

# Community-Centric Youth Philanthropy

## A Case Study of Greater Worcester Community Foundation’s Youth for Community Improvement Program

By Sheryl Seller

“[There are] students who have a lot of lived experience in terms of the areas they want to grant. That they continue to show up no matter what’s happening in their life, that they have found the strength to be open and honest in the group, and how the group has then supported them, it is impressive for 16 and 17-year olds to be doing.”

— Sarah Shugrue, Program Director, Youth for Community Improvement

Photo credit: Greater Worcester Community Foundation



The goal is not to silence the adult, but to make grantmaking less hierarchical. This practice is driven by the core belief that everyone, and in particular young people, possess wisdom, strengths and informative experiences to contribute to the field of philanthropy.

— Sarah Shugrue

Greater Worcester Community Foundation Program Officer Sarah Shugrue, who also directs the Foundation’s Youth for Community Improvement (YCI) program<sup>1</sup>, laughs as she describes her YCI role: “I would say I am just like the woman in the corner.” More seriously, she elaborates, “When I am talking about it, I’ve used words like guide, coach, mentor. The role is really about being a connecting point for [young people]. And I like ‘guide’ . . .because it is really about them, and how do you help connect them to resources and learning?” YCI enables young people to allocate grants to nonprofit organizations in their communities. The goal, Shugrue explains, is not to silence the adult, but to make grantmaking less hierarchical. This practice is driven by the core belief that everyone, and in particular young people, possess wisdom, strengths and informative experiences to contribute to the field of philanthropy.

YCI is a 20-year-old program of the Greater Worcester Community Foundation in Worcester, Massachusetts, a racially, culturally, and economically diverse city of 185,000 in central Massachusetts. The program engages high school students as members of a highly collaborative grantmaking board that decides how to allocate \$25,000 each year to local nonprofits. In 2019, the young people of YCI selected 15 organizations, out of 30 that applied, to receive grants.<sup>2</sup> Each fall semester, about 20 high school students from across

Worcester County<sup>3</sup> take seats on the YCI grantmaking committee.<sup>4</sup>

The 2019 YCI cohort included 22 students, ages 14-18, from across 12 different public, private, religious, and vocational high schools in Worcester County. Given the program’s downtown Worcester location, the program’s demographics have historically reflected the racial and economic makeup of the city as opposed to larger county. The vast majority of the participating students are Black or Latinx. More than 40 percent<sup>5</sup> of Worcester residents identify as Black, Latinx, or Asian. Just more than 20 percent of the city’s residents live in poverty.



Photo: Greater Worcester Community Foundation

- 1 For more information on Youth for Community Improvement and the Greater Worcester Community Foundation visit: <https://www.greaterworcester.org/About-Us/Youth-for-Community-Improvement>
- 2 Each grant can total no more than \$4,000.00, but the number of applications received and grantees awarded varies year to year.
- 3 According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the total population of Worcester County was over 830,000 residents in 2019, up 4% since 2010. Twenty One percent of the population is under the age of 18. Nearly 11.9% of the population identifies as Hispanic or Latino, 6% as Black or African American alone, and 5.4% as Asian alone, while 76.1% identifies as white and not Hispanic or Latino. The poverty rate for Worcester County is 9% and as of 2018 nearly 36% of the population age 25 or older held a bachelor’s degree. Comparatively, Worcester city, as of 2018, had a population of over 185,000, with a population increase of 2.5% since 2010. Over 19% of the population is under the age of 18. Over 21% of the population identifies as Hispanic or Latino, over 13% as Black or African American alone, 7.6% as Asian alone, and approximately 56% as white and not Hispanic or Latino. The city of Worcester has a poverty rate of over 21% with 30.1% of the city’s population, aged 25 and older, holding a Bachelor’s degree.
- 4 Greater Worcester Community Foundation staff, including program director, Sarah Shugrue, select YCI members based on their written applications and interviews.
- 5 This figure includes those individuals who identify as both white and Hispanic or Latino.





Photo: Greater Worcester Community Foundation

## Background and Youth Philanthropy Programs by the Numbers

In 2018, The Sillerman Center for the Advancement of Philanthropy published the brief, “From Beneficiary to Active Agent: How Youth-Led Grantmaking Benefits Young People, Their Communities, and the Philanthropic Sector.”<sup>6</sup> We described youth philanthropy as a practice that “provides young people money and mentorship to directly fund nonprofit organizations.”<sup>7</sup> We concluded that done well, “youth philanthropy helps young people develop useful, transferable skills, a sense of efficacy and connection, and a potentially long-lasting inclination for community engagement.”<sup>8</sup>

This case study explores youth grantmaking further via a deep dive into one well-established youth philanthropy program. YCI provides a concrete example of power-shifting and community-centric philanthropy. We identify processes and practices that benefit both the young grantmakers and the philanthropic community at large. The mission, values, and processes of this particular youth philanthropy program may be instructive for grantmakers seeking guidance in how to eschew hierarchical decision making and shift power to people who actually live in the communities in which grantmakers fund nonprofit organizations. Specifically, this case study aims to demonstrate how youth philanthropy can be an avenue to democratize philanthropy while it simultaneously benefits young people. It may also be useful for those grantmakers concerned with youth more broadly, who are in search of effective youth development and engagement strategies to fund and support. We invite readers to see YCI from the vantage points of young people who participate in the program and their adult supporters.

