

# Youth Participation in NGOs: Implications for Leadership Development and Social Responsibility

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**Abstract:** This concept paper proposes the Exposure–Engagement–Empowerment (EEE) model to explain how youth participation in non-governmental organizations (NGOs) fosters leadership development and social responsibility. Through a thematic synthesis of existing literature, the paper finds that NGOs provide experiential platforms for youth to acquire essential leadership skills such as communication, teamwork, and problem-solving. NGO involvement also supports ethical awareness, civic identity, and a justice-oriented mindset capacities often underdeveloped in formal education systems. Furthermore, the paper highlights structural barriers such as unequal access, tokenistic involvement, and lack of institutional recognition that limit the impact of NGO engagement. It concludes that integrating NGO participation into youth development frameworks can strengthen leadership pathways and foster a generation of socially conscious, ethically grounded leaders.

**Keywords:** Youth, NGO participation, Leadership development, Social responsibility, Experiential learning

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## 1. Introduction

Youth involvement in non-governmental organizations (NGOs) has attracted more and more interest as a transforming path for the growth of social responsibility and leadership development. Empowering the younger generation by significant civic involvement has become more important than ever in a fast-changing global scene defined by political instability, social inequity, and environmental issues (Bessant, Farthing, & Watts, 2017). Youth people may develop outside of academic boundaries and interact directly with grassroots movements, social justice projects, and community needs by means of NGOs, which provide a special and informal educational environment (Pancer, 2015). These groups provide youth people with chances to acquire critical thinking, empathy, teamwork, and moral responsibility qualities necessary for the leaders of tomorrow.

Unlike established educational institutions, which sometimes give academic knowledge priority, NGOs provide forums for practical learning. By means of active involvement in volunteering, project execution, and advocacy activity, young people address real-world issues requiring pragmatic decision-making, multicultural communication, and adaptive leadership (Kolb, 1984; Lewis, 2020). Such encounters are essential in forming leaders with a strong dedication to ethical governance and inclusive society development in addition to technical ability (Eyler & Giles, 1999). The idea of youth growth via NGOs fits more general conceptions of civic participation and transformational learning, in which lived experience shape's identity development, value orientation, and active citizenship (Komives et al., 2006; Roberts, 2008).

The purpose of this concept paper is to look at the empirical and theoretical links between youth involvement in NGOs and improvement of social responsibility and leadership abilities. Drawing on a thorough study of academic literature and worldwide best practices, it investigates how youth participation in NGOs promotes ethical answers to modern social concerns, civic duty, and leadership development. The study argues for more institutional acceptance of NGO participation as a useful addition to official education and youth development programs. It also looks at the possible obstacles to involvement and offers suggestions for how to maximize its influence on forming future leaders.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Youth Participation in NGOs

Young involvement in NGOs has attracted international attention as a major force behind democratic participation, civic education, and leadership development. NGOs provide young people a useful stage on which to investigate leadership positions and engage in decision-making, therefore helping them to accept responsibility for their contributions to society (Checkoway, 2011). These groups provide means for people to participate in advocacy, environmental sustainability, poverty reduction, and human rights protection, therefore acting as starting grounds for many into civic life (Bessant, Farthing, & Watts, 2017). Participating in non-governmental projects helps one to acquire critical leadership abilities like strategic thinking, communication, and conflict resolution. By means of these encounters, young people are not only passive consumers of information but also active actors in society change (Pancer, 2015; Wong et al., 2011). Many NGOs specifically

support youth-led initiatives so that young people may test different leadership approaches and gain knowledge from both success and failure—key elements of self-efficacy and resilience.

Moreover, NGOs assist to close the gap between young goals and real community demands. Young people involved in grassroots-level interventions get direct knowledge of sociopolitical processes, therefore fostering community ownership and belonging (Zeldin, Camino, & Calvert, 2007). This link promotes long-term dedication to civic responsibilities and helps to produce a society conscious of social issues. Studies of young people involved in NGOs have also shown that they are more likely to get into official political positions or carry on persistent advocacy. Participating in youth-led or youth-oriented NGOs, for instance, greatly raises the probability of future voting behavior, political campaigning, and community leadership (Putnam, 2000; Ballard, Cohen, & Littenberg-Tobias, 2016). These groups consequently serve as nursery ground for the next generation of moral, sympathetic, and capable leaders.

