

Perceived Community Support in Youth-Led Organizations: An Exploratory Study in Houston, Texas

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ABSTRACT

Youth-led and student-led organizations play an important role in civic engagement, yet empirical evidence on how young people perceive community support for these groups remains limited. To discover more about this underinvestigated topic, an exploratory study was conducted with survey data from 35 respondents ($n = 35$), who were asked for their opinions about perceived community support, personal involvement, and organization-specific support for a respondent-identified impactful youth organization. Results show a strong positive association between perceived general community support for student organizations and perceived support for the impactful organization ($\rho = 0.633$, $p < 0.001$), suggesting consistency across general and organization-specific support perceptions. However, self-reported involvement is moderately and negatively associated with perceived support for the impactful organization ($\rho = -0.360$, $p = 0.034$), indicating a possible “engagement paradox” in which more involved youth perceive less support. These findings provide a basis for determining how communities can best support youth groups, offering evidence to inform future research and efforts to strengthen youth-led initiatives’ impact.

INTRODUCTION

Prior research shows that community participation offers youth a wide range of benefits by fostering civic awareness and leadership while developing essential skills like public speaking and collective responsibility (London, 2007). Organization participation also generates community benefits by encouraging civic education while instilling responsibility, competence, and commitment into youth (Fan et al., 2012). In turn, greater civic engagement can be developed as youth learn the value of their actions in a community context. Thus, youth-led (Fig. 1) organizations are essential for strengthening communities and youth character. Defined as organizations in which youth hold all major leadership roles (Fig. 1), youth-led organizations can serve many functions in a community. This study focuses specifically on service- and career-oriented organizations, including both school-based clubs and other non-academic organizations. Despite the importance of youth-led initiatives, community recognition of these organizations is often assumed as a guarantee rather than as a variable commitment. Existing

May 2026

Vol 7. No 1.

literature focuses on the outcomes of youth-led programs, case studies of specific organizations, and non-student perspectives, leading to limited existing research surrounding how the youth who lead these organizations perceive the support of their community. Specifically, little research emphasizes the distinction between support in principle and in practice. This gap is especially important to study given that it encompasses various specific issues in community support, such as the decoupling of intangible support from the supply of consistent material resources.

Community support is essential in strengthening youth perspectives. Intangible support, or recognition and non-material aid, can improve the legitimacy and engagement of an organization. On the other hand, tangible support can build an organization's legacy and impact. When young leaders feel that their communities are willing to support them, they are less likely to hesitate in building their organizations despite existing barriers. These conditions, coupled together, can improve member commitment and outcomes by attaching real implications behind the actions of young leaders. Ensuring that youth perceive their community as supportive will encourage them to build initiatives that contribute to the betterment of their character and their community. It is of paramount importance, for leaders and communities alike, to comprehend how communities contribute to youth organizations and how youth perceive support, both tangible and intangible.