There are 512 youth grantmaking programs in the United States.<sup>9</sup> Within these programs, the amount and form of power granted to young people varies. Nearly all of the programs report a “high level” of youth engagement and about 80% of the grantmaking programs serve teens, ages 13-18. YCI is among 209 programs that serve young people ages 13-18, demonstrate high levels of youth engagement, and are based at community foundations. Of the 209 programs, only 4 programs are based in Massachusetts, including YCI.<sup>10</sup>

This case study is divided into four sections. First, we briefly discuss our data collection methods for this study. Second, we explore power imbalances within philanthropy, the concept of power sharing, and the ways in which YCI practices power sharing. Third, our deep dive into YCI considers the program’s mission and values, relationship building, decision making and consensus building, mentorship and resources, and program evaluation. Fourth, we offer some high-level takeaways and lessons learned from this study.

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6 See “From Beneficiary to Active Agent: How Youth-Led Grantmaking Benefits Youth People, Their Communities, and the Philanthropic Sector,” by Sheryl Siller, 2018, The Sillerman Center for the Advancement of Philanthropy (<https://heller.brandeis.edu/sillerman/pdfs/opportunity-briefs/youth-led-grantmaking.pdf>)

7 Ibid. Page 1.

8 Ibid. Page 1.

9 See **YouthGiving.org**, a project of **Candid**

10 YouthGiving.org reports that 450 of the 512 programs self-report a “high level” of youth engagement. 415 of the 512 grantmaking programs serve teens, ages 13-18, with 368 of those 415 programs practicing high levels of youth engagement.

## Section I. Methods

We collected data for this case study through participant observation of five of the twelve YCI cohort sessions throughout the Fall 2019 semester. During twelve 3-hour sessions throughout the semester, YCI participants learn and discuss philanthropy as a general term, different ways to practice philanthropy, and power and privilege associated with philanthropy as well as diversity, equity, and inclusion, identity, and values as they relate to philanthropy. They also write and disseminate their own Request for Proposals<sup>11</sup> through a discussion about problems they see in their communities and what they want to change. All grant applicants must have a strong youth voice component of their mission or programming. Each YCI participant reviews and provides evaluations and recommendations around every proposal they receive. During the final 2 sessions of the semester, the young people work to build consensus around which organizations to fund and how much to fund them.

The author also attended a December 2019 event in which the members of YCI, their families, the 2019 grantees, foundation staff, and local public officials gathered to celebrate YCI's work. The author interviewed three YCI program alumni, Sarah Shugrue (YCI's program director), and three YCI grant recipients.<sup>12</sup> Finally, the author analyzed the pre- and post- YCI program surveys for the first year participants of the 2019 YCI cohort.<sup>13</sup>

## Section II. Philanthropy, Power-Sharing, Privilege, and Identity

**It is vital that all those engaged in collaborative philanthropy understand how philanthropy, power, and privilege intersect in order to build community with one another.**

Significant power imbalances exist between grantmaking and grantseeking organizations. As R.G. Bringle and J.A. Hatcher explain in their paper *Campus-Community Partnerships: The Terms of Engagement* (2002), the community has “more interest [but] less power because there is more at stake, more to lose; thus, that party will be more vigilant toward, protective of, and committed to the relationship.”<sup>14</sup> In addition to this power imbalance, programs like YCI, which give high school students decision making power over substantial grant dollars, have unique power dynamics as well. Shugrue explained, “In the community it changes the power dynamic. You have to ask a group of young people for money. How are you doing something that matters to them? It just flips the power dynamic on its side and says here is where the authority is.”

In order to help the students better understand power, privilege, and identity, as well as help the YCI participants build community and bond, Shugrue asked each committee member to crumple a piece of paper. She then placed a wastebasket in the middle of the room. Based on the months in which the students were born, they were separated into two groups – January through June and July through December – and the January

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11 A copy of the 2019 Request for Proposals is included at the end of this brief.

12 Each of the grant recipients focus on youth-centered work and are featured in a spotlight to show the types of organizations that YCI funds and how these organizations are uplifting youth voice and decision making.

13 These surveys are confidential.

14 See “Campus-Community Partnerships: The Terms of Engagement,” by R.G. Bringle and J.A. Hatcher, 2002, p. 510, *University of Nebraska Omaha* (<https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/232750663.pdf>)



Photo credit: Greater Worcester Community Foundation

through June group were instructed to stand significantly closer to the basket. Shugrue noted, here, that you can't choose when you are born. Finally, the students attempted to toss their papers into the basket. During the activity debrief, one student born between January and June stated that the activity was "too easy," while others said they felt "satisfied," "favored," and "good." However, two of the students whose birthdays fell between July and December said they felt the activity was "unfair" and another student said, "I don't feel like I have a good advantage compared to [the other group]."

Shugrue asked the students to think about various pieces of their identities and traits. She asked how this activity relates to fairness in other aspects of their lives and to think about identities as both shared and hidden. One student said, "Maybe if the basket is farther away, but you get the basket, it's a bigger achievement." Another student stated that "winning is a good feeling." One participant noted that, "Maybe you didn't think twice about helping those farther away and just got it in right away anyways." Still another participant stated, "We can't control where the basket is...if we get it in, we have to be aware of our privilege and be aware of what we have." Finally, Shugrue asked the students if their feelings would have changed if they all had birthdays from January through June. One participant explained, "It's like you don't have a goal." Another stated that the, "privileged side takes things for granted." And a third participant said, "Maybe [people] won't want to give a helping hand."

