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Inside the Youth Organizing Pipeline — How Young Leaders are Made and How They Mobilize Others

Research shows how grassroots organizing groups provide education that often motivates immigrant and refugee youth to work with their non-immigrant Black and Indigenous peers. The work deepens their understanding of potential policy solutions.

April 11, 2026 (NATIONWIDE) – A [new book](#) published by the Russell Sage Foundation and authored by UCLA Professor [Veronica Terriquez](#) offers unprecedented insight into how young people — especially those from immigrant backgrounds — are actively learning how to organize, lead, and drive political change.

In [Learning to Lead: Youth Organizing in Immigrant Communities](#), Terriquez draws from more than 105,000 voting records, over 5,000 surveys, and more than 600 semi-structured interviews to explore how youth organizing groups promote civic and political engagement among young people from immigrant backgrounds.

“The young people I interviewed were eager to engage and ready to act, but they needed spaces where they could develop their voice, understand the historical context shaping the issues impacting their communities, and learn how to take action,” Terriquez said. “Youth organizing groups provide that foundation by helping young people build civic awareness, work across differences, and mobilize others. When that happens, even a small group can have a big impact.”

Learning to Lead draws on Terriquez’s 25 years of working alongside youth, including multiple sources of data she collected over the past decade. Her work as a professor, researcher — and at

her core, a community organizer — led Terriquez to understand the power young Americans have in their communities.

Terriquez has long been inspired by the historic 1964 Freedom Summer effort to register Black voters in the South. In 2018 she launched the Central Valley Freedom Summer Participatory Action Research Project at UC Santa Cruz, which contributed to a 262% increase in voter turnout among 18 to 24-year-olds in the Central Valley. Building on that success, as a professor and director of the Chicano Studies Research Center at UCLA, Terriquez has expanded this program to become the California Freedom Summer Participatory Action Research Project (CFS). The summer project now includes more than 100 students from across California universities, community colleges, and high schools.

Part of the book focuses on analyzing non-profit 501(c)3 organizations that engage low-income youth. She excludes from her study partisan organizations and large federated networks that do not specifically serve this population. Although much of her analysis is based on data from surveys she conducted in and across California, Terriquez identifies patterns in youth organizing that are generalizable across the United States.

“What my research team and I also discovered is that the impact of youth organizing extends beyond adolescence,” Terriquez said. “When young people get involved early, they are far more likely to stay engaged in civic life as adults. It really speaks to the importance of investing in our young people from the start because they are the next generation of great leaders.”

At its core, *Learning to Lead* provides concrete lessons for youth organizing, offering pedagogical model for how schools and youth-serving institutions can strengthen civic engagement in the United States’ multiracial democracy.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

[Veronica Terriquez](#) directs the [UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center \(CSRC\)](#) and is a professor of Chicana/o and Central American Studies and Urban Planning. She is also the co-founder of the Latina Futures 2050 Lab based at the CSRC.

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