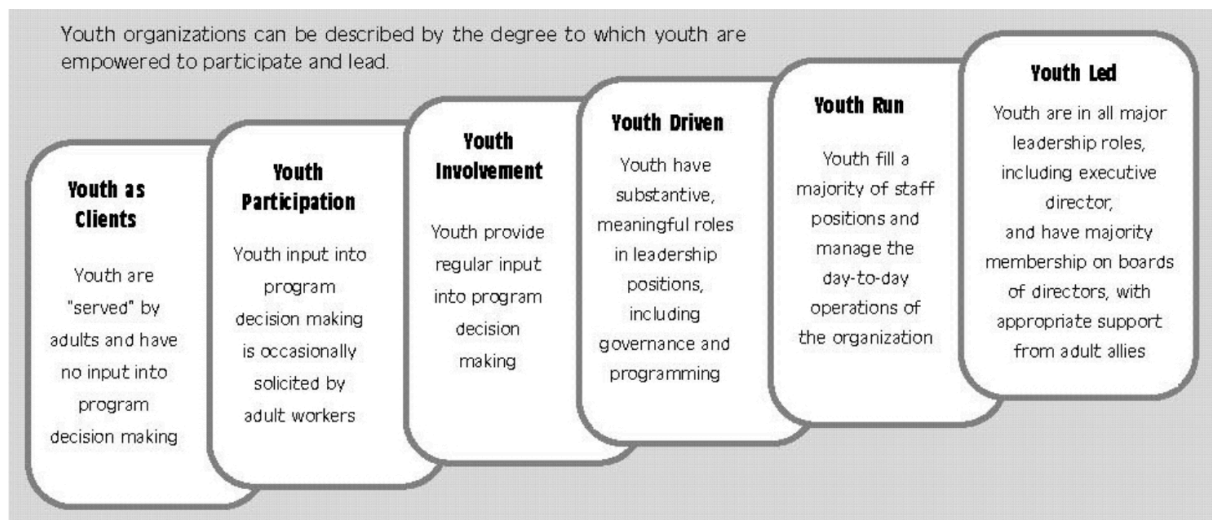


Figure 1. A Spectrum of Youth Leadership. Youth-led organizations are defined as groups where all leadership roles are held by youth members.

Considering the value of youth perspectives in leadership, the study addresses their perceptions of support “infrastructure” in an exploratory manner by using Likert scale and open-ended survey responses to identify patterns in youth participation and community support. The research aims to answer four key questions related to youth leadership and community support. First, it examines the general level of support that youth-led organizations receive. Next, it explores the specific ways communities provide support to these organizations. The study also investigates whether the degree of an individual's involvement in a youth-led organization influences their perception of support. Finally, it analyzes

whether competition among organizations affects the level of support they receive. The rest of this paper starts with an overview of existing literature. Then, the design and data collection process of the study is described. This is followed by a presentation of the findings. The article closes with a discussion and conclusion.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The employment of youth leadership to any extent not only empowers the community as a whole, but also the young people who are an integral part of those initiatives. And not only does leadership teach soft skills, but also directly equips young leaders for future success. In a series of interviews with administrators of schools with community partnerships, it was found that “community involvement was perceived as a way to support student success, enhance school quality, and support community development” (Sanders & Lewis, 2005, p. 8). Youth leadership proves to mutually benefit communities who are involved by providing them with the next generation of skilled, competent workers while also aiding young people develop their professional career from a young age. From a civic perspective, youth-led organizations are essential for “support[ing] their generation’s development and activism” (Youth Speak Out Coalition & Zimmerman, 2007, p. 300). Given that the direction and purpose of an organization are entirely defined by the immediate needs of the young members of a community, these organizations can serve as a multigenerational bridge between young members of a community and adults.

Community support emerges as infrastructure for the development of youth-led organizations. The Youth Speak Out Coalition and Kristen Zimmerman present the Lummi CEDAR Project as an example of this occurrence, as it is structured as a “youth-led, elder-informed organization,” where young members of the Lummi people of Washington State are tasked with preserving the Lummi culture that was lost as a result of Indian boarding schools (2007, pp. 302-304). Thus, the local elder Lummi community acts as a supplier of intangible support for the CEDAR project, where they enhance credibility, recognition, and the legitimacy of the organization. This support can also be tangible, including access to opportunities for internships, post-secondary education, and mentoring that would support students’ progression into their careers (Sanders & Lewis, 2005, p. 5). When available, both types of support can help youth organizations overcome barriers related to limited institutional capacity and bureaucratic constraints (London, 2007). In regards to institutional barriers, schools may provide inconsistent support by promoting a culture of “taking control, creating compliant followers,” which discourages independence among youth, counteracting the hands-on approach of youth-led organizations (Bowman, 2014, p. 63). This suggests that community support not only provides material assistance but also legitimizes the role of youth leadership.

While communities may express broad approval for youth-led initiatives, existing literature suggests that this general support does not directly translate into consistent aid. Research on extracurricular activity involvement and leadership has found that access to opportunities and resources varies by race, institutional priorities, and the perceived legitimacy of particular activities from the perspective of the student (Covay & Carbonaro, 2010; Peguero, 2011). As a result, youth may be encouraged to participate

May 2026

Vol 7. No 1.

in student-led initiatives in principle but may encounter barriers when seeking long-term involvement that does not align with institutionalized expectations. A clear example of this is race-based extracurricular involvement, where Asian American students describe that they are being pushed into particular academic domains, while Latino students find that school administrators steer them into participation in sports while limiting their access to other resources (Peguero, 2011, pp. 25-26). Additionally, community support in practice can depend heavily on organization-specific factors, such as cultural affiliation, which are not captured by general perceived support. Therefore, in addition to examining how general support is perceived, its translation to targeted support for specific impactful organizations should also be examined due to the disconnect between abstract ideas of support and real involvement.

