepancy between the Museum's expressed and enacted values in a manner that drew attention to the public and guests. We enlisted the assistance of several experienced adult accomplices who were willing to assume the risk of solidarity with us to carry out the banner drop, as youth under the age of 21 were not permitted to attend the fundraiser.

After much planning and coordination, our adult allies successfully dropped the banner and drew the attention of the attendees. People took pictures, possibly sharing what they had seen with their friends and asking questions about the "why" behind it. The banner stayed in place overlooking the donors' dinner party for about fifteen minutes before it was taken down by security. No further known action was taken by the Museum to investigate the action, nor are we aware of any acknowledgement or accountability the Museum has taken with regard to the protest. While the banner's impact was limited, we were able to successfully achieve our aim of addressing the Museum's hypocrisy and create greater awareness regarding their expressed and enacted values.

3.3. Study 3: Institutional Retaliation Towards Youth-Led Action

In the spring, the Museum began facing structural budget deficits and its executive leadership decided to address this through staff layoffs and program cuts. The YLC grew concerned as we learned that several well-established educational programs serving youth of color were being cut. Many employees we had gotten to know and worked with closely were affected by staff layoffs.

The YLC began to plan our summer event, an Activist Bootcamp for fellow youth climate advocates to learn skills and movement history from experienced organizers. During our planning phase, we collectively decided that we should dedicate some of our time during this Bootcamp to support programs and staff impacted by the layoffs. We discussed that we could make a real impact on this issue at the institution if our voices were heard by the executives, who had often praised us for our commitment to leadership, advocacy, and action. Furthermore, as a youth climate collective, we continually examined the issue of climate change through a lens of intersectionality. Thus, the connection between the Museum's budget cuts and its impact on youth, low-income communities, communities of color, and accessible science and climate education was relevant to the YLC and CARE's mission.

When Museum workers decided to stage a solidarity break with staff impacted by the layoffs, the YLC attended with fliers we designed in support of the union. While Aleks attended the break with their colleagues, some members of the YLC placed fliers around the Museum. Aleks let us know to contact them if anything went wrong. One of our first locations was the Museum gift shop, where an intimidating man approached us and said, "Don't do that". As he was not wearing any apparent forms of identification, we did not realize he was Museum security staff until much later. We noticed some of our flyers were disappearing and assumed we were being followed, and a man who we believed to be Museum Security trailed us into a children's play area. Alarmed, we ran to the nearest bathroom and locked the door. The situation, at the time, was described by the members present as "out of a horror movie". We notified Aleks and then met up with them in our usual classroom to debrief the situation.

That evening, Aleks reached out letting us know that Anne, a senior Museum leader under pseudonym, would be contacting us by phone to inform us to not return for the rest of the program week. This was our first interaction with Anne despite being in the program for nearly a full year, and she called each of the YLC around 9:30 p.m. She told us not to come in for the rest of the week, without stating a specific reason for our suspension. Since Aleks did not know the exact reason either and was told by Anne not to communicate with

the YLC, the YLC was left in the dark. Obviously, we could assume the punishment was related to our flyering action, but Museum officials did not clearly accuse us of anything, and we did not think we were in the wrong, as none of our actions violated any clauses in the handbook we signed at the beginning of our program.

Anne's phone call made many of the YLC members nervous and put us on edge. The group mostly felt afraid and confused, while others felt justifiably upset because our programming was canceled without a clear conversation. The whole situation spiraled beyond our control very quickly and with little to no clear communication directly with the YLC to determine what happened that day before shutting the Bootcamp programming down. This created a disorienting atmosphere of confusion and doubt (see Figure 1).

