

FOR YOUTH INITIATIVE

LASR Project

Community Report

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**INSTITUTE
FOR
CHANGE
LEADERS**



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Executive Summary

The FYI Leadership Program

The FYI Leadership Program was a joint initiative between For Youth Initiative (FYI) and Institute for Change Leaders (ICL). This program delivered 3 two-day workshop to a total of 49 youth participants in YSW, an area that has faced barriers due to low educational attainment and high levels of youth poverty as compared to the rest of Toronto. The program taught leadership skills, such as public speaking, communication, and confidence, that can be applied to achieve academic success.

The LASR Project

The LASR Project was a research study that examined the relationship between participation in leadership activities and academic outcomes. The project involved a pre/post survey and focus groups to gather information about whether the FYI Leadership Program was able to successfully teach leadership skills to youth that help achieve academic success.

Results

The FYI Leadership Program was a success. Participants reported building leadership skills that will help them achieve academic success. Overall, participants also reported high levels of satisfaction with the program. As well, three youth so far have had notable accomplishments in nominations for and/or receiving awards for their involvement in the FYI Leadership Program. Some suggestions for improving the program included changing the format from a 2-day workshop to shorter sessions over longer periods of time, including more interactive activities, and teaching more concrete skills.

Next Steps

FYI and ICL will continue to partner and deliver leadership programs that include learnings from this pilot project. The next program planned will be developed to work specifically with Black youth. The program will teach leadership skills grounded in cultural practices and using teaching relevant to the unique backgrounds of our youth participants.



Introduction

Leadership

Leadership is a collective term used for those individuals who are not only motivated and empathic but who are also visionaries. Leadership in school means students taking initiative by bringing different groups together to execute or achieve a common goal. It is important for students to experience leadership opportunities during their schooling, to learn the art of building relationships within teams, defining identities and achieving tasks effectively. It also provides an opportunity to learn to identify and display effective communication and interpersonal skills. (Ravasini, 2017).

Schools across Canada acknowledge the importance of leadership in their students. Many of these educational institutes have allocated certain amounts to teach students the importance of leadership and how to channel their inner leader. More recently, research has emphasized the importance of school leadership in improving outcomes for a school and its students. But make no mistake: this is not the school leader as drill sergeant, or the charismatic leader whose skill set is impossible to replicate. Instead, it is a school leader who can transform a school environment so that its students and teachers can flourish. (Hechinger, 2011). With programs that help harness the unique skills students possess, it allows them students to create a productive environment for themselves as well as others. It allows them to think of a step to step basis on how to find a solution to the problems, whether it be at school, work or elsewhere.

Our Youth

Youth living in the York-South Weston (YSW) area have faced increased barriers to accessing opportunities to enrich their learning experiences and develop leadership skills. For Youth Initiative is situated within York South-Weston, which is a neighbourhood with a high population of racially marginalized youth, newcomers, and youth experiencing poverty. In YSW, 34% of youth 17 and under have low income status compared to 16% in the rest of Toronto according to 2016 Census data. As well, TDSB reported that in 2010-2015 YSW had a high school graduation rate of 77% compared to 85% in Toronto overall (Brown & Marmureanu, 2016)

Funding Acknowledgment

This project was funded by the Ontario Trillium Fund (OTF). The actual research and program activities were not influenced by the OTF.



The FYI Leadership Program

Participants

The FYI Leadership Program was delivered to 49 youth participants who lived, worked, volunteered, or went to school in the YSW area and who were currently taking any type of academic course/program that continues throughout the duration of the project where the participant receives a grade. Most of these youth were also participants at FYI and were working on goals related to graduating high school or postsecondary.

Setting

The program was held at FYI which is located at 1652 Keele St. As this location is the site for many youth serving programs and is situated near several high schools, the site was an ideal location for this program as it was accessible for the targeted participant population.

Program Content

Founded in 2016 by Olivia Chow, ICL teaches the skills that organizers need to win social change. Their belief is that students learn best when they practice what they learn, and are constantly engaged in small group learning. Their curriculum comes from Marshall Ganz, a Harvard professor who codified the relationship-building organizational framework we teach after years of organizing with the Civil Rights and United Farm Workers movements. He was a key trainer and organizing strategist behind President Obama's 2008 presidential campaign. The Institute offers the first accredited Marshall Ganz-based community-organizing course in Canada (Institute for Change Leaders, n.d.).

Olivia Chow, ICL Founder



ICL developed the FYI Leadership Program content based on their past group trainings but adapted to be suitable for teaching leadership skills to youth. The program was originally conceived as a 15-week training that would run 2 hours per week. However, budget and time constraints necessitated the program being changed to a 2-day full day workshop. The workshop was run 3 times with a total of unique 49 participants. The program included lecture style teaching, small group activities, large group activities, and multimedia presentations. The participants



learned leadership skills, such as public speaking, communication, and relationship building, and practiced how to apply these skills in their day to day life.