The degree to which students are involved in leadership may also influence how they perceive community support. More engaged students may have greater awareness of institutional barriers, racialized expectations, and resource limitations, which can create more grounded evaluations of support (Peguero, 2011). Additionally, student engagement is determined by the “atmosphere” they are surrounded by, suggesting that engagement not only arises from intrinsic motivation, but also external encouragement (Johnson et al., 2001, p. 325). Therefore, highly involved youth may have higher expectations for recognition and support, especially when they have invested significant effort into their initiatives. The natural disconnect that exists between community and student investment raises the possibility of an “engagement paradox,” in which increased youth involvement also leads to greater perceived shortcomings in the role of community in promoting youth-led initiatives. Existing literature fails to consider this examination, and does not examine how involvement correlates to perceived support.

In an analysis of existing literature surrounding the role of communities in student-led organizations, it becomes clear that there is a lack of research conducted on how youth involved in student-led organizations perceive community support and how those perceptions vary by engagement levels. This exploratory survey-based study seeks to provide correlational evidence of the disconnect of perceived community support by distinguishing between general approval and specific support for particular organizations. By focusing on an area of youth development and education from a youth perspective, this study aims to identify patterns in community support infrastructure availability and offer insight into how that support is practiced.

DATA AND METHODOLOGY

This exploratory study draws on survey responses collected to understand how youth and community members perceive student-led and youth-led organizations, with a particular focus on community support. The dataset includes 35 completed responses (N = 35), who are high school students aged 13 - 18 in Houston, Texas, and who are actively involved in at least one extracurricular or out-of-school organization. Participants who were selected meet the following criteria:

- 1) must be between the ages of 13 - 18;
- 2) must be involved in at least one extracurricular (band, orchestra, sports, clubs, non-profits);
and
- 3) must live in Katy, Texas

May 2026

Vol 7. No 1.

The aforementioned sample criteria were selected as young community members are more likely to have a holistic understanding of their community's selection of youth-led organizations than their adult counterparts. Additionally, participants who already have experience in an organization will make more informed judgments about the current impact of youth in their community and how community support helps generate that impact.

Respondents provided contextual information such as zip code and self-identified racial/ethnic composition (both of the respondent and their community), and they answered several closed-ended questions using a 1–5 Likert scale as well as open-ended prompts describing challenges, opportunities, and notable experiences. The present analysis focuses on the quantitative measures because they allow systematic comparison across respondents while still situating the findings within broader qualitative reflections captured in open responses.

Five key Likert-scale variables were included in the quantitative analysis. First, respondents rated the perceived usefulness/impact of student-led organizations in generating community impact. Second, they rated the perceived density of student-led organizations in their school or community. Third, they rated the general level of community support for student organizations. Fourth, respondents rated their self-reported involvement in student-led organizations. Finally, respondents were asked to name the most successful or impactful student-led organization they knew of and then rate how supportive their community is of that specific organization, creating an organization-specific support measure that can be compared to the general support measure. By examining relationships between perceived community support for a successful organization, it is possible to evaluate whether there is a correlation between organizational success and support and to determine how youth see community support in the context of an already-impactful organization. Together, these measures enable examination of how community support is perceived at both broad and concrete levels, and how such perceptions relate to personal involvement and organizational context.

Because Likert-scale responses are ordinal and may not satisfy assumptions of normality or equal intervals, this study uses Spearman's rank correlation coefficient to examine associations among key variables. Spearman correlation assesses whether respondents who rank higher on one variable also tend to rank higher (or lower) on another variable, making it well-suited for 1–5 rating scale data. Formally, let X_i and Y_i denote two Likert-scale responses for respondent i ($i=1, \dots, n$), and let $R(X_i)$ and $R(Y_i)$ represent their corresponding ranks (with tied values assigned average ranks). Spearman's rank correlation, ρ_s , is defined as the Pearson correlation between the ranked variables:

$$\rho_s = \frac{\sum_{i=1}^n \left(R(X_i) - \overline{R(X)} \right) \left(R(Y_i) - \overline{R(Y)} \right)}{\sqrt{\sum_{i=1}^n \left(R(X_i) - \overline{R(X)} \right)^2} \sqrt{\sum_{i=1}^n \left(R(Y_i) - \overline{R(Y)} \right)^2}}.$$

In the absence of tied ranks, this statistic is equivalently expressed as

$$\rho_s = 1 - \frac{6 \sum_{i=1}^n d_i^2}{n(n^2 - 1)},$$

where $d_i = R(X_i) - R(Y_i)$ denotes the difference between paired ranks for respondent i , and n is the sample size. In addition to correlational analysis, descriptive statistics (means and distribution patterns) were used to summarize overall perceptions of usefulness, support, involvement, and organizational density. Statistical significance was assessed using conventional thresholds ($p < 0.05$), while interpreting results cautiously given the exploratory design and modest sample size.