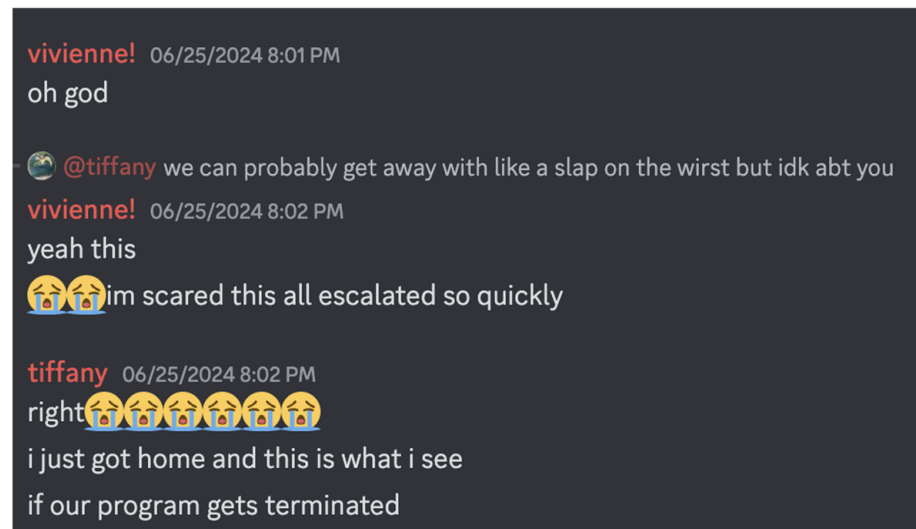


Figure 1. Transcript of YLC Discord conversation: YLC reactions to Bootcamp shut down.

Aleks was a strong supporter, and their main priority was assessing how the situation was making people feel and finding ways to address our fear and stress in order to help de-escalate (see Figure 2).

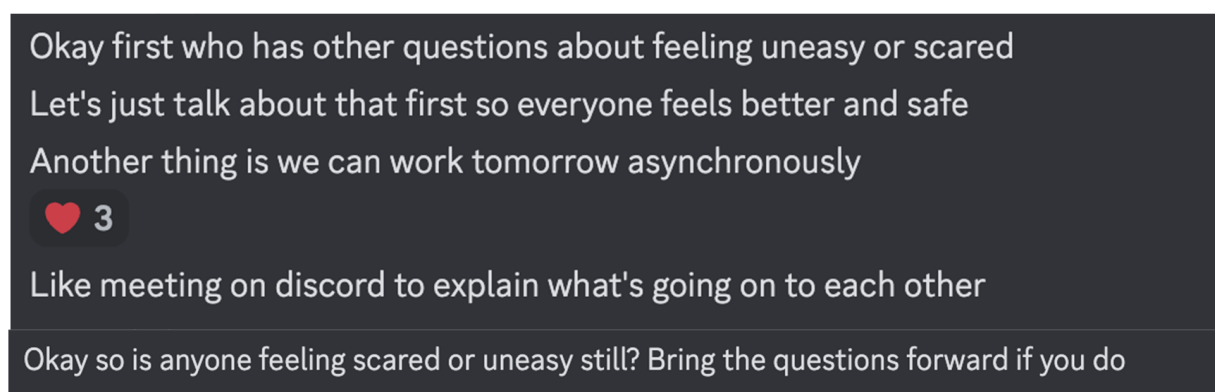


Figure 2. Transcript of YLC Discord conversations: Aleks's responses to YLC reactions.

The following day (Wednesday), the YLC held a virtual meeting on Discord and recorded our perspective of what happened the day before, so that we could establish our summary with a clear memory in case we were to be questioned. In the document, we summarized our experiences and connected them to earlier ones from throughout the program year to draw patterns of issues with power dynamics between the adults

we worked alongside. We explained how these experiences led to us deciding to spread the fliers.

On Friday, Aleks met with Museum management, who wanted to know the reasons the YLC, a youth climate group, would be taking action about workers' rights and layoffs. During the meeting, Aleks shared the YLC's document summarizing our perspective on the experience at the meeting, and the content in its entirety was dismissed as they repeatedly asked questions that were answered in the document. Aleks was told that "no one [at the Museum] is trying to retaliate against the youth or cancel their program", but rather that they were looking into whether Aleks was the one who convinced us to take action. The next day, Aleks was placed on administrative leave, and the Museum did not try to get in contact with the YLC to explain the future of our program and participation.

