

# Meeting the Needs of Young People During the COVID-19 Pandemic Through Program Adaptations in Creative Youth Development Programs

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**Abstract:** Creative Youth Development (CYD) is a holistic approach to engaging young people through the arts and creativity to support them in thriving in all aspects of their lives. Young people consistently rank culminating events – performances, exhibitions, youth summits, screenings of their films – as a powerful motivator and key aspect of their involvement in creative youth development programs.

This article features insights from a qualitative research study in the United States that explored how CYD programs adapted culminating events to the largely virtual program environments of 2020. Findings include challenges organizations faced in 2020; strategies for adapting culminating events during the COVID-19 pandemic, ranging from centering core principles of youth leadership and prioritizing connection with young people to creative strategies for engaging youth, including positioning new event formats as opportunities for youth to co-create entirely new experiences and events; and implications for the youth development field.

**Keywords:** adapt, arts, culminating, holistic, pandemic

## Introduction

Creative Youth Development (CYD) is a holistic approach to engaging young people, typically ranging from ages 8 through 18 and up to age 24, through the arts and creativity to support them in thriving in all aspects of their lives. Creative youth development is distinct from arts exposure programs and traditional conservatory programs in a number of ways, including: the emphasis on youth leadership and amplification of youth voice; immersion in a creative community with traditions and rituals that support a sense of belonging; the deep relationships with caring adults that includes reciprocal learning; hands-on skill building and original creative expression; provision of wraparound services such as mental health counseling that are commonly part of CYD; and in dosage, with CYD programs often involving 6 or more hours per week of involvement by young people. Many CYD programs in the United States enjoy longevity of participation among youth, regularly spanning three to seven years of active participation. Creativity and belonging are central components of creative youth development, and participation in CYD programs is transformative in the lives of young people.

Some exemplary creative youth development programming in the United States includes programs at these organizations: IHood Media in Pittsburgh, PA; A Reason to Survive (ARTS) in National City, California; Artists for Humanity in Boston, Massachusetts; David's

Harp Foundation, in San Diego, California; Destiny Arts Center in Oakland, California; Mosaic Youth Theatre of Detroit in Detroit, Michigan; Spy Hop in Salt Lake City, Utah; and VOX ATL in Atlanta, Georgia.

In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic forced CYD programs to rework their program models, and organizations that maintained programming largely did so in virtual settings. A key consideration for many organizations in adapting CYD programming was that young people consistently rank culminating events – performances, exhibitions, youth summits, screenings of their films – as a powerful motivator and key aspect of their involvement in creative youth development programs (Montgomery et al., 2013). The essence of the challenge was how to adapt CYD programs' culminating events to online programming while maintaining what is powerful and engaging about these events: the excitement of reaching a focal point in the creative process; the thrill of performing live or of showing creative work at a public event; the gratification of audience connection; and the sense of shared endeavor in working toward a common goal with peers.

Through their innovative approaches to adapting programming to the realities of the COVID-19 pandemic, CYD programs demonstrated the creativity that is in their DNA. These programs also demonstrated steadfast commitment to maintaining connection with young people at a time when connection was tenuous and constrained in many realms of young people's lives.

Even prior to the COVID-19 global pandemic, students in the United States experienced among the highest rates of loneliness in the country, with 47.9% of students reporting loneliness (*U.S. Loneliness Index*, 2018). Globally, anxiety and depressive symptoms among young people doubled during the pandemic, as 20% of youth experienced anxiety symptoms and 25% of youth experienced depressive symptoms (Racine et al., 2021).

CYD's holistic approach is particularly needed and powerful at this moment with the ongoing, as of this writing, COVID-19 global pandemic and with the aftereffects of a pandemic characterized by heightened social isolation and incidence of mental health diagnoses and challenges among youth (Murthy et al., 2022). Creative youth development programs foster belonging and connection among youth participants and with artist mentors as central components of CYD. Belonging is an essential component of mental health (Allen, K. et al., 2022). CYD programs' prioritization of and approaches to supporting connection and belonging among young people contribute to youth mental health and well-being, making the strategies identified through this research useful in ongoing efforts to support youth mental health and well-being through creative youth development programs.

## Methodology

This applied research project sought to understand the challenges CYD programs faced during the COVID-19 pandemic and to identify strategies for CYD programs and other youth programs with regard to adapting events to virtual environments. The research was designed in consultation with CYD practitioners, funders, and others involved in the field of creative youth development.