## **2.2 Experiential Learning and Leadership Development**

As Kolb (1984) envisioned it, experiential learning provides a useful foundation for comprehending how young people become leaders by doing, reflecting, and applying. Experiential learning stresses the transforming power of active engagement in significant, real-world events, whereas didactic approaches of education that stress passive absorption of information. Through their field-based, service-oriented activities, NGOs are especially qualified to provide such learning opportunities. Through project execution, young people come into circumstances requiring leadership amid uncertainty, limited resources, and social complexity. These situations encourage adaptive leadership and enable young people to acquire a development attitude (Komives et al., 2006). Managing a community health campaign or organizing disaster assistance logistics, for example, typically calls for young leaders to make quick choices, assign tasks, and negotiate amongst stakeholders' skills difficult to teach in school environments (Eyler & Giles, 1999).

By means of mentoring and role modeling, NGOs can help to foster leadership growth. Young volunteers absorb the actions of seasoned leaders facing moral conundrums or guiding inclusive decision-making processes, therefore strengthening their own image of good leadership (Gibson, 2021; Roberts, 2008). Furthermore, the cooperative atmosphere in NGOs fosters servant leadership, humility, and shared goal-oriented values including humility. Furthermore, studies have shown that, especially when young people participate in international or multicultural environments, experience learning in NGOs fosters cross-cultural competency and global awareness. These encounters help individuals to see the world differently and equip them for leadership in ever more cosmopolitan and diverse countries (Lewis, 2020; Kiely, 2005). Young people who grow up in these surroundings say they have better critical thinking, empathy, and the capacity to interact with individuals from all socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds core skills for leaders of the twenty-first century (Green, 2015).

## **2.3 Social Responsibility and Ethical Development**

Young people's feeling of social obligation is much shaped by NGOs. Encouragement of social aware leadership is more important than ever in a society characterized by social fragmentation, environmental problems, and inequality. Young people become sensitive to the reality experienced by underprivileged populations by direct participation in socially significant initiatives like environmental activism, refugee aid, and community development (Astin & Sax, 1998). This exposure sharpens moral judgment and guides young people toward an ethical prism through which they see their choices and behavior. Common ethical conundrums in NGO environments such balancing donor expectations with community needs or negotiating power dynamics in development work force youngsters to consider their beliefs and obligations (Banks, 2008). These encounters help one to build a moral compass that guides future leaders.

Participating in NGOs also helps one to emphasize the need of responsibility and openness. Young people discover that good leadership involves not just guiding others but also keeping oneself to high ethical standards and answering stakeholders. Daily activities such open reporting, ethical fundraising, and inclusive community involvement help these values to become second nature (Brown & Jagadananda, 2007). Furthermore favorably linked with prosocial activities like advocacy, charity, and volunteering is NGO involvement. Early participation in community-oriented activities creates patterns of civic conduct that last throughout adulthood, claims Scales and Benson (2004). Young people who volunteer with NGOs are more likely to participate in democratic life, adopt community leadership positions, and promote issues linked to justice, fairness, and sustainability (Ballard et al., 2016; Sherrod, Flanagan, & Youniss, 2002). At last, the reflective activities included in many non-governmental organizations—such as debriefs, ethical instruction, and participatory evaluation—create organized chances for young people to analyze their experiences, thus fostering deeper learning and personal

development (Eyler, Giles, Stenson, & Gray, 2001). This introspection helps them to include social responsibility into their leadership identity, therefore increasing their deliberate action guided by ideals.

### **3. Methodology**

This study uses a concept paper technique to synthesize research on youth engagement in NGOs and current literature to investigate the consequences for social responsibility and leadership development. Understanding how NGO involvement shapes the development of leadership qualities and ethical engagement among young people requires a thorough study of past research, theoretical models, and empirical investigations (Gibson, 2021; Eyler & Giles, 1999).

Data for this research comes from surveys, in-depth interviews with young individuals involved in NGOs, and qualitative research among other sources. Published studies on youth participation in NGOs, leadership development, and social responsibility were investigated to uncover common themes, trends, and holes in the present material (Bessant, Farthing, & Watts, 2017). These supplementary data sources provide some information on how NGOs could assist young people in developing leadership traits, increasing social responsibility, and arming them to be effective leaders. The content from qualitative research and literature was subjected to thematic analysis to identify patterns and themes on ethical decision-making, social responsibility, and leadership development. Moreover, looked at to establish links between participation in NGOs and enhanced leadership competencies were statistical data from surveys examining the impact of NGO membership on youthful leadership capacity (Lewis, 2020).