After the meeting, one YLC member sent the Museum leadership a letter of support detailing, and taking ownership of, the events that had occurred earlier that week on behalf of the YLC. By that point, it was clear to us that the Museum was going to blame Aleks for everything that happened, despite the fliers being our own autonomous choices; therefore, we wanted to explain to the Museum that these actions were taken of our own accord. A few weeks later, all YLC members and their parents or guardians received an email from Anne, describing that the Museum had hired a lawyer to conduct an investigation of Aleks' "supervis[ion] of the program" (see Figure 3).

My name is [REDACTED] and I am the Director of Public Programs and Academy Volunteers at the [REDACTED] Program. I'm writing with a short update and request related to your teen's participation in our [REDACTED] Program.

Unfortunately, we needed to cancel our [REDACTED] boot camp at the end of June. We made this decision because we are conducting an investigation of how our employee, Aleks Liou, has been supervising the program. Let me be clear: Your child is not in trouble and the issues we are investigating do not directly involve your child.

I am writing now because we'd like to learn more about your teen's experience with [REDACTED]. A lawyer, [REDACTED], hired by the [REDACTED] to conduct this investigation might email your child about their willingness to speak over Zoom. You are totally welcome to join your child in that conversation.

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me. Because we are still investigating the [REDACTED] Program, I cannot provide much additional detail at this time. I will, however, follow up with you with more information after the investigation has been completed.

Thank you,

Figure 3. Email from Museum leader (Anne) to the YLC and parents regarding Bootcamp cancellation.

Although Anne said we were "not in trouble", multiple YLC members felt that the Museum's response of hiring a lawyer was an intimidation tactic. Furthermore, bringing our parents into the conversation made us panic, since not everyone on the YLC had an equally healthy relationship with their parents, and some families would be less understanding than others. Due to the power dynamics between a parent and child, the Museum's escalation of the situation became nerve wracking for the YLC, since much of a child's agency can be taken away at any time and reason for doubt by a parent.

The same day, the lawyer who was hired as an independent investigator emailed the YLC and their parents, asking to meet regarding "some concerns that have been raised [at the Museum]", without explaining why the meeting would be occurring, what the meeting would be about, or other relevant information for a youth participant (see Figure 4). Upon receiving this email mere hours after Anne's email, we were extremely confused and concerned as to why the Museum was taking such extreme action over distributing fliers without first talking directly to us.

I understand [REDACTED] has reached out to you letting you know that I will be contacting you. As you know, I've been retained by the [REDACTED] as an independent workplace investigator to look into some concerns that have been raised there. These concerns do not involve you directly; however, I understand your teenager may have some information that may be helpful and I would appreciate it if we could set up a time to speak via Zoom video conference. During our meeting, I will explain this process, my role in this process, and what will happen with the information you will provide when we meet. Your teenager's parent/guardian is welcome to attend this meeting. I encourage you to refrain from speaking with anyone about this process so as to avoid tainting this process or inadvertently engaging in retaliation among your peers or employees at the [REDACTED]. Your point of contact at the [REDACTED] is [REDACTED] if you have any questions or concerns.

Please let me know if you are available anytime on Monday, July 22 or July 23 between 1:30 pm and 5 pm. Please let me know what works best for you.

Figure 4. Email from lawyer hired by Museum to YLC and parents.

The majority of the YLC and their families did not feel comfortable attending these meetings. Some YLC parents were not fluent in English and felt uncomfortable responding to direct inquiries from a lawyer. Only two YLC members decided to participate in the meetings, which was an investigation of Aleks. One YLC member who participated in these meetings with the lawyer described their experience as an “interrogation” and less of a conversation. The meeting set a timeline of the events that occurred, while also asking leading questions that seemingly attempted to incriminate Aleks. Despite Anne’s promise that our parents would be updated with the outcome of the investigation, at the writing of this article in October 2024, YLC families have not heard from the Museum and are unaware as to the final decision that was reached during the investigation. Furthermore, we, the team of youth most directly impacted by this investigation, were never told the outcome and are still unaware of the future of the YLC and the CARE program as a whole.