The methodology included an online survey in combination with in-depth interviews, participation in group discussions among CYD practitioners, and one-on-one conversations with CYD stakeholders. 125 respondents from throughout the United States, including 21 states and the District of Columbia, completed the survey. The organizations who participated in the survey represent a range of staff sizes; budgets; and stages in their evolution as organizations; and artistic disciplines, including music, visual art, theatre, dance, creative writing, and media arts. Individuals completing the survey were CYD practitioners who were directly involved with adapting programming and events in CYD programs during the Spring and Summer of 2020.

Results were analyzed via statistical analysis for online survey questions involving numerical responses. For open-ended questions with narrative responses, the author used textual analysis to identify themes and to tabulate responses to understand the prevalence of responses and to identify examples of effective practice. The in-depth interviews provided further examples of strategies and provided context and supported clarity and nuance regarding the unique challenges and experiences of CYD practitioners and youth program participants during this unprecedented time. The in-depth interviews and dialogue with colleagues also provided the opportunity to probe themes and findings from the online survey responses.

The author conducted three in-depth interviews with four individuals, each of whom are full-time CYD professionals who were directly involved in adapting programming and culminating events during Spring and Summer 2020 in the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. The interviewees included: Paula Conrad, Co-Executive Director and Stan Strickland, Co-Executive Director, President and CEO, Express Yourself of Beverly, Massachusetts (joint interview); Cat Corral, Co-Founder & Artistic/Executive Director, transcENDANCE, Lemon Grove, California; and Brandon Steppe, Founder and Executive Director, David's Harp Foundation, San Diego, California.

Additionally, the author had numerous conversations regarding the project, including research design and survey questions, with the following field experts who were in frequent dialogue with CYD practitioners as they were engaged in adapting programming, including culminating events, during Spring and Summer 2020: Arielle Brown, Knowledge and Strategy Associate, The Lewis Prize for Music; Matt D'Arrigo, Co-Founder & Director, The Clare Rose Center for Creative Youth Development; Founder, A Reason to Survive (ARTS), a CYD program in National City, California; Erik Holmgren, Program Manager, Creative Youth Development, Massachusetts Cultural Council; Katie Lorge, Creative Youth Development Programs Manager, Clare Rose Foundation; and Käthe Swaback, Program Officer, Creative Youth Development, Massachusetts Cultural Council.

Further, the author participated in numerous group forums among CYD professionals during the Spring and Summer 2020 that focused on adapting programming, including culminating events. These forums included: San Diego Creative Youth Development Network meetings of CYD professionals based in San Diego, California, and CYD National Community Conversations, online Zoom forums for CYD professionals throughout the United States, hosted by the Massachusetts Cultural Council in 2020 and 2021.

## Findings

### Culminating Events Are a Powerful Motivator and Key Aspect of Youth Engagement

Young people consistently rank culminating events – performances, exhibitions, youth summits, screenings of their films – as a powerful motivator and key aspect of their involvement in creative youth development programs (Montgomery et al., 2013). Survey respondents affirmed the importance of events to their CYD programs and to youth involved in their programs prior to the pandemic. Ninety-one percent (91%) of respondents said that culminating events were extremely important or very important to their organizations.

### Cancellations Were a Reality

Widespread event cancellations occurred during the Spring and Summer of 2020, with fifty-two percent (52%) of the responding organizations reporting that they cancelled events. The decision to cancel events was difficult for many organizations given the disappointment for young people and program staff alike, particularly in the context of the cancellation of so many school and community activities, from socials and proms to field trips, performances, and classroom parties.

### Virtual Events Became the New Normal

The awareness of the importance of events to youth program participants prompted a substantial number of organizations to persevere and find a way to hold their events. Twenty-nine percent (29%) of CYD programs adapted their culminating events and held them in Spring or Summer 2020. Of the events that took place, 87% of events were virtual, 10% were a hybrid format of virtual and in-person, and 3% of events took place in person.

