

Staff Spotlight

Meet Aleks Liou, Program Manager, Youth Action for the Planet

by Larissa Walder



[Browse Staff Spotlights](#)

Aleks Liou (far left, top row), program manager of Youth Action for the Planet, with the program's Leadership Design Council members, who organize programming for their peers, conduct fieldwork, contribute to restoration projects, and more.

Aleks Liou joined the Academy to create a new program called Youth Action for the Planet (YAP). Part of the Academy's Thriving California initiative, YAP is designed to grow a coalition of Bay Area youth passionate about climate activism. Aleks currently works directly with 14 youth leaders, who Aleks fondly calls their co-workers. Together, they identified three main areas of activism to focus on: planting and regeneration, policy and advocacy, and youth convenings to grow a unified coalition for social

change. Read on to learn more about Aleks and their inspiring work with youth.

What do you value most about your role leading Youth Action for the Planet?

I love working with young people to define what “youth action” really means. Because YAP is a brand new program, I’m working with the Leadership Design Council (group of 14 youth) to co-create the program direction and priorities, as well as the process to get there. Even though I sometimes bring ideas to the Leadership Design Council, only 25% or less of these end up happening—it’s truly a youth-led program.

For instance, in January, YAP put on a wildly successful MLK Day of Action, with nearly 700 individual interactions with guests during our Climate Activities Fair. But afterwards, the Leadership Design Council decided we wanted more than just engaging peers in events. The LDC is now focusing on connecting youth to the latest climate research from Academy scientists, so that young people can engage in collective action around pressing research areas to mitigate climate change.



Youth Action for the Planet members created a timeline of youth climate action in the Bay Area, from 1970 until the day they showed it at their Earth Day Pop-Up this year.

How did you get interested in climate and youth activism?

After college, I really wanted to work directly with youth, so I became a sixth grade science teacher in New York City. During my first year of teaching, my students were quickly radicalized by the police murder of Eric Garner. By holding space for conversations about race and racism with my students, I realized I was most effective and inspired while working alongside youth, teaching them political history and strategy, so that they could work together and take action on issues that directly impacted their lives.

This prompted me to pursue a PhD in education with a focus on youth activism and intergenerational solidarity. My research was written with youth activists about how adults can challenge age-based power dynamics and support youth-led movements. During my PhD, I was able to participate in the 2021 Stop Line 3 protests against a tar sands pipeline running through the Red Lake, Leech Lake, and White Earth reservations in Northern Minnesota. This experience helped me cross over to environmental activism from a world of racial solidarity organizing, though all of these movements are intersectional. Indigenous sovereignty is racial justice, which is climate justice, and vice versa.

What moments or aspects of Youth Action for the Planet have made you proud so far?

Youth are really unafraid of pushing back. While we as adults have already both accepted the existing structures and have fear about changes—in workplaces, in the world—young people have both the fearlessness and the creativity to push for change. At the virtual Green Museums Summit reaching 5,000+ people, the Leadership Design Council shared ways that adults can support youth activism, especially around climate change.

For instance, LDC member Vivienne Yu shared this at the summit: "Author Suzanne Collins says, 'What young brains lack in experience they sometimes make up for in idealism. Nothing seems impossible to them.' And I feel like that's us! What we lack in experience or knowledge, we make up for with our passion. Adults who want to support youth climate action can consider youth perspectives, allow us to give input when making important decisions that affect us, and deem what we say as valuable."

After our presentation I got a laugh out of a comment in the chat that said, "Forget AI. These youth are coming for our jobs."

Aleks, learning about you inspired me to support youth activism! What can I do as an adult in the world?

One of the unique challenges of adultism, or the oppression experienced by young people at the hands of adults and adult-produced systems, is that everyone was once a young person. Unlike systems of oppression like racism or sexism, adultism is fueled by an adult presupposition that older people know what younger people are going through because they were once youth themselves.

But youth today have vastly different lived experiences than youth who grew up in different political moments. For instance, today's youth grow up with social media, active shooter drills, and other challenges that adults could not even imagine a decade or two ago. Adults who are genuinely interested in acting in solidarity with youth should listen to and follow the lead of young people. Youth are best situated to understand what works to engage their peers, and as adults, we have to be humble enough to know that we won't always know what will resonate with youth.



During the MLK Day of Action in January 2024, Youth Action for the Planet leaders gathered with other young people from across the Bay Area to talk about ways to empower youth to make climate-related changes in their communities.

Staff snippets

Favorite Academy animal: Cuttlefish that's right outside of the Philippine tank (not sure what the name is; if I remember I'll check on Tuesday!)

Pets: I have two, my dog and my partner's cat. My 7-year-old dog, named Ponyo, is my first pet, and I have wanted a pet forever! I even gave a speech in kindergarten about wanting a dog. Someone's got to make your dreams come true, even with the little things, and most times, it's yourself.

Favorite foods: I love Boba and pastries. I am hoping to build a "library of boba and pastry knowledge," so please send me your suggestions!

What you're reading/watching now: I just finished *There, There* and *Yellow Face* and am looking for suggestions on what I should read next.

About the author

Larissa Walder is a senior associate of teacher professional development.