

Youth and Undergraduate Transformation to Harness Community Change (YOUTH-C2)

YOUTH-C2 is a community-engaged research partnership between the University of California, Santa Cruz and United Way of Santa Cruz County that will implement and measure the extent to which community-engaged research reduces inequalities in educational, empowerment, and leadership outcomes for middle and high school youth as well as undergraduate students. The project and partnership are embedded in Santa Cruz County, California, home to 277,000 residents, with 30% between the ages of 5 and 24, about 20% foreign born, 34% Latinx, and 30% poor or near-poor. This project focuses on two communities that have large concentrations of low-income, Latinx, and immigrant Spanish-speaking families.

United Way's strategic focus on youth empowerment fuels the research agenda. Its overall mission is to improve the lives of local youth and families by uniting the community to address the basic needs of education, health, and financial stability. Its newest initiative, the Youth Action Network, centers youth voice, facilitates community-wide institutional learning and collaboration, and positions youth as the drivers of community change.

We have developed YOUTH-C2 as a strengths-based and culturally inclusive approach to promote youth's and undergraduates' views of themselves as knowledge producers and changemakers through actionable research. Our theory of action posits that individual and structural inequalities impede young people's success, resulting in disparities in college-going rates for low-income Latinx youth, and in graduate school enrollment rates for first-gen Latinx undergraduates. The partnership uses youth participatory action research (yPAR) and community-initiated student-engaged research (CISER)—a model developed at UCSC—to engage youth and undergraduates together to conduct community-engaged and actionable research.

We will implement four different yPAR-CISER projects with the research and community fellows, and assess the effects of these on individual (youth, undergraduates) and structural outcomes. We focus on four areas of research: 1) questions posed about local structural conditions to reduce youth inequalities through the yPAR-CISER research projects; 2) the ways that the yPAR-CISER approach affects individual outcomes for local youth; 3) the ways this approach affects individual outcomes for UCSC undergraduates; and 4) documenting the structural effects of the partnership on local and university outcomes, including new guidance, actions, or policies resulting from the work. We will use mixed methods to address these research questions. Local youth and community organizations will determine which questions to tackle through yPAR-CISER approaches, and these will rely on data collections such as surveys, interviews, and social media analyses.

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UCSC Contact: Rebecca London, Associate Professor of Sociology, rlondon@ucsc.edu
United Way Contact: Keisha Browder, CEO, kbrowder@unitedwaysc.org