At the end of this activity, one student said, "The fact that we are able to participate in this program makes us privileged in a way." These types of activities, which occur through the semester are designed to help students better understand their own privileges and power and also bring the students closer together.

## Section III. Youth for Community Improvement: A Program of the Greater Worcester Community Foundation

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YCI's mission is to empower Worcester county's young people to make funding decisions in the Greater Worcester community and to develop leadership skills. This mission statement has not changed since the program began. In 2018 the YCI participants built on this mission and developed a set of shared program values: diversity, compromise, leadership, friendship. As Shugrue explained, "They talked about diversity being important, not for the sake of quotas but for the sake of experience...also [by] storytelling and learning of different struggles and privileges each member has, collectively [they] grow into a more understanding and compassionate youth that reflect our community."

YCI provides an environment that is "welcoming and heartwarming," as one past participant described it. Based on how students discussed their in-school experiences and struggles, YCI aims to be a space where they feel they have a voice, autonomy, and power. For example, in one meeting a student said that, "Generosity is lacking in the Worcester community...There is no respect in school. Teachers are rude." In another session, one participant said that in their school it is "a white administration dealing with mostly black students...and teachers can't relate to [the student population]." However, programs like YCI may provide a place where they can come without being ridiculed and where they are all working toward a common goal even if their values differ. One student noted that it is different perspectives.

### **The young people who take part in the YCI cohort tend to apply in order to build leadership skills and typically do not have a background or understanding of philanthropy.**

Young people apply for YCI and then based on both their written applications and interviews, Greater Worcester Community Foundation staff select them to be a part of the YCI cohort. The students who enroll in YCI tend to be self-driven to try something new. This is demonstrated in the 2019 pre-program survey where students indicated they had very little knowledge of nonprofits prior to the program. When asked how knowledgeable they were about nonprofit organizations, only one student answered "I have a good understanding," nine answered "I have read/heard of some organizations" and four answered "I have very limited knowledge."

As one past participant said, "I didn't know what philanthropy really was because I was so focused academically and doing sports. I was more like the reserved book club kid, who just wanted to read books and keep to myself so this was one of the points where I just stepped out of my comfort zone." The 2019 first-year participant pre-program survey demonstrated that many students felt this way. Students expressed that the most important reason they joined YCI was to "develop new leadership skills." Whereas they ranked "learn about philanthropy/nonprofits in the community" as their least motivating factor on average. About half the students said they joined YCI to make new friends.





This self-motivated attitude, in addition to the desire to develop leadership skills, also helped encourage young people to apply for and participate in the program. “It definitely got a lot better as I started to meet more people and make more friends in the program. [After] going there a couple of times you form this schedule where you know what to expect,” one alum explained. Another said, “One of the things I really enjoyed about YCI is that I got to meet students, other people who are in Greater Worcester, who go to other schools in Worcester, who are from other small towns in general.”

## Building focus and deep understanding around values enables young people to work toward a common goal

In their 2002 study, *Campus-Community Partnerships: The Terms of Engagement*, Bringle and Hatcher find that a successful student-community partnership is “collegial, participatory, cooperative, and democratic” because there is “effective communication, respect, and coordinated action toward mutual goals and shared vision.”<sup>15</sup> The 2019 cohort came from 12 different schools, but they learned from each other’s values and experiences.

In one meeting, cohort members completed a Values Survey. The student facilitator explained that the purpose of the survey was to think about individual values and learn more about the guiding principles that direct actions in everyday life as they relate to habits of giving and serving. The facilitator also explained that the activity would help when they evaluate grant applications. Further, Shugrue explained to the 2019 participants:

*“You need to know that person’s values and who they are, because that will change how you present information and try to convince them [of grant decisions]. When you are thinking about advocating, it is extremely interpersonal. That is why we spend so much time talking about values and identity.”*

After each student completed the written portion of the Values Survey, in which they ranked each value, such as honesty, compassion, equality, generosity, and happiness, on a scale of 1-12 (with 1 being the most important), the students participated in a gallery walk. Through this portion of the activity, the facilitator announced each value and the students walked around the room and stood next to a number (1-12) posted on the wall that corresponded to how they ranked that value. They then discussed why they ranked that value as they did.

Students tended to define and rank values quite differently from one another. For example, students who felt honesty was most important explained that they ranked it as such because, “a lack of honesty and communication leads to a lot of problems in this world.” Another participant stated that, “If people talked and were honest with their intentions we could solve a lot of things.” On the other hand, students who ranked honesty as least

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Photo Credit: Greater Worcester Community Foundation

important said this was because, “sometimes it isn’t great to show 100% of your true feelings.” Then, when asked if it is ok to lie, this student explained, “You don’t have to be 100% genuine all of the time. I think oversharing can lead to a negative response sometimes...but if we lived in an ideal society we wouldn’t be compelled to lie.” Another student added that we have the freedom and choice, which were two other terms discussed in this activity, to lie or be honest so that was why they ranked honesty as less important.

Through discussion, the group learned to understand each other’s perspectives. After the students discussed each of the 12 values the facilitator asked, “By going from value to value, did you learn anything about yourself?” One student replied, “I have a little of [each value] so I can always work on [each value] more.” The facilitator then asked, “How did you feel when sharing your values with this group?” A student said, “I really like this group because everyone gets along and is open minded and wants to hear ideas.” This comfortability was further demonstrated when the facilitator asked how it felt if someone was standing alone in terms of how they ranked a value. One participant explained, “I was confused and surprised to be standing alone but then I thought about it and I realized that if we do everything on this list we achieve [all of the values].” Another participant confirmed this stating, “We care about these values, it’s just that the ranking is different.”

