

THE CENTRE OF EXCELLENCE FOR BLACK STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

2021 BLACK STUDENT SUMMER LEADERSHIP PROGRAM
(BSSLP)

TITLE: The Centre of Excellence for Black Students: 2021 Black Student Summer Leadership Program

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Executive Summary

The Centre of Excellence for Black Student Achievement at the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) designed and delivered its third annual Black Student Summer Leadership Program (BSSLP) in July 2021. The BSSLP is a unique program that offers leadership training and paid work experiences for self-identified Black students in secondary schools across the TDSB. The five-week program brought together 85 Black students and community partners and provided students with experiential learning opportunities in various career fields. The primary aim of the BSSLP was to support the development of Black students' leadership skills and enhance their knowledge about various careers or industries that often see less people represented from Black communities. These professions include business, media and creative industries, technology and trades, information technology and entrepreneurship.

The BSSLP builds students' capacity to conduct community-based research using a youth participatory action research (YPAR) method. The objectives of that aspect of the program are to: (a) deepen students' engagement in learning; (b) strengthen leadership and empowerment; (c) increase research and communication skills; (d) improve critical awareness about social problems; and (e) expand social networks in the communities of Black students.

This report provides an understanding of how Black students and experiential partners interacted with and benefited from the BSSLP. To gather feedback on the BSSLP, two surveys were conducted in July 2021, one with student participants and the other with community partners and organizations. Data collection also included observations. The main themes that emerged suggested that BSSLP: 1) had an overall positive impact on Black students; 2) was beneficial for the experiential partners and their organizations; 3) contributed to Black students' career development; 4) enhanced Black students' interpersonal skills; and 5) developed Black students' research and analytical skills through YPAR.

Recognizing the importance of building and strengthening school-community engagement, the evaluation of this program offers insights on BSSLP effectiveness, areas of improvement and future recommendations. Further, the report provides an understanding for all stakeholders with a direct interest in the Centre of Excellence's summer initiative and direction on ways to support and develop long range planning and programming.

Background of The Centre of Excellence

The TDSB launched the Centre of Excellence for Black Student Achievement on June 1st, 2021. The vision of the Centre of Excellence¹ is to improve experiences and outcomes for Black students, their families and the wider African, Afro-Caribbean, and Black (ACB)² community. To achieve this, nine mandates were created and came as part of the response from Black families, community members and education stakeholders. The Centre of Excellence mandate aims to provide recommendations and support to combat anti-Black racism, identify barriers to success and access appropriate resources for Black students (e.g., scholarships, networking, mentoring) from within the ACB community and beyond. The mandate will also inform changes to policies and procedures within the TDSB to ensure all students benefit from the learning and innovative practices developed by the Centre of Excellence.

The Centre of Excellence Mandates

Student

- Provide support to Black students in TDSB schools to combat racism, navigate complaint processes, identify barriers to success and access appropriate resources (e.g., scholarships, networking, mentoring).
- Identify, develop, and facilitate culturally responsive and relevant healing practices for students.
- Establish effective mechanisms for monitoring improvement in the achievement of Black students.
- Inform changes to policies and procedures so that all students may benefit from the learning and innovative practices developed by the Centre.

Families/Communities

- Support meaningful engagement and advocacy of caregivers for their children in TDSB schools and programs and improve the lines of communication to them about Black student success, system navigation and complaint processes; and

¹ The Centre of Excellence for Black Student Achievement hereafter is called The Centre of Excellence.

² The authors of this report alternate between using the term “Black” and African, Afro-Caribbean, and Black (ACB) throughout the document.

- Engage in strategic community partnerships related to education within the identified approved annual budget for this purpose.

Staff/System

- Use evidence to highlight promising practices and engage in meaningful research on topics relevant to Black students that are then integrated across schools and at the system level within the TDSB.
- Create professional learning in anti-Black racism and collaborate with other staff in facilitating learning in decolonization, anti-racism, anti-oppression, and human rights, while recognizing the similarities and intersections of various forms of oppression.
- Provide annual accountability reports and recommendations to the Board of Trustees and staff.