*Figure 1.* Promotion for *This Is Now*, a 2020 art projection series of youth artwork organized by Artists for Humanity of Boston, Massachusetts, United States. Copyright Artists for Humanity



Table 1: Adapting Culminating Events Summary of Select Survey Results

On a scale of 1 to 5, how important have culminating events such as performances, exhibitions, and screenings been to your organization PRIOR to the pandemic? [1 = not important at all, and 5 = extremely important]	1	2	3	4	5	Weighted average
	Not Important at all	A little important	Somewhat important	Very important	Extremely important	
	0%	1.61%	7.26%	37.1%	54.03%	4.44
	0	2	9	46	67	Total respondents 124
Have you cancelled or postponed your Spring/Summer 2020 culminating event(s)?	Postponed 18.70%	Cancelled 52.03%	Neither – we are holding our events as previously scheduled 29.27%			Total Respondents 123
What are some of the ways you have adapted your event(s)?	Example response “Although we cancelled in person events, we have held film screenings, music performances, and radio doc listening parties via platforms such as Twitch and Vimeo.”					Total Respondents 122
Are your redesigned events INTERACTIVE, and if so, how?	Example response “[Yes.] Youth can invite family and friends to culminating events, which include virtual exhibitions and performances. Youth act as docents in these virtual spaces, to share their creative works and discuss how they participated in curating the virtual gallery.”					Total Respondents 120
What are your top three challenges in adapting your culminating event(s)?	Example response “Translating the interactive, relational, networking of our events to online/virtual.”					Total Respondents 122
Are you involved in developing or participating in any ALL NEW events/culminating events, such as a citywide, online youth arts festival? If so, please describe the event and/or collaboration.	Example response “Our organization just headlined a drive in cinema style event with Pittsburgh’s City Theatre that included live performances from multiple arts organizations in the city.”					Total Respondents 113

On a scale of 1 to 5, how important have culminating events such as performances, exhibitions, and screenings been to your organization PRIOR to the pandemic? [1 = not important at all, and 5 = extremely important]	1	2	3	4	5	Weighted average
	Not Important at all	A little important	Somewhat important	Very important	Extremely important	
	0%	1.61%	7.26%	37.1%	54.03%	4.44
	0	2	9	46	67	Total respondents 124
How are you DOCUMENTING your reimagined culminating events?	Example response “Our culminating event of a poetry reading was documented through a saved video through facebook live and uploaded to youtube.”					Total Respondents 117
Have young people been more involved in planning and implementing culminating events?	Yes 39.34% 48	No 60.66% 74	Total Respondents			Total Respondents 122
Have there been more youth employment opportunities related to adapted events?	Yes 21.31% 26	No 79.51% 97				Total Respondents 122
Are community members or others more available to attend and participate?	Yes 57.98% 69	No 45.38% 54				Total Respondents 119
What is your BEST ADVICE on how organizations can adapt culminating events in ways that honor young people’s work and accomplishments?	Example response “try to reimagine events, not just put existing events online, and work with young people to do that reimagining”					Total Respondents 106
						Total survey respondents 125

## Programs Demonstrated Imagination and Creative Courage in Redesigning Events

Organizations reimagined and redesigned events. Examples of event adaptations include:

- Creating a film or video in lieu of a live performance;
- Shifting to an online platform and converting what had been a mega event into multiple, shorter events featuring fewer young people per event;
- Mounting outdoor exhibitions of young people’s work viewable from motor vehicles with organized viewing times so that young artists could view the car parade of supporters from a distance;
- Socially-distanced teen summits that connected youth from across organizations and geographies; and
- A nighttime, outdoor, large-scale projection series of featuring young people’s visual art.

CYD programs who held events tapped into their creative courage as artists and program staff to attempt new approaches and formats and shared that, in doing so, they felt they were modeling healthy risk-taking and flexibility for and with the young people in their programs (P. Conrad & S. Strickland of Express Yourself, personal communication, June 20, 2020). This quote from a survey respondent epitomizes the healthy, self-compassionate orientation that some CYD programs took with regard to adapting culminating events: “...we were, frankly, flying by the seat of our pants, and overall proud of what we accomplished.”

## Challenges of Maintaining Programming and Adapting Culminating Events

The top three challenges that creative youth development organizations reported experiencing in adapting events during the pandemic included:

1. Engagement and Motivation Among Youth Program Participants
2. Technology and Connectivity
3. Staff Capacity, Aptitudes, and Stress

Additional challenges that CYD programs highlighted facing during the pandemic included family engagement, communication, loss of venues, and revenue loss.

With schools shifting to online platforms in Spring 2020, the prospect of opting-in for virtual CYD programs did not appeal to many students. Therefore, maintaining programming was the foremost challenge for CYD programs during the pandemic and was requisite before programs could consider figuring out how to adapt their culminating events.

In the Spring of 2020 and into the Summer, CYD programs worked hard to maintain lines of communication and modes of connection with youth program participants, scrambling to deliver tablets, adopting platforms and applications that young people could use on their smartphones, and telephoning and texting youth and their families. Stephen Aguilar of University of Southern California documented the digital divide with regard to access to devices such as laptops and tablets as well as Internet connectivity during the pandemic, publishing “Guidelines and Tools for Promoting Digital Equity” in Spring 2020 (Aguilar, 2020). Children and families had a heightened need for access to technology and the Internet



during the pandemic, and numerous CYD programs helped as they prioritized this need among youth in their programs.