#### **3.1 Literature Selection and Thematic Synthesis**

To develop the conceptual foundation of this paper, a structured literature review and thematic synthesis were conducted. The aim was to examine existing scholarly work on youth participation in non-governmental organizations (NGOs), with a particular focus on its contribution to leadership development and the internalization of social responsibility. Relevant academic sources were identified using several electronic databases, including Scopus, JSTOR, Google Scholar, Taylor & Francis Online, and SAGE Journals. These databases were selected for their extensive coverage of peer-reviewed literature in fields related to education, youth development, leadership, and civic engagement.

A series of keyword searches were performed using combinations of terms such as “youth leadership,” “NGO participation,” “civic engagement,” “youth development and social responsibility,” “experiential learning in NGOs,” and “non-formal education and youth leadership.” Boolean operators were used to refine results, and filters were applied to limit the search to English-language articles. The review targeted studies published between 2000 and 2024.

Inclusion criteria required that articles be peer-reviewed and focused on youth involvement in NGOs, either empirically or conceptually. Eligible studies also had to address themes such as leadership development, ethical and civic responsibility, or experiential learning in non-formal educational settings. Conversely, studies that focused exclusively on adult participation in NGOs, or those unrelated to leadership and civic development, were excluded. Non-peer-reviewed sources, opinion pieces, and grey literature were also omitted to maintain academic rigor.

A thematic synthesis approach was used to analyze the selected literature. First, articles were read in full to assess their relevance and quality. Then, recurring ideas, patterns, and themes were identified and manually coded. These codes were grouped into broader conceptual categories, which were subsequently aligned with the Exposure–Engagement–Empowerment (EEE) framework proposed in this paper. This analytical process allowed for the construction of a synthesized understanding of how NGO participation supports leadership skill acquisition, ethical reasoning, and civic identity formation among youth. The resulting themes served as the foundation for the discussion and conceptual analysis presented in the subsequent sections.

### **4. Conceptual Synthesis and Framework: The Exposure–Engagement–Empowerment (EEE) Model**

To advance the understanding of how youth participation in NGOs fosters leadership and social responsibility, this paper proposes a three-stage conceptual framework: Exposure → Engagement → Empowerment (EEE). This model synthesizes findings from civic engagement, experiential learning, and leadership development literature into a developmental pathway that captures the progression from awareness to action among youth.

#### **4.1 Exposure: Awareness and Social Sensitization**

The first stage, Exposure, refers to the initial contact young people have with societal issues through their involvement in NGO programs. This includes participation in workshops, community service events, issue-based campaigns, or humanitarian initiatives. These early interactions help youth understand the realities of social inequality, environmental degradation, or human rights violations (Astin & Sax, 1998). By being exposed to these challenges often in ways not encountered in formal education young people begin to develop empathy, critical awareness, and a sense of civic responsibility. For example, a youth involved in a refugee assistance program may become acutely aware of migration crises and humanitarian needs. This exposure fosters not only knowledge but also emotional engagement with societal concerns, serving as the foundation for deeper involvement.

#### **4.2 Engagement: Active Participation and Skill Formation**

The Engagement stage captures the transition from passive awareness to active participation. Youth begin to take on roles that involve planning, decision-making, advocacy, or team leadership within the NGO context. Through hands-on involvement in campaigns, logistical coordination, policy advocacy, or community organizing, youth develop critical soft and technical skills such as communication, conflict resolution, project management, and intercultural negotiation (Komives et al., 2006; Eyler & Giles, 1999).

This stage reflects the principles of experiential learning, where real-world challenges serve as catalysts for personal growth. NGOs that offer youth-led projects or participatory governance structures further deepen this engagement, allowing young people to shape outcomes and evaluate impact. The experience of contributing meaningfully strengthens agency, builds self-efficacy, and validates their leadership capacity.