4. Findings and Implications

Our interpersonal experiences of adultism at the Museum are symptomatic of the larger, structural manifestations of adultism present in nonprofit and educational institutions, where adults regularly determine what “counts” as leadership, participation, and activism for youth. Through our case studies, we have identified three core themes that illuminate the key challenges we faced as youth activists working within a nonprofit organization, specifically the institutional mismatch between expressed and enacted values, tokenization and control over youth, and limitations of adult policies in radical youth movements.

4.1. Institutional Mismatch Between Expressed and Enacted Values

Despite the Museum’s expressed values of “diversity”, “equity”, “collaboration”, “sustainability”, and “advocacy”, our experiences have made it clear that the Museum’s actions were not aligned with these values in reality. In each of our case studies, we illustrated how the Museum prioritized its image and revenue over its own values, volunteers, and staff. The most egregious of these examples to us is the Museum’s partnership with its fundraiser sponsors (Study 2). Despite the Museum’s expressed commitment to fighting climate change, preserving the natural world, and maintaining Earth’s biodiversity, it continues to accept donations from corporate polluters at the root of climate justice issues. This is a clear and direct example of greenwashing.

Apart from its climate-based values, the Museum also expresses the values of diversity and equity and youth empowerment. However, cutting programs such as teacher professional development, which brought science education to historically BIPOC and low-income communities across our region, was an example of the Museum acting in opposition to its expressed mission and values. When the YLC engaged in direct action to point out the Museum’s contradictions in this regard, our message and its connections to environmental justice were silenced or punished. The Museum’s actions in both recruiting

and suspending the YLC are indicative of an intentional co-optation of “youth voice”, “activism”, “climate justice”, as well as marginalized communities like youth of color. It is evident across these case studies that the Museum was more interested in securing its own reputational advantage for creating a “novel youth climate activism” program than it was in genuinely listening to and supporting youth activists.

Compared to how the Museum operates, we, as youth, have always collectively done our best to operate in a way that deconstructs hierarchies. We want equally elevated voices in the room. As a youth activist collective with a genuine core goal of justice and equity, the YLC created collective norms and values that centered youth voice, collaboration, solidarity with one another, and taking action for the planet (see Appendix A). We define our activism as “working with diverse audiences and movements in order to challenge the status quo and work collectively towards meaningful improvements in our communities”. We see ourselves as categorically different from the Museum for a multitude of reasons, but identify our alignment in expressed and enacted values as a distinguishing one. To us, any youth programming that claims to be “activist” must involve taking action on our values to challenge power dynamics and create material change. As youth activists, we are driven by intrinsic motivation and what we gain from social movements through coalition and solidarity building, while the Museum operates on extrinsic motivation, where factors such as profit influence their expressed versus enacted values.

4.2. Tokenization and Control of Youth

As activists, our views on environmental justice and activism require us to make an impact by speaking out and being unafraid to engage in uncomfortable actions to make change, without reputational or institutional restrictions. When the YLC engaged in more passive, surface-level activities such as “raising awareness” about issues understood by the general public (e.g., invasive plant species), the Museum celebrated us in their newsletters and fundraising campaigns as “exceptional youth leaders”. However, when we tried to move beyond “dutiful” dissent towards “disruptive” and “dangerous” types of dissent (O’Brien et al., 2018), we were punished, investigated, and suspended (Study 3). This made us feel like our purpose as the YLC was to create a program for youth tokenization rather than for genuine youth voice, action, and representation.