CYD program staff considered the full context of the pandemic, its impact on young people, and of the necessary shifts in expectations with regard to programming. One respondent commented “For youth arts performances, it [what has driven our decisions] has been recognizing all of the challenges that youth are currently experiencing related to health concerns, financial concerns, school stress, and more, and then making sure the virtual arts activities or events that we are hosting are appropriate in consideration of all of those factors.”

Not only were programs weighing what was possible with regard to youth engagement in planning and implementing adapted culminating events, they also considered the demands on staff. The myriad unanticipated impacts on organizations and on staff members’ personal lives proved stressful. While survey respondents expressed resolve in maintaining contact with youth, they also reflected how learning and migrating programming to new technology platforms was a key source of stress.

Additionally, some programs experienced lack of interest from youth regarding the prospect of online culminating events. One survey respondent shared, “I imagine this will shift with time, but our youth were more or less deflated by the idea of virtual culminating events and there was a lot of disappointment and disengagement.” Another CYD professional, described their organization’s top challenge regarding adapting events during the pandemic, “Creating the energy and feedback that a live audience gives.”

However, many organizations viewed the culminating events as a source of youth engagement to be leveraged. Further, the link between constraints and creativity is widely documented across fields and professions, including among artists, architects, scientists, and engineers. CYD programs innovated in the face of pandemic constraints, particularly regarding being in the same physical space. As educator Brandon Rodriguez asserted, “Constraints aren’t the boundary of creativity, but the foundation of it” (Rodriguez & Farkas Gelley, 2017). Specific strategies and examples of CYD programs’ creative adaptations are discussed further in this paper.

## Opportunities Sprung from Challenges

While organizations faced substantial challenges during Spring and Summer 2020, opportunities emerged with regard to events during the pandemic, including broader community attendance, expanded youth leadership, and youth employment opportunities. Specifically, fifty-eight percent (58%) of organizations reported that community members were more available to attend their events. Community members who attended events included elected officials, creative industry professionals, funders, program alumni, family, and friends of youth, program staff, and board members, all of which was engaging for young people. Further, with features such as the “chat” function on Zoom, attendees were able to give direct, real-time encouragement and support to youth with an immediacy that helped to mitigate the disappointment of not being in the same physical space with the audience. CYD programs forged connections, built awareness, and grew their networks as community members logged on to virtual events.



As shared previously, survey respondents listed family engagement as a challenge during the height of the pandemic. Some families were less available to attend online events as work, school, and childcare all changed, increasing demands on families. At the same time, the convenience of being able to attend an event without having to drive across town resulted in some young people experiencing an increase in their family members' attendance at culminating events. In some cases, family members who live in different states or countries attended events for the first time.

Additionally, and in line with CYD principles and overall youth development principles for high engagement, thirty-nine percent (39%) of responding CYD programs reported increases in youth leading events during the pandemic. Given that youth voice is a core value of creative youth development programs (Creative Youth Development National Partnership Website, n.d.; Montgomery, et al., 2013), it is striking to see such a substantial increase in this aspect of CYD programs because programs would have been starting from a baseline of strong youth leadership. Youth helped to reimagine events, provided critical support with technology, supported their peers, and played key roles in producing culminating events during the pandemic as well as performing and sharing their creative work.

Further, CYD organizations also reported a 21% increase in youth employment opportunities related to culminating events. In these paid roles, young people helped bring needed operating capacity, program support, and technology skills to their organizations. CYD programs were also keenly aware of pandemic-related job losses and the inability of people ill with COVID-19 to work, all of which most severely affected communities of color within the United States (Maye et al., 2020), and sought to be an additional source of family income or source of income for youth.

## Trends in CYD Programs During the Spring and Summer of 2020

A number of trends in CYD programs in Spring and Summer 2020 emerged from the research. A key trend was organizations taking unprecedented steps to maintain connection with young people. Program staff knew that nothing else would be possible if they were not able to be in contact with youth or if youth chose to not be in contact. Programs reallocated funds to purchase devices to provide youth, made widespread shifts to virtual programming, and personally and persistently reached out to youth.