The data collection process was conducted through a confidential Google Survey, which was sent to participants via iMessage. To ensure that ethical considerations were observed during the data collection process, each participant in the survey completed an informed consent form. Minors also submitted an informed assent form signed by a parent or guardian. The consent forms informed participants that participation is voluntary and that they are free to opt out of the survey at any time. The participants were also informed of the purpose of the research and the use of their data. All responses will remain anonymous and the greatest effort will be made to ensure that no identifiable characteristics of participants are included in the research.

RESULTS

Descriptive results indicate that respondents generally viewed student-led organizations as beneficial to community life and perceived community support as relatively high. The perceived usefulness/impact of student-led organizations was rated positively overall ($\mu = 3.77$ on a 1–5 scale), suggesting that most respondents believed these organizations generate meaningful impact. Perceived general community support for student organizations was also relatively high ($\mu = 3.51$), indicating an overall belief that communities are supportive of youth-driven initiatives.

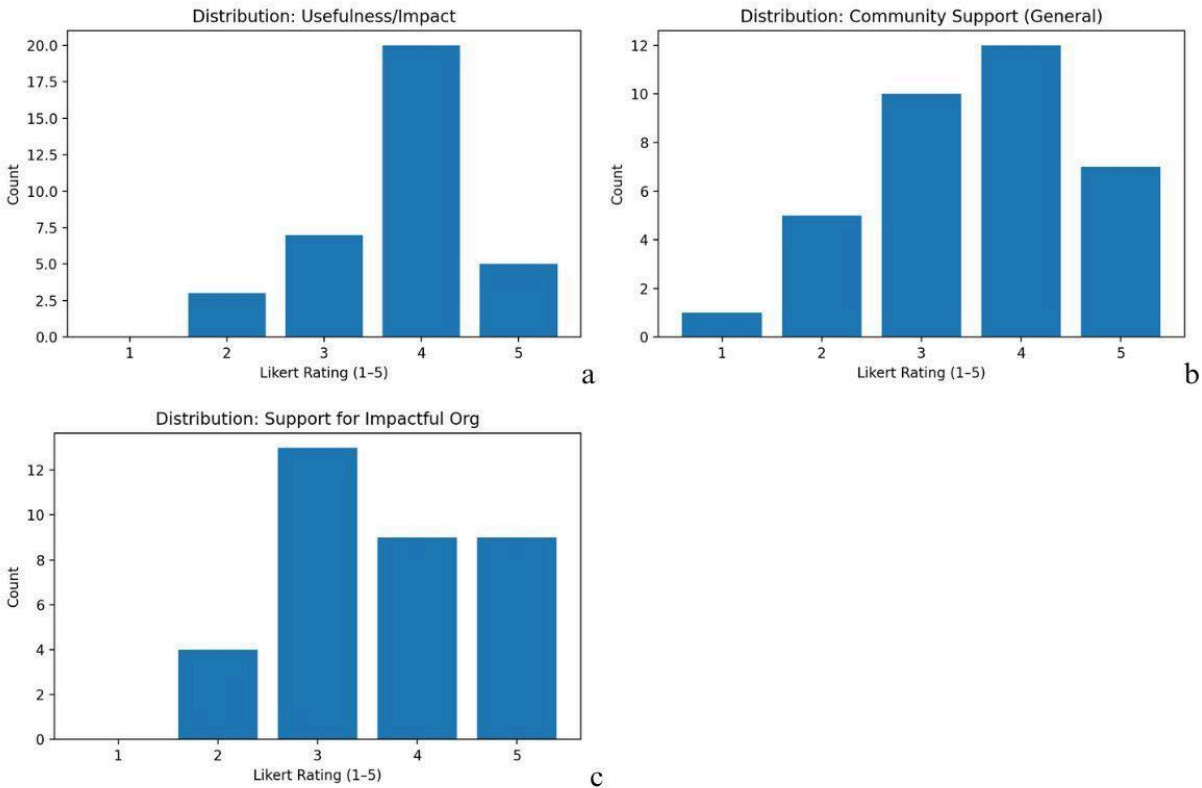


Figure 2. Likert Scale Survey Response. a) Usefulness of student-led organizations; note limited “5” responses. b) Community support for student-led organizations; note high standard deviation. c) Community support for respondent-identified impactful organization.