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## Consensus building and decision making are challenging but understanding identities, values, and passions makes these processes easier

The 2019 YCI cohort received 30 grant applications. Each student reviewed all 30 applications and then presented at least one of the proposals to the larger group. After each presentation the students discussed the proposal then voted on a scale of 0-3 as to whether they wanted to consider funding each organization. Shugrue tracked how participants ranked the proposals and, after they finished discussing all 30 proposals, she pulled up a spreadsheet showing the final rankings. The students then decided which proposals to eliminate based on how they scored and discussed those proposals not eliminated. Further, the students decided how much money to allocate to each organization. With \$25,000 to distribute, and no grant totalling more than \$4000, this proved to be a challenging task. As a past participant explained “We would try to find a compromise. I think that was something that was really strong about the program. Because everyone’s voices were heard, people were a little more [open] to compromising and finding middle ground.” Ultimately, the 2019 cohort made grants to 15 organizations.<sup>16</sup>

During their decision process, a 2019 participant brought up the importance of “taking everything into consideration before making a judgement.” Additionally, a program alum summarized their thoughts of the grant decision making process:

*“At the very end of my program...we would debate a lot about what programs to fund. That was my favorite part because that’s when we realize that is when people are so passionate about these programs and we were all fighting for what we wanted...it was very intense....but it was so good. You’re in a room with people who are passionate about the same thing you are passionate about and they are all fighting in a way that you know they care and they aren’t trying to put you down in any way, they just want you to understand them.”*

## Young people develop leadership, collaborative, and other professional skills through youth philanthropy

Each week, YCI participants rotate facilitation and leadership roles. Roles include: Greeter, Facilitator before dinner, Vibe Checker, Note Taker, Facilitator after dinner, and Time Keeper. Shugrue explained that one of the best means she found to engage YCI students was through student-facilitated, short relationship-building activities during sessions, which the YCI participants refer to as Ice Melters. Most students did not have previous team building experiences like this and said they gained useful leadership skills. One past participant said:

*“Through YCI the skills I learned, especially when it comes to facilitating a meeting, or just facilitating any type of group activity, that is something I do all the time now in college. [This] is something I felt I was able to do because I learned those skills [from YCI].”*

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16 For a full list of the 2019 grantees, see the Youth for Community Improvement website: <https://www.greaterworcester.org/About-Us/News/All-News/for-20th-year-youth-for-community-improvement-awards-funds-to-local-youth-driven-organizations>



Another past participant said, “A good concept of YCI that I learned is that you really become a better person by learning off of others’ strengths and weaknesses.” And, thinking more long term, another alum said that skills they developed in YCI would benefit them in the future:

*“Part of me hopes that in the future I can be a part of a workforce or job where I am able to help others in a community in any way possible...I am really interested in forming relationships with community leaders and talking with other people, helping them, and finding out problems in their communities and alleviating them.”*

Students also said they gained skills in decision making, self advocacy, professionalism, and teamwork. As a past participant explained:

*“The impact that YCI has had on me personally, has been a greater sense of confidence within my decision making. They taught me a lot of how to be professional in the work environment, which I value greatly because I am going to college, so the realization that I will be part of a workforce, a part of a group of colleagues from my community, [as part of a team] we have to work together to create different decisions. I thought that was a really great opportunity to build on that skill.”*

Young people can participate in YCI for 2 years. All three of the alums interviewed for this study talked about the experience of staying in the program for two years:

*“During my first year I didn’t really speak a lot. Cuz I felt like I had no right to say anything because I haven’t really faced those problems or felt what [other students] were going through...This was a really big challenge for me, speaking up and giving my opinion.”*

Another past participant found their second year more challenging:

*“I think my second year the biggest challenge that year had to be picking up leadership. I think that was an issue where I think it was the same people who were taking the lead on things and it wasn’t by choice, it was kind of no one else was doing it so it just so happened it was the same people keeping the program moving forward.”*

Students know what to expect and know what the workload is going to be during their second year, but they also take on additional responsibilities and become mentors to their first-year peers.

In addition, some students were not able to attend each week, which meant that they had to play catch up the following week. Other students would help bring them to where they needed to be or present for their peers if someone was absent or unprepared. For example, in one meeting each student gave a short pitch as to why their peers should give \$1000 to a project or organization of their choice. Most students created PowerPoints for their pitch, which briefly outlined the organization or project and its importance as well as the financial ask, of up to \$1000. Four of the 22 students were absent for that meeting, but had submitted their PowerPoints in advance. For each of those four presentations, a peer stepped up and offered to present on behalf of their fellow students. The level of engagement varied among students. But generally, students exhibited eagerness to help each other.

## **Youth philanthropists should gain a deeper understanding of their own communities and build relationships within the community**

The young people who participate in YCI gain a better understanding of and build relationships with their community. Based on the 2019 first year YCI cohort program surveys, the three most popular definitions of community in the pre-program survey were “a group of people with ethnic, cultural, and/or religious characteristics in common” (13/14 respondents chose), “people living in the same geographic area” (11/14), and “people at my school” (10/14). These selections reflect that at the start of the program students may have based “community” from static, compulsory traits such as geographic location and individual background, rather than characteristics of choice such as beliefs and interests.