The Museum’s adults were the ultimate decision-makers that could unilaterally decide which types of activism and youth work were worth supporting and what types were under suspicion, worthy of investigation, or disciplinary action. Despite the digital space being an important site of activism for young people (Jenkins et al., 2016), the YLC was barred from using social media and not granted the “proper authorization to create an account” (Study 1). Museum adults had total control over how we presented ourselves to the public, our digital image, and whether we had a digital image at all. The Museum explicitly cited market-based interests and potential impact on Museum revenue as the reason for not “allowing” CARE to have a social media presence. Adult restriction on our contributions for the CARE logo also suggested to us that we were not fully seen as “youth leaders”, but instead, puppets. We felt that we were hired by the Museum to create an external image that the Museum was making an effort to work more closely with youth and was open to listening to diverse perspectives, when internally, this is not what we experienced.

When we were suspended as a collective in Study 3, the Museum did not consider the impact or consequences of abruptly pausing our programs on our partners, funding opportunities, upcoming speaking engagements and collaborations, or us as individual youth. Senior leaders had total decision-making power over how our actions would be viewed, interpreted, and punished and whether or not our program would continue, without consulting or having a direct conversation with us. We believe that the Museum

saw our actions as predominately orchestrated and executed by Aleks, which is a false and ageist perspective that sees our power through an adultist, individualist, and hierarchical mindset. This view does not recognize youth choices, actions, and lived experiences as legitimate forms of political critique.

Although the YLC was awarded a substantial grant in August 2024 to continue CARE for two more years, the Museum leadership still kept our program on pause and never reached out to update the YLC about their decision. Traditional nonprofit structures allow adults to unilaterally cut youth resources and funding without consultation of its affected members, meaning youth organizing is often limited by adult control rather than informed by community needs. In fact, our swift suspension as a collective and the use of legal intimidation to discourage our continued efforts is reminiscent of green lawfare tactics employed by corporations using “strategic litigation against public participation” (Konkes, 2024), taking legal action against environmental activists in order to discourage dissent and curtail protest rights (Singh, 2025).

4.3. *Limitations of Institutional Policies and Structures on Radical Youth Movements*

Museum protocol and policies often interrupted or fully prevented our organizing efforts. From social media to logo design to the Museum’s protocol for reprimanding Aleks, Museum leaders often cited policies that we were not made aware of prior to joining the YLC to limit our organizing capacity. Therefore, we advise that youth and adults who want to form horizontal structures for decision making within nonprofits co-write and -edit any policies that directly affect young people with youth. It is imperative that policies and procedures about youth must include discussion alongside us to ask whether these policies are relevant, supportive, or useful to us, particularly if we are expected to be “leaders” representing specific organizations.

Nonprofit organizations’ reliance on corporate and private funding can lead to co-optation and tokenism, where young activists are used for public relations purposes rather than empowered as genuine decision-makers (Covà, 2020). While youth organizations strive to cultivate leadership and influence, they often find their pathways restricted by the narrow interests of philanthropic funders, which can limit the scope of their activism (Christens et al., 2022; Terriquez et al., 2018). Traditional nonprofit organizations link youth “leadership”, “voice”, and “empowerment” with participation in neoliberal practices, such as obedience to larger structures and institutions of governance. Moreover, the NPIC can create a culture of compliance among youth activists, as youth navigate the expectations of adult partners and institutional funders; young people may be pressured to prioritize issues that align with funders’ or institutional interests over those that resonate with their lived experiences and aspirations because of their need for material support and resources (Conner et al., 2022). Funding landscapes can inadvertently reinforce existing power structures, as organizations may feel pressured to conform to donor expectations rather than pursue transformative change.

Our experiences fortify Kwon’s (2013) assessment that “the constitution of nonprofits [make them a] technology of neoliberal governance [which] severely limits the potential of oppositional political activism” (p. 5). Throughout our case studies, we articulated examples where we were expected by the Museum to participate in “youth voice” in particular ways that coincided with adult ideas of “sounding and looking like good citizens” (Tuck & Yang, 2014). Furthermore, in Study 2, we called attention to nonprofit partnerships with foundations and corporations that participate in the ongoing exploitation and extraction of workers and the planet. Having financial and contractual responsibilities with corporations that do not share sustainability and environmental justice values limits the authentic “youth climate activism” that youth can participate in within nonprofits.