Setting Context

The Centre of Excellence for Black Student Achievement at the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) hosted its third year of the Black Student Summer Leadership Program (BSSLP) in 2021. The partnership started with ten students in the summer of 2019 as a partnership with the Jean Augustine Chair in Education, Community and Diaspora at York University's Faculty of Education. With the supports of Graduation Coaches for Black students in 2020, the program had 31 Black students participating. The five-week program in 2021, brought together 85 Black students and community partners and provided students with experiential learning opportunities in various career fields.

BSSLP was developed to enhance participants' agency, activism, research and leadership skills, and citizenship. The program has two major components: 1) a work placement where students complete paid work experience with partner organizations, and 2) a Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) project in which participants conduct a social justice-oriented study based on their interests.

BSSLP is an unparalleled program as it offers learning opportunities and paid work experiences for self-identified Black students, sixteen years and older. Unlike most youth leadership programs which are offered as workshops or conferences, for example the *Leaders of Our Time* workshop³, the design of the program is multi-week to ensure the immersion of BSSLP participants in

³ A specialized leadership program to guide Black youth through job shadowing to managing finances in order to drive their education, career and personal development
<https://onevoiceoneteam.org/program/leaders-of-our-time/>

experiential learning with identified partner organizations. Additionally, the students were paid during their participation in the program, received hands-on work experience, and were able to develop soft skills.

In sum, the BSSLP honors students' voices and affords them the chance to address issues in their school and community. BSSLP fuels student leadership by facilitating a student-centered environment that affirms their lived experiences and providing employment positions to bolster post-secondary education prospects and career opportunities towards social, economic, and political empowerment.

Overview of Black Student Summer Leadership Program

During the 5-week program 85 students engaged in leadership, experiential learning opportunities and career development opportunities, and interpersonal skill development. The program is purposeful in placing students in career fields in which Black professionals are systematically underrepresented. By exposing students to these careers, the hope is to increase the diversity of these fields in the future.

The BSSLP participants completed internships in the following areas:

- Media and Creative Industries
- Information Technology & Entrepreneurship
- Community Development
- Business
- Technology and Trades
- Public Health

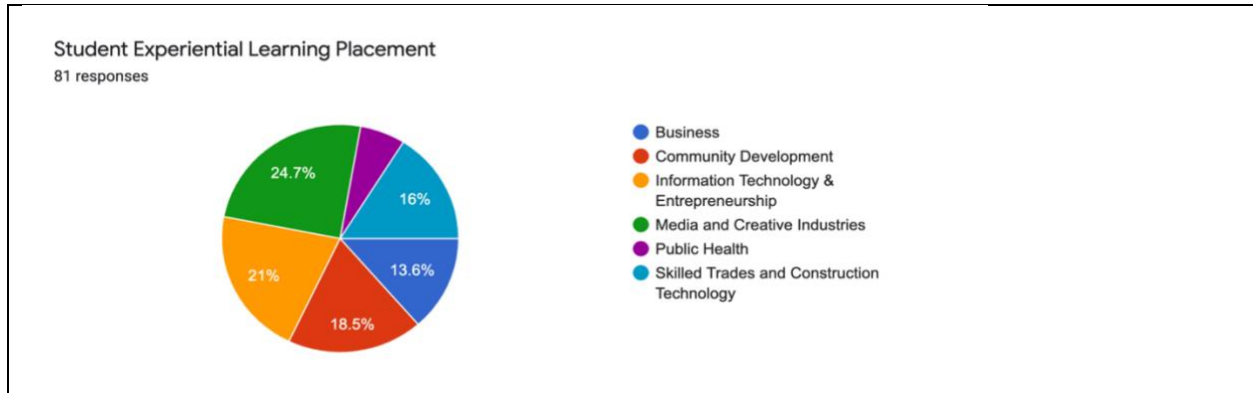
The BSSLP participants completed a 40-hour work placement (see Figure 1). The first week included an orientation to the program. In this orientation, the purpose of the program was explained, as well as an outline of expectations and an introduction to TDSB work related policies. With the support of TDSB Graduation Coaches, who developed and co-led the program with teachers, the objectives of the 2021 program were to:

- Provide students with an enriching experience through online workshops, interactive synchronous and asynchronous activities, and in-placement work experiences.
- Assist students to co-construct and complete social justice-oriented research projects.
- Enhance students' understanding of social justice issues affecting many Black professionals and communities.
- Create opportunities for collaborative learning and engagement among students.