The post-program results demonstrate a shift to a broader definition of community. It is notable that students tended to select a greater number of definitions than the pre-program survey because it shows that students developed a more inclusive, and broader, understanding of community. The numbers do not line up perfectly because fewer students answered the post-program survey; however, a greater proportion of students selected “a group of people who share the same interest in common” and “people with similar values and beliefs.” As one 2019 participant stated, “In [YCI] we are all different but we are the community. Everyone's point of view adds something.”

A past participant explained that YCI made her aware of issues in the community and how people perceive those problems. She talked about her initial lack of understanding about another YCI student’s desire to fund more sidewalks. Then, her fellow student explained that the sidewalks in her neighborhood weren’t safe, or sometimes didn’t exist, and cars would drive on them

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so she was afraid of getting hit by a car. This explanation helped the alum realize why funding for sidewalks was important. Students also learn about the importance of space beautification. When they fund the design of a mural or art installation or playground and park clean-up, they can visually see the change they helped make possible.

## **A strong mentor is vital to the success of a youth philanthropy program**

Shugrue's work and own community engagement helps to establish and enrich community relationships, partnerships, and trust. Shugrue grew up in Worcester. After completing her master's degree and working for organizations that focused on mentorship, she was eager to bring her skills back to her community. When she applied for the program officer role, YCI was not part of the job description but after foundation officials interviewed her and learned about her background and skills working with young people, they added it in. She explained:

*"The YCI piece totally drew me to the role. [Working at a foundation] was really going further and further away from direct service and YCI was an opportunity for me to get back in the weeds and be practicing... And working with kids has always been a passion for me and so the ability to do that, and do it in such a meaningful way, where it wasn't instruction based and it was really their program, I was pretty into it."*

The alum and 2019 cohort described Shugrue as supportive and always available and seemingly happy to be with them. She continues to support program graduates by writing college recommendations, inviting them to speak on panels, and providing mentorship. The grantees said they rely on Shugrue to find out when the RFP from YCI is released and due. Shugrue explained, "One of the benefits of having a Program Officer run this program is that they know a lot of grantees, they know a lot of nonprofits, they know where the young people are...also the foundation does scholarships so we have a really robust database of school guidance counselors."

This high level engagement does not come without challenges. In addition to YCI, Shugrue runs 2 other programs and 7 grant cycles. Time is always a challenge as she works every year to update the curriculum, advertise the program, and stay involved in the community. In addition, the program itself is only 12 weeks. That means the young people must stay on task in order to get their work done. Shugrue said, "I think we timeline struggle every year in 12 weeks to build trust, get them familiar with each other, learn about this, figure out what they care about, get an RFP out, give nonprofits enough time to apply, and make decisions." Over the years, YCI has become more research-based and the young people now make about 90% of the decisions. Sarah provides the most guidance when it comes to questions around presentations, evaluation guidelines, and rubrics.

The past participants and 2019 cohort expressed the difficulties of getting their work done amidst their busy schedules – including other after school activities, exams, and college applications. When participants arrived at their third to last meeting, at the end of November 2019, Shugrue expressed concern that many students had not yet completed their proposal evaluations. Students explained that they struggled with the evaluation process and online system, that they didn't have much time throughout the week, and that they had trouble managing their time as they would get stuck on one application for too long.

One past participant explained:

*“The hardest part about the program was finding time to read all of the different applications that we got throughout the time there... We were all on busy schedules being high school students...each application averaged at least 5 pages...it was another daunting part of the program but also one of the most rewarding parts.”*

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## **Foundations should provide resources such as meals and transportation stipends to youth philanthropy participants as well as engage the participants’ families.**

YCI provides \$5 stipends to each student every week for transportation. Some of the students rely on the bus or other transportation, for example, and this is helpful for them and their families. YCI also provides a full dinner for the students each week. Students typically take leftover food home.

YCI also provides student and parent orientations. When explaining the program’s mission, Shugrue uses words like ‘service,’ or ‘benefitting community’ instead of ‘philanthropy’ or ‘grants’. Shugrue explained that there is an important balance between how quickly you dive-in to start work and how much time you give the group to get to understand their tasks as philanthropists.

## **Program assessments and a broad understanding of program goals help ensure a robust youth philanthropy program.**

As discussed, YCI conducts a pre- and post- program survey regarding motivation to join YCI and understanding of the program, philanthropy, and community. The 2019 surveys indicated that students join YCI to develop new leadership skills. Throughout the program they develop a more inclusive and broader view of ‘community’ and the ways to give back to their communities, and they gain a better understanding of what the nonprofit sector is and does. In addition, at the end of each session the young people complete a “plus/delta” activity. Shugrue asks, “What do you feel really good about, what do you feel uneasy about, what is one word you’re feeling as you walk away tonight?” She considers student responses when thinking about what to do differently for the next cohort. However, ultimately, Shugrue said the goal of the program is broader than mixed-method assessments:

*“If they feel like after their 12 weeks they are more aware of what is happening in their community, they are more motivated to be involved in civic conversation, if it means that they vote in their first election, if it means that they advocate for something they care about, that’s a win. On the other side, I think that in the nonprofit community, there is an increased value in what youth bring to the table in that more tables are opening up seats for young people. So it is sort of twofold - how are participants different as a result and for me that is just that they care more about community and that they have more interest in being civically engaged, and then on the community side that we are saying we’ve got all of these really prepared, smart young people, how are we creating some good space for them to be involved in being part of decisions that affect them.”*



Photo Credit: Greater Worcester Community Foundation

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Because of YCI, and because I realized that these are real world problems that are so important, it isn't just me, it doesn't just depend on me, it depends on other people and impacts other people, I was like wow I should voice my opinion...and advocate for this.

