



Who gets to measure and define youth and young adult wellbeing?



# CENTERING YOUTH IN WELL-BEING RESEARCH AND PROGRAMMING: A Guide for Adult Allies

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## Overview

The Youth and Young Adult Well-being Project is a collaborative well-being research project that centers young people, supported by adult allies, to create a knowledge base for advocacy, policy development, and best practices to help young people thrive.

This collaborative is anchored by Fresh Tracks at The Aspen Institute Forum for Community Solutions and supported by the Annie E. Casey Foundation. The project is led by three Youth and Young Adult Design Teams grouped by cultural affinity: Black Expressions of Well-being, American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN), and Latine Bienestar. Currently in its second phase towards a pilot tool, the project focuses on narratives from these cultural groups, highlighting community strengths and cultural connections to develop comprehensive measures of well-being.

This guide is designed for other adults and organizations doing youth-centered work, with a goal of sharing the processes, perspectives, and learnings of adult allies as a framework for centering youth and young adult leadership in Youth-led Participatory Action Research (YPAR) and collaborative projects.

## Authors

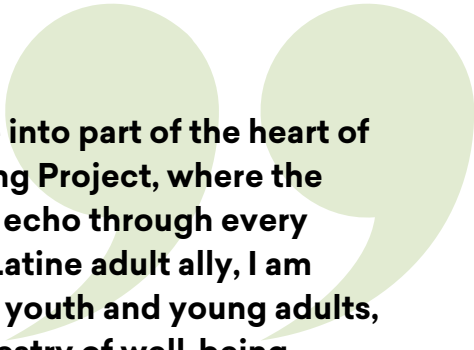
Adult allies served as Research Navigators, supporting the youth researchers in the development and implementation of this project. This tool is a compilation of their lessons and guidance to any organization that hopes to center youth leadership and uplift youth voice in their work. Authors include **Jennifer Ayala, Ph.D.**, Professor in the School of Education, St. Peter's University; **Jose Dobles**, Vice President of Programs, Citizens Committee for New York City; **Sefanit Habtom**, Postdoctoral Scholar, College of Education at the University of Washington; **Devin A. Heyward, Ph.D.**, Assistant Professor of Sociology and Urban Studies, St. Peter's University; **Takeya Meggett**, Founder and Executive Director, Earth Child, Inc.; **Marlené Mercado**, UC Davis; **Sierra Quintana**, MPH, CHES, Senior Professional Research Assistant for the Centers for American Indian and Alaska Native Health; **Jerreed D. Ivanich, Ph.D.**, Assistant Professor in the Colorado School of Public Health, University of Colorado; **James King Jr.**, Professor, Seattle Central University ; **CJ Goulding**, Fresh Tracks Strategic Advisor.

## Background

Historically, research on youth and young adult well-being in communities of color has often been conducted by researchers from outside those communities, using Western frameworks of wellness, and focusing on deficits and disparities rather than cultural strengths and community perspectives. While publications on these often-overlooked populations have increased, they have often led to interventions that do not prioritize cultural honor, celebration, or revitalization within AI/AN, Black, and Latine communities. Instead, the focus has been on achieving outcomes aligned with Western expectations, overlooking the cultural context and unique practices that influence wellness in these groups.

Youth-directed research, including Youth-led Participatory Action Research (YPAR) has shown promising results in many marginalized communities, including American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN), Black, and Latine populations. By including youth leadership in structure and research design, rejecting racist frameworks, and using a healing-centered approach, research projects and related organizations can create more accurate measures of well-being and more effective solutions to help young people thrive.

The issues and interventions that arise as a part of this exploration into well-being are complex, and can differ internally within a community and from one community and affinity group to another. However, there is an inherent connection between these communities, and therefore an opportunity to build a larger, interwoven knowledge base for collective benefit.



**“What you are about to read is a glimpse into part of the heart of the Youth and Young Adult Well-being Project, where the rhythms of our diverse communities echo through every narrative. As a straight, Indigenous, Latine adult ally, I am constantly learning from the experts, our youth and young adults, about what it means to weave a tapestry of well-being, celebrating the unique strengths and cultural ties that define us.”**

**— Juan Martinez, Senior Program Manager, the Aspen Institute**

## **Project Structure and Adult Roles**

Each **Youth and Young Adult Design Team** in this ongoing project is composed of youth researchers aged 18-26 whose knowledge and lived experience frames their work. Each team works closely with **Research Navigators**, who support bringing their approaches to life; and **Peer Research Mentors**, who help create a larger emphasis on youth voice, along with opening new leadership opportunities for youth and young adult participants. **The Planning Team**, composed of adult partners from Fresh Tracks and Hello Insight offers planning, logistics and support to the overall Wellbeing Project. A **Core Team** of representatives from each Design Team act as paid consultants to the Planning Team, informing decision-making and acting as a bridge between the youth and young adult researchers and the Planning Team. In addition, an **Advisory Board** was developed to create partnership with and guidance from stakeholders in the community. **Adult allies took part as Research Navigators, and members of the Planning Team and Advisory Board.**

## **Our Approach as Adult Allies**

Upholding a sense of community and belonging for our youth researchers is key to the success of this project. Youth and young adult researchers lead the development and design as a way to increase belonging and ownership of the project and its outcomes. As adult allies, we serve primarily as guides, informing the vision of the project, offering feedback on ideas and content, providing resources, and liaising with key stakeholders. We believe that this process should be youth-led, participatory, and community engaged. We take inspiration from healing-centered approaches (like Shawn Ginwright's healing-centered engagement) rather than those that center trauma.