CYD programs prioritized mental health of youth, teaching artists, and staff. Programs sought to continue to provide a psychologically safe and nurturing space, social connection and belonging, and opportunities for creative expression. Organizations with social workers and mental health professionals on staff continued to provide, and in some cases, increased, mental health counseling for youth. Other programs made referrals to mental health services. Programs prioritized self-care and peer support for adult staff.

Another trend was the focus on meeting basic needs. CYD programs listened to youth program participants and their families and addressed the food insecurity that grew during the pandemic, particularly among communities of color (Maye et al., 2020). One CYD leader created a weekly drive-through food distribution program for teens experiencing hunger.

Youth program participants inspired and helped others during the COVID-19 pandemic. Youth exercised their agency and employed their creativity in providing inspiration, helping others meet practical needs, and addressing critical issues such as racial equity and social justice. Young people involved in CYD programs organized food drives, created community murals, and engaged in activism.

*Figure 2.* A young artist celebrates completion of an outdoor mural with a message of encouragement made during the COVID-19 pandemic in a program of ArtReach in San Diego, California, United States. Copyright ArtReach



All-new, citywide events emerged as a pandemic trend in CYD programming. Collaborating across organizations provided new experiences for youth and attendees. One example was the Drive-In Arts Festival at Hazelwood Green, which multiple organizations collaborated on to hold in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. These citywide events fostered unity in communities and helped programs reach new audiences.

Some citywide events were virtual while others were outdoors, and creating outdoors was another trend during the pandemic. Youth collaborated on murals and dance videos that were filmed outdoors, sometimes with solo performances that were edited into a unified piece.

The single biggest trend with regard to program formats was the move to virtual programming and events. Organizations employed a range of platforms and applications to support virtual programs and events. Youth media organizations generously gave advice and modeled amplifying youth voice on virtual platforms.

But given the challenges of the pandemic, more was required than migrating to virtual platforms. CYD programs needed to strategize, experiment, and adapt during the pandemic, particularly when proceeding with culminating events. Their successful approaches are discussed below.

## CYD Programs Used 11 Key Strategies to Adapt Culminating Events

Eleven (11) strategies for adapting events emerged from this research. The strategies are organized into three sub-categories: *Guiding Principles*, *Youth Engagement Strategies*, and *Event Structure and Some Conditions for Success*. The 11 strategies include:

### *Guiding Principles*

1. Youth Led, More than Ever;
2. Prioritize Connection;

### *Youth Engagement Strategies*

3. Give Young People the Opportunity to be Part of Creating Something Completely New;
4. Provide One-on-One Support;
5. Leverage the Increased Availability of Community Members to Attend;
6. Work Across Geographies;
7. Make it Interactive;
8. Make it Celebratory, Make it Special;

### *Event Structure and Some Conditions for Success*

9. Hold Shorter Events with Smaller Groups of Young People;
10. Get Help with Technology; and
11. Allow More Time for Planning.

*Figure 3: 11 Strategies for Adapting Culminating Events During the COVID-19 Pandemic.*  
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<b>Guiding Principles</b>	
	1. Youth Led, More than Ever
	2. Prioritize Connection
<b>Youth Engagement Strategies</b>	
	3. Give Young People the Opportunity to be Part of Creating Something Completely New
	4. Provide One-on-One Support
	5. Leverage the Increased Availability of Community Members to Attend
	6. Work Across Geographies
	7. Make it Interactive
	8. Make it Celebratory, Make it Special
<b>Event Structure and Some Conditions for Success</b>	

	9. Hold Shorter Events with Smaller Groups of Young People
	10. Get Help with Technology
	11. Allow More Time for Planning

## Guiding Principles

### Youth Led, More than Ever

While expanded learning and youth development practitioners widely embrace youth voice as a foundational program element and core value, participants in this study reiterated the importance of youth voice during this time of rapid change and global crisis. “Lean into the practice. Nothing for them without them,” implored one respondent. Practitioners emphasized the need to ask and keep asking youth what they want in programming and events given how much everything was shifting and because of the loss of control youth were experiencing in many aspects of their lives. “Be off the charts nimble...Let the young people tell you what they want to do and work with them to make it happen,” advised one practitioner in response to the question regarding top advice during the pandemic. With regard to events, another practitioner shared, “Engaging the young people in the planning stage and in the development of the solution helps to build their confidence and increases their level of participation.” Ensuring that programs and events were youth led was also a strategy for engaging young people, which helped programs to address their top pandemic challenge of youth engagement.