Self-reported involvement showed variation across respondents ($\mu = 3.14$, $\sigma = 0.97$), reflecting differences in personal engagement. When asked to identify the most successful or impactful student-led organization they knew of and then evaluate community support for that organization, respondents reported moderately high levels of organization-specific support ($\mu = 3.66$, $\sigma = 1$), though ratings were not uniformly high, suggesting that support for particular organizations may be experienced unevenly even when general support is perceived as strong.

To summarize the overall pattern of associations among the Likert-scale measures, Figure 3 presents the Spearman rank correlation matrix (ρ) among key ordinal variables ($N = 35$). Cell colors encode the strength and direction of monotonic associations between variables; warmer colors indicate positive correlations and cooler colors indicate negative correlations.

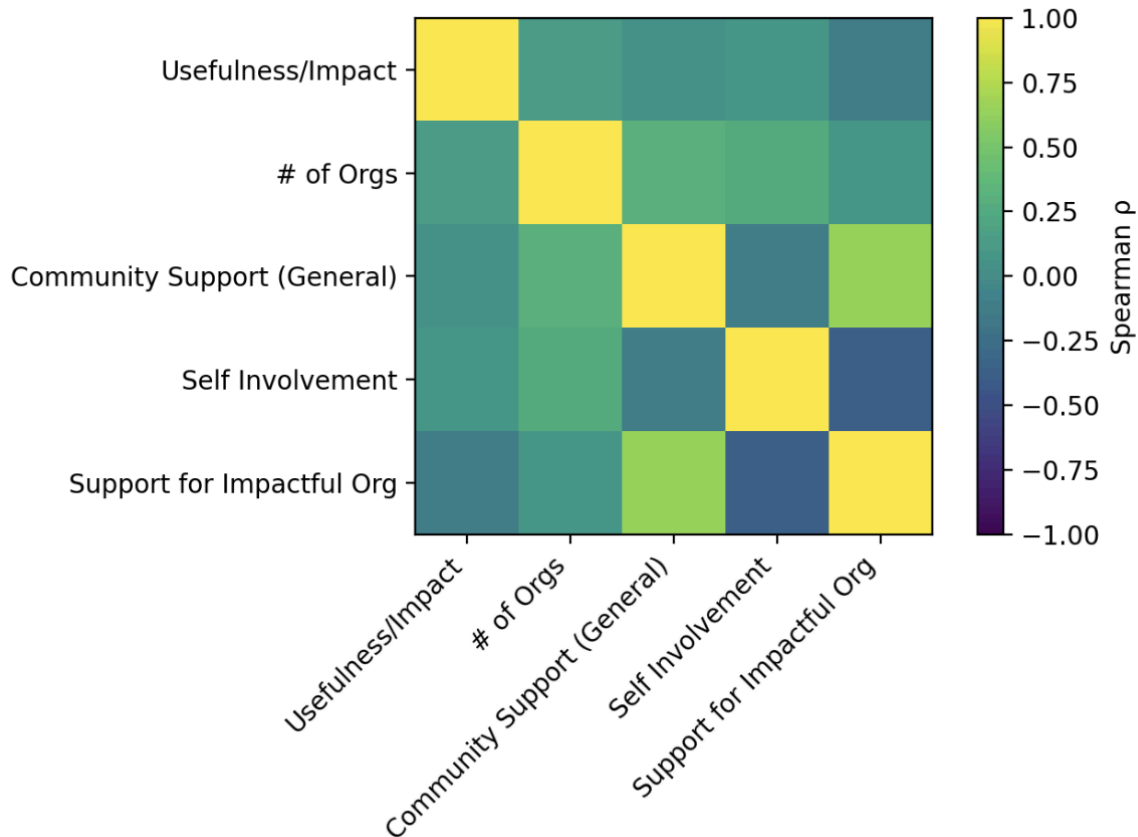


Figure 3. Spearman rank correlation matrix (ρ) among key ordinal (Likert-scale) variables ($N = 35$). Cell colors encode the strength and direction of monotonic associations between variables; warmer colors indicate positive correlations and cooler colors indicate negative correlations.