5. Conclusions

This study underscores the critical importance of establishing effective practices for engaging youth in meaningful ways, particularly within the context of programs created with the purpose of supporting youth activism. As youth authors, we explicitly highlight that the most effective approach to working with youth is to work alongside us as equal partners, rather than treat us as subordinates. This shift in traditional power dynamics allows youth voices to be heard, fostering innovation and creativity. By treating youth as partners, trusted adults and organizational partners can empower young people to represent our generation and make decisions about the direction of our goals and initiatives. Mutual respect is paramount.

Furthermore, the role of adults in youth-led work should be redefined to focus on facilitation and mentorship rather than dictation. This approach allows youth to take ownership of their learning and activism, as noted by [Ramey \(2013\)](#), who emphasizes the positive outcomes associated with youth involvement in organizational decision-making processes. In organizations that are genuinely youth-centered, adults should not occupy central or managerial roles. Instead, their position should be one of advising and supporting. When adults adopt a supportive rather than a controlling role, it fosters trust and collaboration, enhancing the collective experience. As demonstrated throughout our case studies, when Museum adults had the mindset of having “power over youth” in youth spaces, they took control of our group and its creative direction, despite their acknowledgement that CARE was youth-led. However, if an adult understands they are there exclusively to offer support to the youth, rather than dictate what youth should work towards and how they should approach it, youth can still learn valuable lessons from intergenerational collaboration while maintaining their autonomy as individuals and a collective. For example, when working with Aleks, we learned a lot with regard to seeking out grants and building a coalition. These were skills that we did not have, but something we were interested in, and our advisor offered to help us and teach us. There was no loss of learning in the adult taking a step back from the wheel, but rather, a deeper trust and bond was built between the youth as well as the group as a whole. Knowing that what we worked on would not be judged or disregarded, but truly valued and considered, helped us to put our best foot forward as a team and strive to make something great together. Adults can encourage youth to ask critical questions about their processes and aspirations without prioritizing their own opinion (e.g., “how would this work?”, “what might our process look like to reach this goal?”, “what do you dream of accomplishing together?”). Such an approach not only creates space for youth solutions but also fosters a collaborative environment where young people feel comfortable exploring ideas.

On a structural level, youth governance should be institutionalized within nonprofit institutions that “serve” young people; young people should have voting and decision-making power at every level of leadership that adults do within organizations that capitalize off of our intellectual, emotional, and physical labor (e.g., not only within programs, but also on financial, strategic, and vision-based decisions). In smaller youth-led collectives with adults in support roles, like ours, we advise that adults be excluded from voting privileges to ensure that youth retain their autonomy and are not influenced by age-based power dynamics in their decision-making. The adultism we experienced throughout our case studies suggests that adultism is a system of oppression that upholds and serves market logics; therefore, youth governance and tangible decision-making power is necessary in intergenerational organizations to support the radical aims of youth and democratic, educational goals of public learning institutions like museums.

We recommend that individuals and institutions working alongside youth make intentional time and space to co-create and regularly revisit institutional policies with

youth. Regular check-ins for consent, especially concerning the use of youth's media and images, are vital for ensuring that youth feel safe and respected in their participation. We believe that institutions should allow youth the right to withdraw their consent from institutional agreements if violations of trust and harm have occurred between youth and the institution. This practice is supported by the work of [Zeldin et al. \(2014\)](#), who argue that successful youth–adult partnerships emphasize shared decision making, which significantly impacts youth belonging and community building. By actively involving youth in the co-creation of policies and practices, organizations can foster a culture of inclusivity and respect that enhances the overall effectiveness of their programs.