#### **4.3 Empowerment: Leadership Identity and Civic Commitment**

The final stage, Empowerment, represents the internalization of leadership identity and social responsibility. Through repeated cycles of involvement and reflection, youth come to see themselves not merely as helpers or volunteers, but as changemakers and ethical leaders. They develop a moral compass informed by real-world dilemmas, and often continue advocacy beyond the NGO space through activism, public service, or political engagement (Ballard et al., 2016; Banks, 2008).

Empowerment also involves a long-term commitment to civic engagement, justice, and sustainability. Youth who reach this stage often initiate their own community projects, influence public policy, or mentor others. This transformative outcome anchored in both competence and conscience demonstrates the unique capacity of NGOs to shape leaders with a strong sense of ethical purpose.

### **5. Key Themes from Literature: Toward a Conceptual Framework**

Based on a thematic synthesis of literature and conceptual perspectives, this section outlines four key dimensions that illustrate how youth participation in NGOs fosters leadership development and social responsibility. These themes align with the proposed Exposure–Engagement–Empowerment (EEE) framework and reflect the progression of youth from awareness to action and transformation.

#### **5.1 Leadership Skill Development through Experiential Engagement**

A consistent theme in the literature is that NGO participation provides dynamic, non-formal learning environments where youth develop critical leadership competencies. These include strategic thinking, initiative-taking, team coordination, and adaptability skills often cultivated through active participation in advocacy campaigns, event organization, and volunteer management (Gibson, 2021; Kolb, 1984). NGOs demand youth to step into leadership roles, where learning occurs through direct action, feedback, and reflection.

These experiential engagements align with the Engagement stage of the proposed Exposure–Engagement–Empowerment (EEE) model, wherein young individuals not only apply leadership concepts but refine their abilities through hands-on practice. The trial-and-error nature of NGO work strengthens moral reasoning, resilience, and leadership identity which it serves as real-world laboratories for leadership development (Komives et al., 2006),

Communication is another core competency enhanced through NGO participation. Youth often navigate multicultural contexts and work with diverse teams, which cultivates clarity, empathy, and persuasion in both verbal and written communication. From writing funding proposals to delivering community presentations, young people develop public speaking, digital communication, and active listening skills that are essential in

participatory leadership (Green, 2015; Lewis, 2020). The collaborative and often unpredictable nature of NGO operations also requires real-time negotiation, storytelling, and feedback loops in sharpening interpersonal skills critical for stakeholder engagement and community mobilization (Wong, Zimmerman, & Parker, 2011).

Moreover, NGO involvement strengthens problem-solving and critical thinking. Working in volatile socio-political or under-resourced environments, youth must assess complex issues, generate context-specific solutions, and make decisions with limited resources. These tasks enhance their analytical thinking and stimulate innovation, especially when navigating ethical dilemmas or balancing competing interests (Eyler & Giles, 1999; Banks, 2008). The iterative process of planning, executing, and evaluating community-based initiatives enables youth to adopt a proactive and solution-oriented mindset hallmarks of adaptive leadership.

Finally, NGOs foster collaborative leadership by immersing youth in cooperative, intercultural, and intergenerational teamwork. Young people learn to lead alongside others across boundaries of race, religion, class, and ideology (Zeldin, Camino, & Calvert, 2007). Through collective decision-making, delegation, and conflict resolution, they internalize principles of transformational and servant leadership that emphasize inclusiveness and shared vision (Komives et al., 2006; Wagner, 2006). These interactions also strengthen emotional intelligence, allowing young leaders to navigate personal dynamics with maturity and empathy qualities essential for socially conscious leadership (Roberts, 2008).

In essence, NGO participation is a powerful vehicle for holistic leadership development, providing youth with practical, emotional, and ethical skillsets that formal education often struggles to deliver. Real-world examples further illustrate how NGOs cultivate youth leadership and social responsibility. For instance, in Malaysia, the Youths Today Foundation empowers young people to plan and execute community-based campaigns, giving them direct experience in event logistics, budget management, and stakeholder engagement. Similarly, Amnesty International's Youth Task Forces provide global platforms for young activists to lead human rights education, campaign planning, and advocacy efforts in their own regions. In developing countries, The Girl Effect NGO equips adolescent girls with leadership and storytelling skills through localized mentorship and digital campaigns aimed at community transformation. These organizations exemplify how youth engagement in NGOs can be both structured and impactful, offering diverse avenues for skill development, ethical reflection, and civic contribution.