Correlational analysis revealed that perceptions of community support are strongly aligned across general and organization-specific levels. Specifically, perceived general community support for student organizations was strongly and positively associated with perceived support for the respondent-identified impactful organization (Spearman $\rho = 0.633$, $p = 0.000044$). This result indicates that respondents who perceive their community as supportive overall also tend to perceive the community as supportive of specific impactful organizations, suggesting that support functions as a coherent community climate rather than being entirely case-specific. At the same time, self-reported involvement in student-led organizations showed a moderate negative association with perceived support for the impactful organization (Spearman $\rho = -0.360$, $p = 0.0336$). This pattern suggests a potential “engagement paradox,” in which individuals who are more involved in youth-led activities tend to perceive lower levels of community support for organizations with which they have committed a significant amount of time and effort.

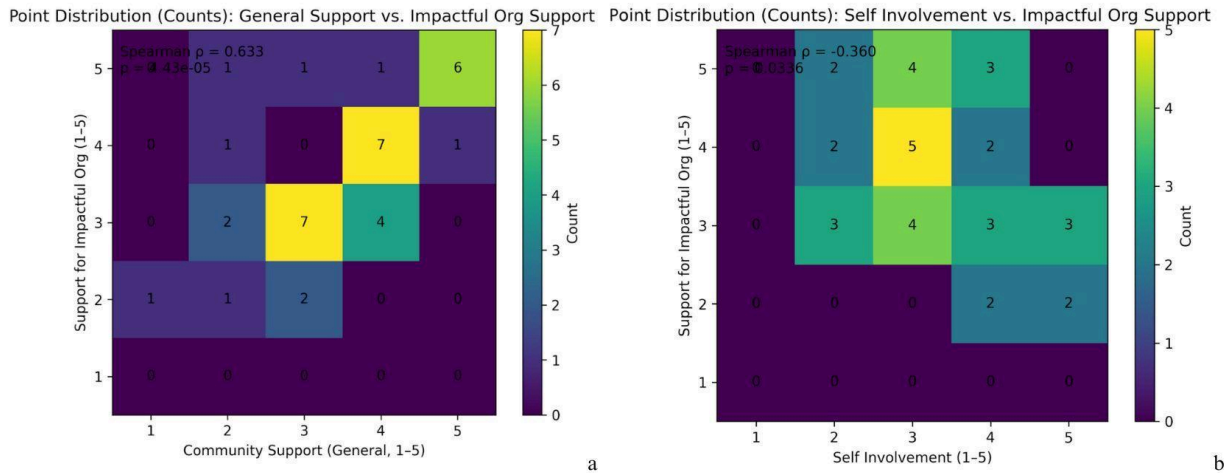


Figure 4. Joint distributions (count heatmaps) for two key relationships (N = 35). a) General community support vs. support for the respondent-identified impactful organization. b) Self-reported involvement vs. support for the impactful organization. Cell values show counts for each (x,y) pair; Spearman’s ρ and p-values are reported in each panel.

Finally, an exploratory relationship was observed between perceived density of student organizations and perceived general community support (Spearman $\rho = 0.310$, $p = 0.070$). Although not statistically significant, this trend suggests that communities perceived as having more student-led organizations may also be perceived as more supportive, a possibility that warrants further testing with larger samples.

When asked about the specific ways that their community supported student-led organizations, many participants referred to tangible support, such as monetary partnerships, offering meeting spaces, and providing opportunities for making an impact. As far as identifying what types of organizations were perceived as most impactful, participants cited school-based volunteer clubs and nonprofit organizations. The following representative excerpts present students’ responses as to how impactful organizations receive support and use that support to help their community:

P5: (...) *the most successful project happened with another organizations [sic] (Connect & Comfort) where we spent 5 hours at a boba shop making cards for veterans, which required coordination with another local community nonprofit.*

P14: (...) *we brought together a lot of members from around the city to talk about the importance of volunteering, and it was great that we were able to leverage a lot of other organizations in our community (liked [sic] Red Cross, FEMA, etc).*

P36: *They help support a unique cause (sending origami made by volunteers globally) and have started many chapters globally. I think they were able to grow through their social media account.*

There is evidence that these specific cases of single-organization-based community support are affected by students' general sentiment of the value of community to youth initiatives.



Figure 5. Student engagement with various organizations. a) Rotary District D5890 and Disaster Aid USA; 200 youth participants educated about clean water access. b) Partnership between Connect & Comfort and the Interact Club; 100 cards written for hospice patients. c) Youth leaders from 8 schools. d) Obra D. Tompkins High School Interact Club and Gong Cha; \$500 raised, 50 boxes of school supplies donated.