### Prioritize Connection

CYD practitioners who participated in this research prioritized maintaining connection with youth during the pandemic above other programmatic concerns. As such, modified core programming, such as Art 160’s drop-in virtual studio sessions, took priority over public-facing events. Practitioners expressed empathy and awareness for all that youth were coping with during the first six months of the pandemic. One program staff member shared, “... recognize and honor that the world is different right now and that if the work is a little different as a result or if not all youth are able to step up, that is ok. They may be dealing with a lot, and the art can reflect that and provide a release/way of processing what they are dealing with.”

The healing and nurturing aspects of being part of a creative community were important aspects of what CYD programs brought to young people during the pandemic. One survey respondent discussed what his program learned by listening to young people in the early weeks of the pandemic: “We have learned that providing youth space to connect deeper with their artistic passion in a social online setting (opposite of what their distance learning school model is) was more important than a reimagined event for them in this season. These informal listening parties simultaneously honored young people’s work and provided additional opportunities to connect during these challenging times.”

Just as youth voice was imperative, so was youth choice. In contrast to some teachers demanding that students turn on cameras for virtual classes, CYD programs employed an opt-in model with regard to participation and cameras. Programs were flexible, encouraging, compassionate, and nimble. Artist mentors let students know that they were there for the students, including by reaching out to young people directly for one-on-one contact and through social media messaging such as Spy Hop of Salt Lake City Utah's graphically designed post declaring, "With an uncertain future... We're Here for Our Youth."

## Youth Engagement Strategies

### Give Young People the Opportunity to be Part of Creating Something Completely New

One inventive pandemic program strategy traded the inability to hold typical events, such as live performances, for entirely new forms of culminating events. Dancers at transcenDANCE, a CYD organization in Lemon Grove, California, were accustomed to staging a live dance performance each June. Executive and artistic director Cat Corral determined that a high-quality film of dancers performing outdoors would be a way to showcase students' work during the pandemic, so she reallocated funds to contract with a professional filmmaker. Students' disappointment about the cancelled live performance morphed into excitement about performing during filming and about having their performance-on-film as part of their artist portfolios. When the film was complete, transcenDANCE held a virtual release party so that students had a focal point for the film's release and so the young dancers got to experience feedback from a live, albeit virtual, audience.

High quality films or recordings of performances or exhibitions are an enduring source of pride and enable youth to share their work across virtual platforms. One research participant shared, "Creating a video or documentary style project allows the young people to have something to take away. It also allows them to share their work with people all over the world via email, Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, Twitter, and YouTube. It's also a great tool for them to look back on and recognize how they contributed to creating something amazing during a challenging time in the world."

In the summer of 2020, following the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis, Minnesota, Detroit Youth Choir (DYC), also in the midwestern United States, collaborated with Imagination Detroit to film Detroit Youth Choir – Glory – We Are One – featuring IndigoYaj and Kid Jay, a powerful live action video filmed primarily on the streets of Detroit. John Legend wrote the song "Glory" for the 2014 film *Selma* about the civil rights movement in the United States during the 1960s. DYC selected the song and altered the lyrics to reflect their modern-day call for racial justice in the wake of ongoing racism and police brutality in the U.S. The students of DYC created a video that, with its closeups of singers expressing deep conviction about the song lyrics, coupled with aerial footage of students marching down Woodward Avenue in Detroit painted with the words "Power to the People" as they sing, was a platform to merge their talents as young singers with their desire for change as activists. The video proved to be a powerful medium for Detroit Youth Choir and is likely something that participants will be proud of for the rest of their lives.

World Café Live and Mighty Writers, both of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, provided young people with the opportunity to write poetry that was then set to music composed by a professional musician and ultimately performed before a live, virtual audience. The program, “Mighty Songs for the Moment,” proved engaging for youth and audience alike. A World Café staff member shared, “During this [virtual] residency, our teaching artist worked with young poets, turning their poetry into songs. During a digital release party, students spoke about their creative process and performed poetry/songs live. This was our first virtual education event; 40+ members of the community logged in to listen and celebrate young voices.” This strategy of entirely new experiences may be particularly potent for programs working with adolescents, given that older youth are drawn to novel experiences (UCLA Center for Developing Adolescent, n.d.).

### Provide One-on-One Support

At a time when young people had lost so much, some CYD programs recognized that one-on-one attention was something that they could provide that would be something young people could gain. This strategy was most often reported by music organizations. For example, Art of Elan in San Diego, California, is an organization of professional musicians that offers a Young Artists in Harmony youth program with A Reason to Survive (ARTS), a CYD program in nearby National City, California. Art of Elan continued its Young Artists in Harmony residency in Spring 2020 in a virtual format that included weekly, one-on-one sessions with professional Art of Elan musicians/teaching artists.