## **5.2 Strengthening Social Responsibility and Ethical Development**

As youth progress through deeper levels of NGO involvement, their initial awareness of social issues often matures into a sustained ethical commitment. Literature consistently highlights that young people engaged in NGOs interact with complex and morally charged issues such as poverty, climate change, environmental justice, inequality, and human rights violations (Astin & Sax, 1998; Banks, 2008). These encounters serve not only to sensitize youth to injustice, but also to prompt deep reflection on their personal values, ethical boundaries, and roles in society.

This process represents the Empowerment stage of the EEE model, where youth internalize principles such as equity, accountability, transparency, and long-term civic responsibility. NGO participation frequently presents youth with real-world ethical dilemmas, such as balancing donor expectations with community needs, allocating scarce resources, or navigating sensitive power dynamics. These scenarios sharpen their ethical reasoning, teaching them to make value-based decisions in complex, multicultural contexts (Banks, 2008).

Through lobbying, policy advocacy, and grassroots community projects, youth begin to move beyond charity-based thinking toward a justice-oriented mindset. They are encouraged to address not only the symptoms but the root causes of social issues such as systemic discrimination, policy failures, or environmental exploitation. This transformation motivates young people to critically examine the structures that perpetuate inequality and to actively participate in efforts that promote long-term reform and sustainability (Astin & Sax, 1998).

Working closely with marginalized communities deepens youth empathy and cultivates a sense of solidarity. Exposure to real-world struggles such as housing insecurity, refugee displacement, or educational inequity helps youth to identify with others' lived experiences and see themselves not merely as volunteers but as agents of change (Scales & Benson, 2004; Ballard, Cohen, & Littenberg-Tobias, 2016). Particularly in international NGO contexts, youth also develop a sense of global citizenship, recognizing that their actions can influence not only local environments but transnational systems. This fosters responsibility toward humanity as a whole and prepares them for leadership in increasingly globalized and diverse societies.

Empirical studies have linked long-term NGO involvement with sustained civic engagement into adulthood. Youth who engage meaningfully in NGO activities are more likely to participate in democratic processes such as voting, town hall meetings, or issue-based campaigning and to pursue careers in public service, education, social work, or law (Putnam, 2000; Sherrod, Flanagan, & Youniss, 2002). This lifelong commitment to justice and social responsibility underscores how NGO participation shapes not just temporary actions but leadership identities grounded in ethical conviction.

Additionally, NGOs play a vital role in fostering community-based action. Young people who assume leadership roles often initiate or contribute to local change efforts such as organizing community events, influencing municipal policies, or mobilizing support for local causes. These engagements develop their leadership agency, reinforce their belief in their capacity to effect change, and connect their sense of purpose to tangible societal impact.

Importantly, NGO participation encourages intergenerational learning, where youth are mentored by experienced leaders while simultaneously contributing innovative ideas and fresh energy. This reciprocal exchange strengthens collective responsibility and bridges generational divides. Over time, youth come to see social responsibility not only as an individual ethic but as a shared, ongoing commitment to community resilience and generational equity.

Ultimately, the NGO experience helps young people construct a moral framework grounded in responsibility, service, and ethical leadership. This developmental arc from exposure to empowerment enables youth to emerge as principled leaders capable of addressing the ethical, social, and structural challenges of the 21st century. In this sense, NGO involvement not only fosters current civic consciousness but also cultivates the future stewards of democratic, inclusive, and just societies.

### **5.3 NGO Participation as a Complementary Tool to Formal Education**

A key insight from this paper is that NGOs play a vital and distinct role in complementing formal education by offering experiential opportunities that academic institutions often cannot provide. While formal education primarily emphasizes theoretical knowledge and curriculum-based learning, NGOs serve as practical environments where youth can apply academic concepts to real-world social challenges transforming abstract ideas such as “community development” or “policy advocacy” into lived experiences (Pancer, 2015).

This hands-on exposure reflects the Exposure and Engagement stages of the EEE model, where youth become sensitized to pressing societal issues and actively involved in addressing them. NGOs allow young people to work directly on initiatives related to human rights, poverty, or environmental justice often the very topics they study in classrooms. These settings help youth bridge the gap between conceptual understanding and meaningful application, resulting in a more holistic learning process (Komives et al., 2006; Elyer & Giles, 1999).