## **Our Process**

Building a research agenda that centers youth/young adult leadership and understandings of well-being started with creating a community of inquiry. The group intentionally established an intergenerational collective of researchers who share identities with the focus affinity groups and set collective values for the formed groups. Specific attention has been paid not only to the outcomes of the research produced, but to the relational processes and commitments to community well-being of its members.



**Below, we identify the values that guided our work, along with the strategies and practices used to implement these values and modifications made based on feedback from youth.**

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### **Youth and Young Adult Ownership and Power-Sharing:**

- Adult allies encouraged youth and young adults to take ownership of the project's success and outcomes.
  - *Example: youth and young adults were paid for their time as experts and knowledge producers.*
- Adult allies ensured that youth and youth adults held meaningful leadership roles, such as project coordinators, event planners, or spokespersons, to engage them directly in decision-making.
  - *Example: Initially, research navigators met for updates with the core group separate from the youth and young adult researchers. After the youth teams expressed a desire for a greater voice in decision-making and direction of the project, a young adult from each of the affinity groups became part of the core team of decision makers, co-developing and co-facilitating the large group sessions.*

## Centering Well-being:

- Teams explicitly acknowledged and addressed the themes youth and young adults identified in their work (i.e. the impacts of capitalism on well-being, financial instability, and the concomitant expectation that they must always be productive)
- Teams began each session with a check-in, where each member was invited to respond to a particular prompt or the sharing of an object that is personally meaningful, incorporating personal life, culture, and community into project meetings.
- Teams were mindful of centering well-being within their own cohorts by aligning to the lessons gleaned from their research.
  - *Example: Allowing time for rest and being comfortable with timeline lulls.*

## Respect and Empowerment:

- Embrace the principle that youth have unique perspectives and valuable contributions. Value their ideas, opinions, and experiences.
- Honor the differences in language/tone, slang, AAVE, and/or references to popular culture that are made by young researchers as a legitimate form of discussion and analysis.
  - *Example: Dialects or slang terms were kept in the research, especially when using direct quotes or when trying to synthesize learnings.*

## Consistency and Dependability:

- Teams set up regular meetings where youth and adults discussed project goals, challenges, and progress.

## Collaboration and Adaptability:

- Adult allies fostered a sense of partnership where adults and youth work together as equals, sharing decision-making and responsibilities.
  - *Example: Meetings within the Latine cohort were to be attended by at least one young researcher. Any decisions made had to include a youth perspective; otherwise, meetings were not held.*
- Youth and young adults supported each other in project tasks.
- Y/YA researchers shared responsibility and filled in for one another when outside lives added pressure or decreased project capacity.
- Teams established regular feedback mechanisms to ensure continuous improvement, addressing concerns promptly.
- Adult allies listened actively to youth concerns, suggestions, and feedback, demonstrating that adult allies valued their opinions by taking their input seriously.
- Adult allies communicated openly about decisions, explaining the rationale behind them; they addressed any misunderstandings or misconceptions promptly.
- Be willing to make changes based on feedback received from youth, demonstrating that their voices are genuinely shaping the project. Be prepared to make changes to structures, timelines, processes, and deliverables.
  - *Example: The project increased stipends for leaders midway based on feedback.*

## Centering Education, Learning, and Capacity-Building:

- Y/YA Researchers acknowledged the project as a learning experience for both youth/young adults and adult allies.
- Y/YA Researchers encouraged continuous growth and improvement.
  - *Example: Literature was distributed amongst the groups during the in-person convening, like Braiding Sweetgrass and Rest is Resistance.*
- Adult allies provided training and mentorship to help youth build the skills they needed to lead effectively within the project.
  - *Example: Adult allies would give the young researchers an opportunity to speak first (or at all), whether to share back findings within the larger group or when speaking to project partners, so as to not assume ownership of the cohort or project.*
- Teams established common understandings and vocabularies of the research, goals, and potential actions and audiences for the work through group sessions.
  - *Example: Initial training sessions focused on the theory and practice of decolonizing, critical participatory action research approaches.*

**By implementing these strategies, you can create a project environment that genuinely values youth leadership, empowers young individuals, and helps them thrive while making meaningful contributions. Remember, the goal is to create a collaborative partnership where adults and youth work together for shared success.**

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