Programs discussed the importance of providing one-on-one support to connect with young people and to get a sense of their well-being. In some cases, there was also a practical dimension to the one-on-one support, which was to adequately prepare students for virtual, culminating events. A survey respondent advised, “Be sure that students are interacting virtually with teachers/directors/conductors regularly one-on-one...[to] understand the struggles that each young artist is facing.”

### Leverage the Increased Availability of Community Members to Attend

As discussed earlier, virtual platforms and altered schedules opened possibilities for community members such as artists, elected officials, and other civic leaders as well as program alumni to honor and celebrate CYD youth program participants’ creativity and creative endeavors. Some programs tapped into people’s heightened availability to directly involve them in virtual programming. For example, Mosaic Youth Theatre of Detroit included program alumni in its December 2020 virtual Perform-A-Thon. Involving program alumni not only provides inspiring and relatable role models, it also conveys a powerful message of belonging: “Once you are part of our organization, you will always be part of this family.” With increased social isolation among young people during the pandemic, experiences and messages of community and belonging in CYD programs were a form of support. Support flowed in both directions between youth and community members who attended virtual events as many youth performers and artists viewed sharing their art with community members as a way to uplift the community during the pandemic.



## Work Across Geographies

Events and programming that linked participants and attendees who were in different locales and who were from different organizations put a fresh spin on virtual programming. Working across geographies could be exciting and engaging and an antidote to the tedium that was a common experience among youth during the pandemic. In one bi-coastal collaboration, WNYC's Radio Rookies of New York, New York partnered with YR Media of Oakland, California, to produce "Young America Speaks Up", which featured content created by young people from throughout the United States.

## Make it Interactive

The National Young Artists Summit in 2020 was a creative youth development multi-day culminating event. During the Summit young creatives from throughout the United States engaged with one another about being young artists, about global and domestic issues, and about the creative youth development field.

In other events and gatherings, youth created together via virtual platforms. One quick-to-pivot CYD organization director shared, "We actually reimagined all of our online time to be 100 % interactive as we found that young people would not participate if it was not interactive. One example of this is our Beat making breakouts where young people could interact in Zoom socially or move freely to breakout rooms where our Artist Mentors were producing music live with input from youth. The music was then transferred to youth via a phone app called 'Bandlab' where they added their own vocals to the instrumentals."

Across artforms and genres and event program elements, real-time interactivity among youth was the predominant form of interactivity in virtual, culminating events. Audience members' primary role was encouragement. That being said, audiences were sometimes invited to participate in the live event as an audience engagement strategy, whether by dancing or singing or responding verbally. A program noted in its survey response, "We also hosted an open mic poetry slam where the audience joined in and performed."

Audiences also asked questions and provided feedback. A survey respondent wrote, "Students in most cases had opportunity to share work, and receive direct feedback, praise, and advice from mentors, peers, and audience members. In larger events we employed Zoom panel features and offered Q&A opportunities to the audience."

Some interactivity was prompted, such as by an on-camera host inviting attendees to comment in chat features. One survey response read, "YouTube Premiere allowed us to release the films in a way that people watched them in real time and could comment together." Interactivity also took the form of structured polls. A CYD program staff member described the role of a poll in their program's virtual event: "In one instance, a student playwright edited their play to include Zoom as the place for the script, and built into the play an alternate ending where an audience poll affected the ending of the performance."

## Make it Celebratory, Make it Special

A typical element of culminating events is joy and celebration, so finding ways to make the event adaptation celebratory is important. Express Yourself of Beverly, Massachusetts moved



its large, annual culminating event online in Spring 2020. The organization provided pizza and t-shirts to students and families to enjoy during their livestreamed culminating event.

Another organization with annual traditions for graduating high school seniors figured out how to honor and celebrate these teens with individually-tailored gifts and a way to share in the moment as a community. “We sent our senior gifts to our graduates and had them do an unboxing during a Zoom event and share their personalized awards with everyone. This was in conjunction with screening their work and having Teaching Artists give short speeches,” shared a survey respondent from a CYD program. “The unboxing was probably the highlight of the event.”

### Event Structure and Some Conditions for Success

Some nuts-and-bolts strategies emerged from the research, and respondents were eager to share the lessons from their successes and failures.