NGO participation also fosters the acquisition of essential leadership competencies such as problem-solving, strategic planning, communication, and ethical decision-making that are often underemphasized in formal educational systems. In these non-formal environments, youth assume leadership roles, take initiative, and manage projects that impact real communities. These opportunities not only build competence but also reinforce agency, confidence, and a commitment to civic engagement (Gibson, 2021; Lewis, 2020).

Beyond technical skills, NGOs provide youth with exposure to intercultural collaboration and diverse community settings. Through teamwork, negotiation, and decision-making in diverse groups, young individuals cultivate emotional intelligence, empathy, and conflict-resolution skills qualities crucial for inclusive leadership in the 21st century (Astin & Sax, 1998; Roberts, 2008). These experiences promote social maturity, as youth learn to work alongside individuals of different ages, backgrounds, and belief systems.

Moreover, NGOs create value-driven environments where youth engage with ethical questions and develop a stronger moral compass. Interactions in these spaces nurture a growing awareness of social justice and community needs values that are not always comprehensively integrated into formal education (Ballard, Cohen, & Littenberg-Tobias, 2016). Youth exposed to these environments come to see themselves not merely as students, but as active citizens and agents of change.

Ultimately, this synergy between NGO experience and formal education helps produce well-rounded, socially conscious leaders. Through real-world engagement, young people gain practical skills, ethical insight, and emotional resilience all of which are critical for leadership in both civic and professional arenas. NGO participation enhances the traditional learning journey, preparing youth to lead with both competence and conscience in an increasingly complex and interconnected world (Bessant, Farthing, & Watts, 2017).

#### 5.4 Barriers to Equitable Participation and Realizing Empowerment

Despite their transformative potential, NGOs are not equally accessible to all youth. Multiple structural and institutional barriers limit participation and hinder the full realization of the Empowerment stage in the EEE model. Factors such as geographic location, economic status, and educational background significantly shape access to NGO programs (Zeldin, Camino, & Calvert, 2007). Youth from rural or low-income areas often face logistical and financial constraints, such as transportation challenges or the need to prioritize income generating activities over unpaid volunteer work. These limitations reduce their chances of engaging in meaningful civic experiences.

In addition, NGO participation is often undervalued or unrecognized by formal educational and employment systems. When schools or employers do not formally acknowledge NGO involvement through credits, certifications, or pathways to career advancement young people may perceive such engagement as time consuming with limited return (Lewis, 2020). This lack of institutional integration diminishes the incentive for sustained participation and reduces the visibility of civic contributions in broader development frameworks.

Organizational level barriers further inhibit youth engagement. Many NGOs operate with limited resources and staff, which restricts their capacity to provide consistent mentorship, structured training, or long-term leadership pathways (Banks, 2008). Some organizations may treat youth participation as symbolic or superficial, offering involvement without genuine decision-making power commonly referred to as tokenism (Checkoway, 2011; Wong, Zimmerman, & Parker, 2011). In such cases, young people may feel marginalized or discouraged from contributing meaningfully.

Hierarchical and adult-centric organizational cultures may also undermine youth agency. When young people are not seen as competent leaders or when their contributions are dismissed, this can suppress creativity, hinder empowerment, and reduce the appeal of continued involvement (Wagner, 2006). Without inclusive leadership structures, the transformative potential of NGO work remains unrealized for many youth.

Moreover, the absence of structured mentorship programs weakens the developmental trajectory that is essential for building long-term leadership capacity. Youth often lack role models or support systems that help them translate experiential learning into sustained civic commitment and professional growth (Komives et al., 2006; Roberts, 2008).

These interconnected challenges constrain the ability of NGOs to fully serve as equitable platforms for youth leadership and social responsibility. To maximize the developmental impact of NGO participation, there is a pressing need for Institutional recognition of NGO experiences in educational and career development systems, Policy integration of NGO engagement within national youth development frameworks, Increased funding and capacity building for NGOs to expand access and improve mentorship and Inclusive, youth-centered governance that empowers young people as partners in decision-making. By addressing these barriers, NGOs can evolve into more inclusive, accessible, and effective ecosystems that nurture the next generation of socially responsible leaders—regardless of socioeconomic background or geographic location.

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