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In addition to each alum describing improved decision-making and leadership skills, it became clear that the students met the goals that Shugrue outlined. The past participants said:

*“One value that I thought was really important was having two different hearts at the same time...so having a compassionate heart and having a heart that also uses your brain...so one that sees all the great work that a program does but also one that criticizes almost in a constructive way that you don't just give away all of your money to one organization just because you think they deserve it the most. You need to balance it out.”*

*“Because of YCI, and because I realized that these are real world problems that are so important, it isn't just me, it doesn't just depend on me, it depends on other people and impacts other people, I was like wow I should voice my opinion...and advocate for this.”*

*“Having the opportunity so early to engage with youth philanthropy, in high school...I think it was a great experience, it was something that has been an integral part of me continuing to be a leader in the way I like and feel I am best at serving my community and the communities I am a part of.”*



## Section IV. Conclusion

### What do we learn from YCI?

This case study aims to be instructive for grantmakers looking to support or fund organizations and programs that seek to move away from hierarchical or paternalistic decision making and shift power to people, including young people, who live in the communities in which grantmakers support. Youth philanthropy programs provide one model for how to shift power and center the community. This case study demonstrates how youth philanthropy can help to democratize philanthropy while it simultaneously benefits young people.

Some key takeaways for funders include:

- Be deliberate in efforts to shift power and resources to the community
- Building knowledge and understanding of stakeholder values and identities allows for strong decision making practices
- Grantmakers interested in equity and providing counterforces to the inequality inherent in philanthropy should consider investing in youth grantmaking programs
- Youth philanthropy programs like YCI reverse and realign power imbalances and result in well-rounded, participatory, and more democratic grantmaking
- Funders who prioritize youth development and youth engagement, as well as public service and civic engagement more generally, should consider funding or starting their own youth philanthropy programs
- In a robust youth philanthropy program, young people must be supported by a strong mentor and resources such as stipends, food, and leadership development activities
- A strong youth philanthropy mentor should be integrated into both the foundation and community which the foundation aims to support
- Youth philanthropy programs should center and honor youth-voice and decision making
- Through strong youth philanthropy programs, like YCI, young people gain leadership, professional, self-advocacy, and decision making skills

By observing how young people interacted during their YCI experience, speaking with program alums, grant recipients, and YCI's program director, it is clear that youth philanthropy programs like YCI can be effective in helping young people develop leadership skills while also decentralizing and democratizing philanthropy. No program is a perfect program or entirely replicable. However, YCI's model is an example of a program that both makes philanthropy and youth engagement more community-centric, inclusive, and equitable.

YCI is an opportunity for young people to gain experience in exploring and better understanding their communities. They confront real world problems, some of which students may be experiencing in their own lives. In some cases, the students have had to grapple with issues they hadn't previously known much about. YCI helps connect academic work, daily life, and community. YCI participants, through their value set of diversity, compromise, leadership, and friendship, develop strong decision making and community-centric practices that we believe philanthropy at large should learn from and practice as well.

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Youth philanthropy programs provide one model for how to shift power and center the community. This case study demonstrates how youth philanthropy can help to democratize philanthropy while it simultaneously benefits young people.

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**Organization Name:** Regional Environmental Council (REC) Worcester

**Year Founded:** 1972

**Organization Director of Programs:** Grace Sliwoski

**Website:** <https://www.recworchester.org>

**Facebook:** <https://www.facebook.com/RECworchester/>

**Twitter:** @RECWorchester

**Mission:** To bring people together to create a just food system and to build healthy, sustainable, and equitable communities in Worcester and beyond

REC strives for food justice, meaning fair and equal access to healthy, sustainable, and affordable food, in Worcester, Massachusetts. Their three major programs that aim to achieve these goals include: The Community Farmers Market, which includes a mobile farmers market; the UGROW network that promotes and supports 67 community and school gardens throughout Worcester; and YouthGROW, a youth development program that employs low income teens to maintain two urban organic farms and also complete a curriculum on Professional Development, Leadership Skills, Urban Agriculture, and Social Justice.

In 2019 REC received YCI funding for 2 projects. One grant will bring elementary school students to visit a UGROW Garden space “to see that space and meet some of the youth and broaden the classroom beyond what was possible at the [elementary] school site,” explained Grace Sliwoski, REC’s Director of Programs. The other grant, Sliwoski said, “will focus on updating some of our youth spaces to be more soothing and uplifting.”

YCI’s young people were drawn to REC’s work because of their similarly youth-driven models that encourage and increase peer leadership, consensus building, and youth voice. For example, YouthGROW’s peer leadership model increases young people’s responsibilities year to year as they gain experience maintaining the organic farms. The program has 7 youth leaders: young people who return to the program for a second year and are responsible for hiring future youth employees. In addition, 4 young people who have at least 2 years of experience with YouthGROW are hired back as REC junior staff.

In 2019, there were 250 applicants for only 15 available positions in the YouthGrow program. Sliwoski explained, “Because our category of young people we serve is not defined by any particular barrier” young people are drawn to the program by the opportunity of paid work experience, adult mentorship and support, and by the open door, forever policy that encourages young people to work with REC for more than one year and have the potential to return as REC staff and board members.