DISCUSSION

This exploratory study highlights two key quantitative patterns in perceived community support for youth-led organizations: a strong alignment between general community support and support for a specific impactful organization, and a negative association between self-reported involvement and perceived support for impactful organization, which can be labeled as an “engagement paradox.” The

May 2026

Vol 7, No 1.

often understood in a material context, while words like *leadership*, *network*, and *opportunity* point to the professional and developmental aspects of community support. This pattern in language aligns closely with the quantitative finding that general and organization-specific support perceptions are correlated, demonstrating a holistic understanding of what support looks like in principle and in practice.

At the same time, the engagement paradox represents a central tension in the findings. Respondents who reported higher levels of involvement tended to perceive lower levels of community support for impactful organizations. Open-ended responses suggest several explanations. First, highly involved youth may be more aware of the behind-the-scenes labor required to sustain organizations, including securing partnerships, organizing events, and maintaining long-term initiatives. One respondent explained, “Founder of the Interact Club, which has organized many business partnerships/community events,” highlighting the personal effort required to mobilize external support. Second, involvement may heighten expectations, leading youth to evaluate support more critically. For instance, while visibility may be high—as one respondent noted, “I am an FBLA (Future Business Leaders of America) officer, and one video we posted on Instagram got 1M+ views, which was great for engagement”—visibility does not necessarily translate into sustained institutional or material backing. Third, ongoing volunteer efforts such as “clean ups and book donations” may demand consistent resources and coordination, making gaps in support more notable to those most engaged in the work.

Race / Ethnicity	Asian	Hispanic/Latino	White	Multiracial	Black	Total
Count	20	7	6	1	1	35

Figure 7. Racial Composition of Survey Participants

The racial composition of survey participants are presented in Figure 7. Asian perspectives are most represented, with Hispanic and White perspectives following. Although unequal representation is not ideal, it does not significantly affect the research results. Extracurricular involvement is known to be encouraged on a racial-basis by school officials, with Asians most likely to be actively involved in them (Peguero, 2011). Because Asians are generally more involved in leadership roles, it is acceptable that they are greatly represented in this study.

These findings point to broader organizational realities faced by youth-led initiatives, particularly challenges related to sustainability, long-term engagement, and burnout. The qualitative responses suggest that impactful youth organizations often rely on repeated activities, travel, and extended commitments that require more than symbolic encouragement. For example, one respondent noted that “Scioly (Science Olympiad) provides a lot of students with the opportunity to travel, which helps cover some of the costs so that these trips are more accessible to students,” while another explained that “FBLA travels a lot for business competitions, allowing members who are super involved in FBLA and are willing to attend these events too.” Similar examples illustrate that meaningful community support may involve financial assistance, logistical coordination, and institutional partnerships, which are not fully captured by general perceptions of support.

CONCLUSION

This study reaffirms that youth-led organizations are widely perceived as useful contributors to community life and that communities are generally viewed as supportive of youth-led initiatives. Empirically, the findings show a strong alignment between perceived general community support and perceived support for a specific impactful organization, suggesting that support is experienced as a coherent community-level climate rather than as isolated evaluations of individual groups. At the same time, the study identifies a key tension: higher self-reported involvement is associated with lower perceived support for impactful organizations, revealing an engagement paradox within youth-led organizing. This pattern matters because it suggests that the youth most deeply engaged in organizing, coordinating, and sustaining these initiatives may experience support differently, pointing to a potential gap between broad community approval and lived, practical support.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The sample size is modest ($n = 35$), and the use of convenience sampling limits the generalizability of the findings. All measures rely on self-reported perceptions, and the correlational design does not allow for causal inference. Nevertheless, as an exploratory study, this work provides valuable initial evidence and identifies patterns that warrant further investigation. Future research should build on these findings by refining how community support is conceptualized and measured, disaggregating it into dimensions such as funding, mentorship, access to space, partnerships, and public recognition. Interview-based approaches could further clarify why highly involved youth perceive support differently and how expectations shape evaluations of community backing. Additionally, closer attention to differences across organizational types—such as service-oriented, competitive academic, and arts-based groups—may help explain variation in support needs and sustainability. Together, these directions can deepen understanding of how community support operates in practice and how it can more effectively strengthen and sustain youth-led organizations.

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