Philanthropic organizations, grants, and donors who have financial resources and expertise can create youth-only funding opportunities to enable young leaders to fund their projects autonomously while fostering accountability by working directly with youth. Rather than operating through a nonprofit “middleman”, funders can directly finance youth projects that align with their specific philanthropic interests and connect youth organizations to needed resources. This supportive role enables youth to take the lead, fostering our growth and development in useful skills like budgeting, finances, and grant writing, without undermining our autonomy or the need to spend additional resources on adult salaries and overhead.

The urgency and importance of this work is further underscored by the actions of the second Trump administration, which is cutting federal funding to K-12 and higher education, diversity and equity initiatives, and other fundamental resources for youth ([ACLU, 2025](#)). As young people who are navigating overwhelming confusion, uncertainty, and fear over our shifting body of human rights and civil liberties, we underscore the need for safer spaces ([Kelley, 2024](#)) that authentically respect and support the development of youth, our voices, and our futures. The history of social movements has shown that direct action, coalition building, and solidarity are fundamental components of challenging oppressive policies and regimes ([Kauffman, 2017](#)), and that student voices have always led collective struggle ([Clay, 2012](#)). We challenge adult readers and adult-led organizations to disrupt the practices we have outlined in our experiences and act courageously alongside us in the collective effort for liberation.

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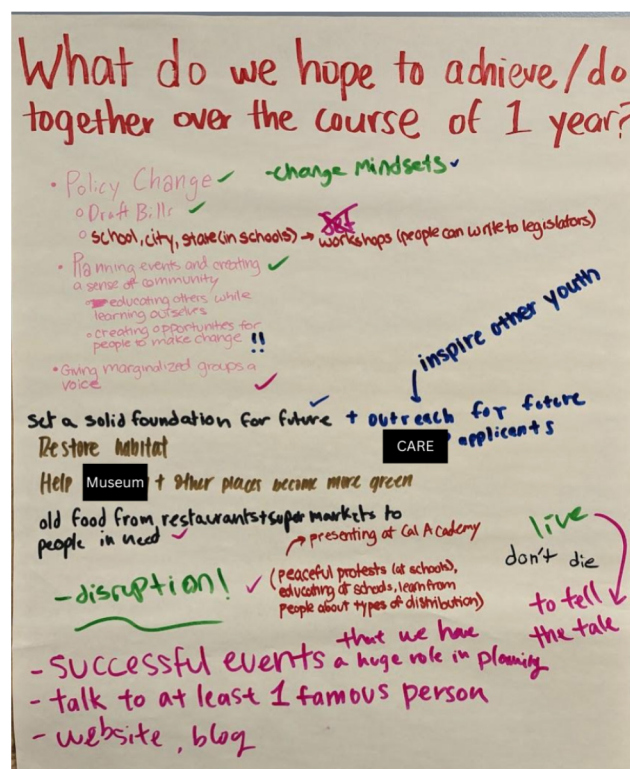
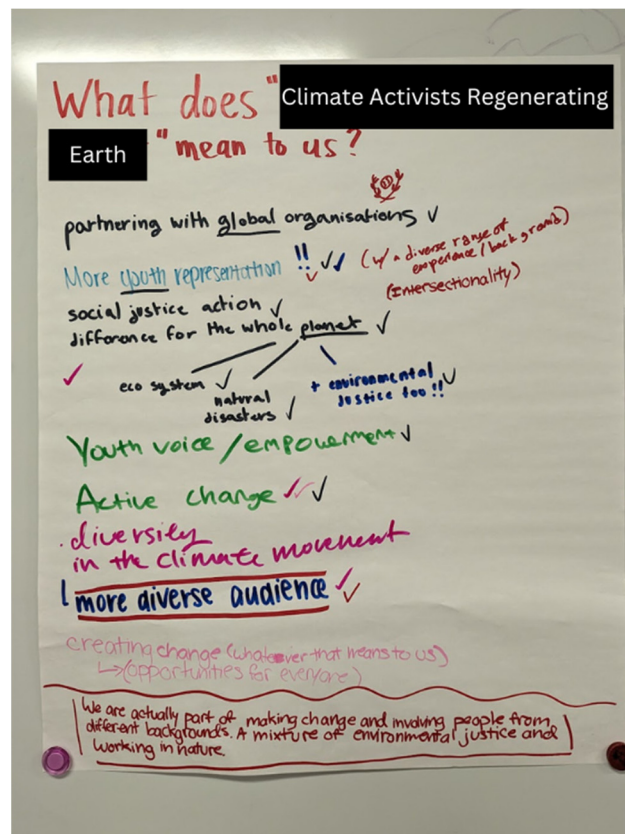
Institutional Review Board Statement: The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki, and approved by the Institutional Review Board of Teachers College, Columbia University (protocol code 20-362, no expiration date).