Sliwoski explained, “Having those opportunities where there can be power and decision making and responsibility that is real, but is also supported with appropriate education and appropriate mentorship and appropriate peer support, and is realistic in that way, is incredibly valuable.”

**Organization Name:** Rise Above Foundation

**Year Founded:** 2009

**Organization Executive Director:** Sarah Baldiga, Co-Founder

**Website:** <https://weriseabove.org/>

**Facebook:** <https://www.facebook.com/riseabovema>

**Twitter:** @RiseAboveMA

**Mission:** To provide Massachusetts children in foster care with enriching activities, opportunities, and experiences.

In 2009, two social workers founded the Rise Above Foundation in Central Massachusetts after working with Massachusetts teens in the foster care system who told them about their needs. The young people in the foster care system wanted to be able to participate in the same sorts of activities as their non-foster care peers but didn't always have the means to do so.

"Our whole goal is to honor what kids want to do or try and make sure there are no financial barriers to them being able to play sports or participate in music, go to summer camp, or go on field trips with school, said Sarah Baldiga, Rise Above Foundation's Executive Director and Co-Founder. "We are committed to making sure that whatever we are providing for kids is what they are asking for." Rise Above serves about 1000 youth in Massachusetts per year with just 1 full time and 2 part time staff members.

The Foundation covers the costs of a variety of activities in which young people in foster care want to participate, ensuring that the young people can engage in the same activities as their friends who aren't in foster care. Most often social workers and foster parents apply for funding through an application on the Foundation's website. Commonly, funding requests are for activities such as guitar lessons, school field trips, sports gear like tennis racquets, or horseback riding summer camp. This, Baldiga said, gives youth in foster care the "opportunity to have normalcy in their lives...being able to do the regular kid stuff goes a long way in their healing." And, according to Baldiga, these activities also help improve young people's mental, social, and physical well-being.

The Foundation's clear youth-driven, inclusivity, and equity focus made them stand out as the young people in YCI made their 2019 grant decisions. Specifically, the grant that Rise Above received from YCI in 2019 will enable them to create a youth-led council, with its official name to be determined by the young people themselves. The goal of the council is to provide young adults, ages 17-25, who are or were in the foster care system, the power to create their own agenda, build relationships and network with each other, and plan activities and events through the Foundation.

Rise Above's positive impact is made clear through the many thank you notes the foundation receives from case workers, families, and young people. As one young person points out in his hand-written thank you note to Rise Above, "I also liked [basketball camp] because through everything I just remembered to have fun."



**Organization Name:** Healthy Options for Prevention and Education (HOPE) Coalition

**Year Founded:** 2000

**Organization Director:** Dr. Laurie Ross

**Website:** <https://www.hopecoalitionwoo.org/>

**Facebook:** <https://tinyurl.com/rpymgdm>

**Twitter:** @coalition\_hope

**Mission:** To reduce youth violence and substance use and promote adolescent mental health and youth voice in Worcester

HOPE Coalition is a youth-adult partnership between 18 organizations in Worcester, Massachusetts including youth serving organizations, mental health agencies, community based health care centers, the City of Worcester, and the Worcester Public Schools. The Coalition works to reduce youth violence and substance use and promote adolescent mental health and youth voice in Worcester. They accomplish this through a program that integrates mental health counselors into youth organizations to address stigma and increase access to mental health services. This program also provides training to youth workers on how to address mental health issues with the young people they serve. Further, HOPE Coalition runs Peer Leader campaigns in which high school students develop projects and training programs based on the needs they see in their schools and communities.

When HOPE hired Laurie Ross, a Professor of Community Development and Planning at Clark University, in 2000, as the coalition coordinator, she created a team of peer leaders across the partnering organizations. Ross explained that she “brought research methods to the youth, and how you do needs assessments and public speaking.” With Ross’ leadership, the young people who are a part of HOPE Coalition complete community needs-assessments through surveys and participate in advocacy work and protests, and conduct discussions and meetings with local politicians and affiliates such as the department of public health.

HOPE Coalition creates new projects and adjusts priorities based on what the young people see and learn in their communities. YCI and HOPE Coalition have clear value alignment around young people driving decision making and developing leadership skills. Thus, in 2020, through the support of a 2019 grant from YCI, HOPE Coalition created an “adult swim” program, which trains adults on how to better listen to, support, and work with young people and elevate youth voice in decision making. The second part of this work will focus specifically on sexual health and mental health.

Although Ross works for HOPE Coalition only 12 hours per week, and the coalition has no permanent space, meeting at partner organizations such as the YWCA or Worcester Youth Center, HOPE still engages about 20 young people each year. Projects that grew out of youth-driven needs-assessments, such as the mental health program, still thrive today. Ross explained, “I believe very strongly in youth involvement. I would love to see more of a coalition of youth-led groups so they can see the power...and have a network that can help them.

# Appendix A

## 2019 Youth for Community Improvement Request for Proposals



### Youth for Community Improvement (YCI) Request for Proposals Deadline: Monday November 15, 2019

YCI, an advisory committee of the Greater Worcester Community Foundation composed of high school students, requests proposals from Worcester County nonprofit organizations in the following areas;

1. Basic Needs (Hunger & Homelessness)
  - a. Organizations supporting those in our community who have inadequate housing or are homeless
  - b. Organizations engaged in work on affordable housing
  - c. Organizations providing basic needs, especially clothing, household items, food and supplies for babies (formula, diapers etc...)
  