#### Hold Shorter Events with Smaller Groups of Young People

With school, work, socializing, and many leisure activities such moving entirely or substantially online, *virtual fatigue* became a watchword and a reality. CYD programs that were designing opt-in activities such as virtual events had to confront virtual fatigue of both youth participants and audience members as they adapted culminating events during the height of the pandemic.

A contributing factor to virtual fatigue is not feeling seen or heard in the digital space. CYD programs discerned that multiple, smaller virtual events featuring fewer young people could help give youth a sense of being in the spotlight.

Additionally, smaller-scale events can foster a sense of connection with audiences in a digital space. “...online and small — focused for larger impact,” summarized one survey respondent in describing their organization’s formula for success.

Virtual events that maintain audience engagement are shorter in duration than typical live events. Organizations that discussed specific timespans as being successful recommended 30 minutes to 1 hour maximum for the audience portion of a virtual event. Youth and program staff sometimes chose to also have their own, non-public space for celebration and sharing following the public event. Just as performances moved online, so did cast parties, closing circles, and group reflections.

#### Get Help with Technology

Identifying, acquiring, and effectively using technology were important conditions for success in adapting culminating events to virtual environments during the pandemic. For organizations without needed expertise on their existing staff, getting help with technology was essential for multiple reasons: to understand what was possible creatively and technically, including vis-à-vis connectivity; to learn and train others, adults and youth alike, on new apps and platforms and other forms of technology; and to support smooth implementation during live, virtual events.

Organizations sought help in a variety of ways, including learning from peers. Youth media arts programs such as David’s Harp Foundation in San Diego, California and 1Hood

Media in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania and others provided early and ongoing leadership, sharing expertise and advice with their colleagues. Youth themselves provided leadership, advice, and technical support. CYD programs also partnered with creative industry. Some programs secured new volunteers or contracted with people or firms with technology expertise.

### Allow More Time for Planning

The exploratory, experimental, and iterative nature of unexpectedly and fundamentally re-designing a culminating event was time consuming. Numerous respondents and interviewees reported that adapting events took more time to plan than what was typical in pre-pandemic program timelines and program cycles. “Allow 4 times the amount of planning time!” wrote one respondent. “...allow time for research and planning on what it will take to implement,” echoed another.

Involving youth in the planning also required time and was, as always in process-oriented CYD, of central importance to young people’s experience. Programs also discussed additional support to help young people prepare for events taking place in new and unfamiliar formats. A program staff member advised, “...include them [youth] early in the process and planning, and rehearse rehearse rehearse.”

### Implications

For CYD program staff during the pandemic, living their commitment to youth meant proceeding with imperfect solutions. Program staff modeled a healthy orientation toward unanticipated challenges as being flexible in the face of unanticipated challenges is healthy for people and for organizations (Noam, 2020).

CYD programs responding to the survey and in interviews encouraged others to persevere in finding ways to adapt culminating events. CYD programs, as all youth programs during the COVID-19 pandemic, faced significant challenges with regard to maintaining programming and adapting events. The very acts of strained CYD program staff taking the time to share words of encouragement and insights on programming and events during the pandemic by responding to the survey and by granting interviews were themselves acts of generosity and commitment to young people.

French philosopher Voltaire’s aphorism “The best is the enemy of the good,” is reflected in these words of encouragement from a survey respondent:

“Keep going. It’s not perfect, but everyone is in the same boat, and the effort and caring you show the kids and families means more than ever.”

In December 2021 United States Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy issued an Advisory on Protecting Youth Mental Health. The report outlines the significant impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the mental health of young people in the United States, discusses the pre-pandemic declining overall state of youth mental health, and identifies the state of youth mental health in the United States as a crisis. The Advisory calls for investment in and support of young people’s mental health and well-being to be a priority across public, private, and social sectors in the U.S.

Creative youth development programs have an important role to play in that they contribute to youth mental health and well-being by supporting belonging, which in turn supports optimism (Noam, 2021). Prioritizing connection with young people is the right choice and is a lesson to carry forward beyond the pandemic (Montgomery 2021).

## Conclusion

The strategies for adapting culminating events in creative youth development programs during Spring and Summer 2020 as COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns were enacted throughout the United States can be useful going forward.

The field of CYD demonstrated innovation and commitment to young people through its creative adaptations of culminating events. The strategies the field employed centered foundational principles of prioritizing connection and youth leadership. Creative strategies for youth engagement, including framing new event formats as opportunities for young people to be part of creating something completely new; providing one-on-one support; leveraging the availability of community members to attend; working across geographies; and coaxing joy by making events celebratory and special; are worth employing going forward to effectively engage young people in CYD programs.

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