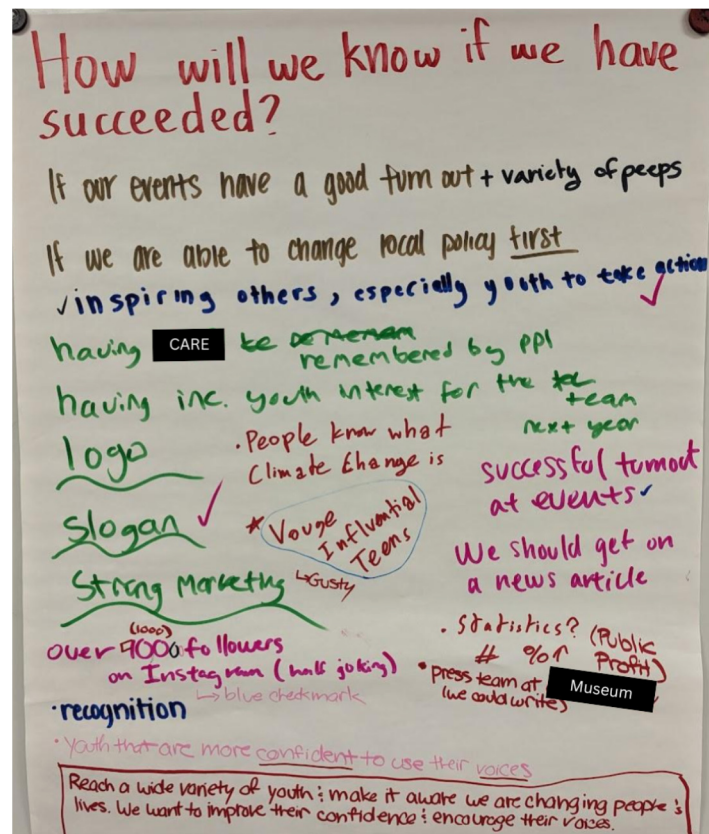
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Appendix A. CARE Program Orientation Ideas and Goals





Appendix B. YLC Banner Drop





Notes

- ¹ Drawing from the work of youth activism and social movement scholars, activism here is defined as “efforts to disrupt, impede, or (re)direct the social, political, or economic status quo, with the intention to create institutional change that produces greater equity for all” (see [Conner & Rosen, 2016](#); [Kirshner, 2015](#); [Ginwright, 2010](#); [Ginwright et al., 2006](#); [Tuck & Yang, 2014](#); [Lesko & Talburt, 2012](#)). It should be noted that this definition directs the ensuing conversation about activism towards acknowledging and centering counterhegemonic activism only, and not right-wing “activism”, as the latter maintains systems of oppression and hegemonic power.
- ² Institutional affiliation and program name have been replaced with pseudonyms to maintain confidentiality.
- ³ We wanted to maintain a degree of anonymity and privacy for youth’s developing identities while also providing demographic information pertinent to the study. Therefore, each of the six youth participants is represented with a number instead of their names or a pseudonym. Aleks is the only adult participant, and they have chosen to use their name.

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