2. Space Beautification
  - a. Organizations focused on our community's sustainability, protecting natural resources and maintaining vibrant community spaces
  - b. Organizations with projects revolving around improving neighborhoods
  - c. Organizations looking to support projects on beautifying their physical building spaces
  
3. Academic Enrichment
  - a. Organizations providing enrichment opportunities to young people (priority given in the areas of STEM and ESL)
  - b. Organizations providing services in the areas of emotional health and wellbeing and substance use
  - c. Organizations working in the space of sexual health education

ALL APPLICATIONS MUST SPEAK TO YOUTH VOICE IN THEIR PROPOSAL. Youth voice is the empowerment of young people through leadership roles, holding decision making power, and/or involvement of youth in program organization.

- Scope & Limitations: Grants will not exceed \$4,000. Total project budgets may not exceed \$25,000.
- Deadline: Monday November 15, 2019
- To Apply: Application is available on line. [Click here.](#)
- Contact: Sarah Shugrue, Program Officer 508-755-0980 [sshugrue@greaterworchester.org](mailto:sshugrue@greaterworchester.org)

## Appendix B

# Discussion Questions for Past Youth for Community Improvement Participants

**The following questions were directed to 3 past participants of Greater Worcester's Youth for Community Improvement Program.**

1. Please state your name and in what year/s you participated in YCI.
2. How did you learn about YCI?
3. Were you involved in any sort of community engagement or volunteering activities prior to YCI? If so, please provide an example.
4. Who or what encouraged you to apply for the program?
5. What was the application/interview process to become a member of YCI? How did it make you feel?
6. How did you and your YCI colleagues choose which areas you wanted to include in your RFP?
7. What do you remember as the biggest challenges during the program itself?
8. What were decision-making processes like in YCI?
9. Did you know any other students in the program when you joined? Did you build relationships or friendships during and after the program? Have any of those lasted through today?
10. Would you encourage other high school students to participate in YCI or a similar program? Why?
11. Are there any values or concepts you learned through YCI that were particularly memorable? If so, what?
12. Do you continue to participate in any sort of civic engagement or leadership programs now? Did you in college (if already graduated from college)?
13. How, if at all, has YCI shaped your future goals -- career or otherwise?
14. What is something you feel YCI could have improved upon during your time in the program?
15. What is your favorite memory from YCI?
16. Do you keep in touch or stay engaged with Greater Worcester Community Foundation/YCI staff or alum? To what extent?



## Appendix C

# Questions for Discussions with Youth for Community Improvement 2019 Grantees

**The following questions were asked of 3 grantees of Greater Worcester's YCI Program. Answers to these questions were used in developing each grantee spotlight.**

1. Please state your name, your organization's name, and when your organization was founded.
2. Please state your organization's mission.
3. Please describe how your organization works to uplift youth voice.
4. Please describe how your organization works to support young people — through allocating basic needs, social services, mental and physical health support, mentorship, etc.
5. How many times have you applied for a grant through YCI?
6. How many times have you received a grant through YCI?
7. If you've either applied for or received grant dollars from YCI multiple times, what encouraged you to re-apply?
8. How do you feel knowing that the YCI grant decisions are made directly by high school students?
9. Based on your experience with YCI, is there anything you'd recommend the program changes in terms of the application process, outreach, or grant process?
10. Do you see a need in your community for more youth-led programs, like YCI, to exist in your community? Why or why not?

## Appendix D

# Questions for Discussion with Sarah Shugrue, Youth for Community Improvement Program Director at Greater Worcester Community Foundation

**The following questions were directed toward Sarah Shugrue, Program Officer at Greater Worcester Community Foundation, and Director of the Youth for Community Improvement Program.**

1. Please state your name, organization, and title within your organization.
2. How long have you been working at Greater Worcester Community Foundation and how long with YCI specifically?
3. Before this role, did you have teaching experience or any youth development or engagement work?
4. What drew you to this role?
5. If you could give yourself a job title for your role within YCI, what would it be and why?
6. Does YCI have its own mission statement or does it share that of GWCF? Has it changed over the years? What are some values you feel YCI holds strong to?
7. Could you describe a couple of broad challenges you've faced in working with YCI?
8. How has the YCI curriculum changed over the years? Do you plan on changing it yearly, or how do you ensure it is where it needs to be?
9. How, if at all, have you seen the demographic of YCI participants change over the years? How do you go about outreach for the program?
10. Could you share an example or two where the YCI participants really impressed you in some way and/or surprised you?
11. Do community organizations who are invited to apply for funding seem to know about YCI or do you get questions from organizations every semester around what the program is?
12. Do you feel that there is trust between YCI and the community?
13. What tools or metrics do you use to determine how the semester is going? What tools do you use to prepare for the next cohort?
14. What does success mean or look like for YCI?
15. Do you keep in touch with YCI alum? If so, what fields have you seen alum enter into? Does there seem to be any trend to the nonprofit world or landscape?
16. In your opinion, what are the biggest benefits to a youth grantmaking program? Think about benefits for the young people, foundations, nonprofits, community, etc.
17. What do you think would encourage other foundations to start their own youth grantmaking programs or boards? What do you think are the barriers keeping more foundations from doing so?





## SOCIAL JUSTICE FUNDER OPPORTUNITY BRIEFS

draw upon research, policy analysis and practitioner experience to identify promising grantmaking opportunities that aspire to create a fairer, more inclusive and more equitable society.

**Sheryl Seller** is assistant director of the Sillerman Center for the Advancement of Philanthropy.

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We welcome your comments.

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