Curriculum Content

The curriculum covers the following topics:

1. Introduction to Public Narrative
2. The Story of Self
3. The Story of Us
4. The Story of Now
5. Storytelling for Social Change
6. Theory of Change
7. SMART Goal Setting
8. Tactics to Access Power
9. Transformative Organizing
10. Building Relationships
11. Recruitment
12. Building Teams

Throughout the program, participants receive motivational coaching from the teacher and a trained facilitator. The coaching fosters the development of a unique story that the participant will be able to use in their leadership activities outside of the program.

The program also frequently utilizes multimedia presentations, videos, and real world examples to ground the learning in materials accessible and understandable for the youth participants.



The LASR Project

Purpose of the LASR Project

The LASR Project sought to understand the relationship between youth engagement in volunteer/leadership activities, and academic success through an in-depth research project that would evaluate the impact of a leadership program on academic outcomes. This project intended to measure participants' perceptions and actual differences in academic success by comparing that participants' grades before and after the 15-week leadership training. However, since the program was changed to a 2-day workshop, measuring change over time was no longer possible. Instead, the research focused exclusively on the participants' perception of how leadership could help them improve in school. For Youth Initiative (FYI) piloted the FYI Leadership Program in partnership with Institute for Change Leaders (ICL) to youth interested in learning leadership skills and the LASR Project examined how participation in this program impacts academic success. The research questions this included in this project were:

- 1) How do youth define leadership and academic success?
- 2) What effect does participation in leadership and volunteer activities have on academic success?

LASR Project Method

Participants in this research included the 49 youth who participated in the FYI Leadership Program. This research used a mixed method approach by combining pre/post survey (primarily quantitative with several qualitative short answer questions) and focus groups (qualitative). The pre/post survey contained questions regarding the participants' perception of their leadership abilities and academic abilities and was completed by the 49 participants in the FYI Leadership Program. The survey used two reliable and valid surveys (see references) that are available free to use online as well as short answer questions that were developed by the Principle Researcher in consultation with the community being researched and demographics. This approach allowed the research questions to be addressed while creating space for participants to provide input that might be missed by the researchers.

Ethics Approval



This project was reviewed and approved by the Community Research Ethics Board. Community Research Ethics Office (Canada) Corp. c/o Centre for Community Based Research, 190 Westmount Road North, Waterloo ON N2L 3G5.

Results

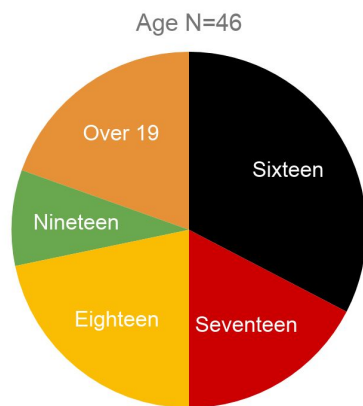
LASR Project Results Use

The results of the research will be used to inform For Youth Initiative's best practices for engaging youth in leadership programs and be shared with the community.

Results

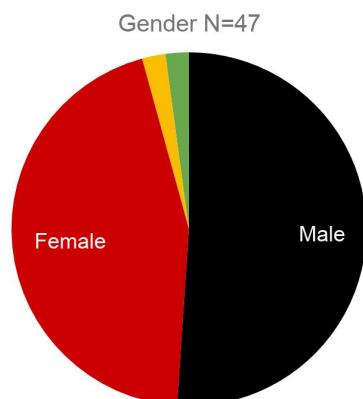
All 49 youth who participated in the program completed a pre/post survey. A total of 14 youth participated in 2 focus groups to gather feedback as well. Not all participants responded to each question so results may not always add up to 49.

Demographics of the participants:



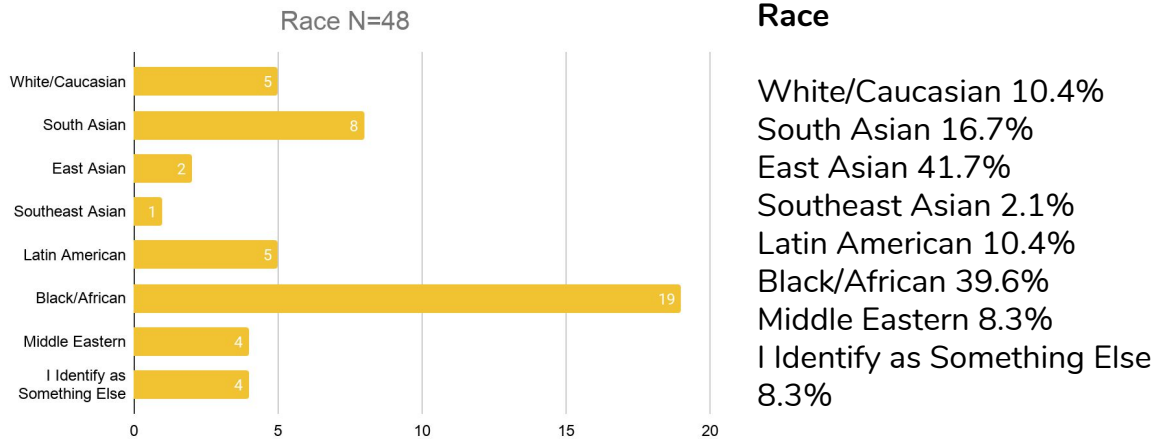
Age

Sixteen 32.6%
Seventeen 17.4%
Eighteen 21.7%
Nineteen 8.7%
Over Nineteen 19.6%



Gender

Male 51.1%
Female 44.7%
Genderfluid 2.1%
Prefer Not to Say 2.1%



There were some common themes in the results:

- 1) Participants tended to agree that leadership skills were valuable and applicable to achieving academic success. Of the 39 youth who responded to the survey question *Do you think leadership skills help youth achieve academic success?*, only 3 (7.7%) responded no. Other responses included:

“Very, it's important for everyone to have leadership skills it helps in various fields and reflects on how you shape your life and others around you.”

“Yes - leadership qualities are the same qualities that build the perseverance and work ethic that are essential to academic success. One of the best ways to learn is by teaching others.”

“Yes, it prepares them for the real world, in both personal and academic fields.”

- 2) In both the survey and focus groups, there were common themes in the leadership skills that youth said they learned from participating in the program. These skills included: communication; public speaking; goal setting; and confidence. Some responses included:

“I learned to speak more in public this will help me in school for presentation”

“I learned and developed great skills that I will never forget such as public speaking, how to get points across, how to start a campaign and all the steps to take to be successful, and I learned how to do so with a group.”



“I learned ways to make my voice be heard.”

- 3) The survey questions that had the highest increases overall among participants between the pre/post survey were:
 - a) “I seek other’s opinions before making up my mind”
 - b) “I openly share my feelings with others”
 - c) “Other people know where I stand on controversial issues”

Areas of Improvement

The youth also had some suggestions that they gave during the focus groups for how to improve the FYI Leadership Program:

1. The youth overall did not like the full day program. They would have preferred the original planned format which was shorter hours over a longer period of time. Specifically, they felt that the full day program started too early in the morning and they were tired shortly after lunch.
2. The youth felt as though lectures were too long and they would have liked more hands on activities. They said that they sometimes got bored during the lecture parts of the program and got tired of sitting for too long. Some youth compared this part of the program to school and expressed that they didn’t want to attend a program that felt like school.
3. The youth felt that some of the concepts talk in the program were too abstract. They would have preferred to learn more skills that are relevant to their life and practice these skills in a hands on manner.

Overall, the youth in the focus groups enjoyed the program and felt as though they learned valuable skills. However, they believed that making the above changes will improve the program for future participants.

Summary

The results from the LASR Project demonstrate that the FYI Leadership Program was successful in teaching youth leadership skills that were relevant to creating academic success. There is room for improvement to continue developing the program but the overall positive reactions to this pilot project indicate that the program is moving in the right direction.



Youth Accomplishments

A notable accomplishment from two youth participants was the successful campaign to allow du-rags in school led by Luqman and Hiqman. Hear about their story here: https://www.changeleaders.ca/luqman_and_hiqman



Luqman and Hiqman, winners of the Youth for Change Award, with two FYI staff

Another notable accomplishment was a separate youth's nomination for the TD Scholarship for Community Leadership for her involvement in the FYI Leadership Program. This youth was initially a participant and then a volunteer in a later session of the FYI Leadership Program. Her contribution to the program was invaluable as she brought in her life experience combined with her newly developed leadership skills to be an excellent leader in the program. She is still waiting to hear whether she received the award at the time of this writing.



Participant and leader



Future Direction

Applying New Learnings

FYI is committed to remaining adaptable and responsive to community needs. Our dedication to serving our youth means that we will be applying the things we learned during this pilot project to our future programming. FYI has recently received funding from Laidlaw Foundation and Heritage Canada to deliver and evaluate additional leadership programs. The learnings from this pilot project are invaluable to developing these new programs.

FYI also believes strongly in disseminating knowledge to the community. Releasing this report and continuing to share our successes will contribute to the community at large benefitting from learning to develop and deliver leadership programs.

Future Programming

FYI plans to continue to partner with ICL to deliver more leadership programs in the future. Currently, the next series of programs we have planned are 6-week leadership programs for Black youth who experience institutionalized racism in the education and the justice system. Our goal is to foster leadership skills among these youth so they can learn self advocacy and become agents of change.

Conclusion

Overall, the FYI Leadership Program and LASR Project were a success. The FYI Leadership Program met its intended purpose of teaching youth leadership skills that can be used in their daily life. The LASR Project was able to evaluate the success of the program in teaching leadership skills that will positively impact academic success as well as provide valuable insights for future leadership programming.



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