- Provide students with mentorship opportunities.
- Strengthen their leadership and empowerment.
- Improve students’ knowledge of community resources.

Figure 1

Students’ Placement Options



Previous Youth Participatory Action Research Work in the TDSB

Over the years, there have been various YPAR initiatives in the TDSB (e.g., YPAR with Latinax youth through the 2008 *Proyecto Latin@* initiative⁴, collaborative YPAR work with OISE’s Youth Research Lab and TDSB’s Urban Indigenous Education Centre⁵). Subsequently in 2019, Black Students engaged in YPAR as an extension of the Black Student Success and Excellence (BSSE) initiative. As mentioned earlier, a four-week *Black Student Summer Leadership Institute* was created in collaboration with the Jean Augustine Chair in Education, Community and Diaspora in the Faculty of Education at York University. Ten students participated in this initiative, along with four youth mentors. Through YPAR, the purpose of the *Black Student Summer Leadership Institute* pilot project was to provide Black secondary students opportunities to develop their leadership and agency in identifying and disrupting anti-Black racism.

⁴ Proyecto Latin@ Phase 2 – Pilot Program Youth Participatory Action Research with Latin American Students: Report to the Office of the Superintendent, Inclusive Schools, Students, Parents, and Community Toronto District School Board
<https://wordpress.oise.utoronto.ca/proyectolatino/files/2015/04/Proyecto-Latin@-Phase-2.pdf>

⁵ Youth Research Lab <https://youthresearchlab.org/programs>

The program was facilitated by Student Equity Program Advisors from the TDSB and researchers from both York University and TDSB Research & Development Department. Students used existing qualitative data about Black student experiences, along with critical reflections of their own experiences, to identify ways in which schools can foster a greater sense of belonging for Black students. Students received workshops on research methods and unpacked anti-Black racism. The workshops were supplemented by guest speakers or field trips focused on centering Black identity. Students in the summer program highlighted key themes such as not having a sense of belonging, stress, lack of engagement, body/self-image issues, neglect, lack of student voice, and safety issues when discussing the Black student experience. Their experiences were used to ground recommendations on how to make school spaces more welcoming for Black students.

Building on this, the pilot grew to a seven-week program in summer 2020 and included over thirty students. The 2020 summer program was facilitated by The Centre of Excellence's Graduation Coaches. In collaboration with the Jean Augustine Chair in Education, Community and Diaspora in the Faculty of Education at York University, this youth-centered research model amplified and honoured student voices in conversations about schooling experiences and community development. The recommendations from the summer program led to two newly designed credit courses that focused on positive racial identity development and were delivered on Saturday mornings from November 2020 to June 2021. To continue the goals of developing student researchers and target school-based policy design, TDSB Graduation Coaches, as well as researchers from York University and TDSB Research & Development, also facilitated leadership sessions on Saturday afternoons from November 2020 to June 2021. In these sessions, students used the YPAR framework to design and implement research projects that target and drive school-based policy changes with respect to issues of anti-Black racism, alongside exploring Black identities, cultures, histories, and solidarity.⁶

Literature Review

Black Student Identity in Education

To gain a better understanding of Black students' experiences in education, an analysis of their identity is needed. The term Blackness is used to describe African, Afro-Caribbean, and Black diasporic identities that intersect with social variables such as race, gender, sexuality, socio-

⁶ **Power of Youth Participatory Action Research: Student Voice and Black Excellence**

economic, migration, ability, and culture (Evans, 2019; Munroe, 2021a). In other words, Black students must negotiate their identities through “an array of varying lenses” (Reece, 2007, p. 186). Black students’ identities are critical in understanding how they position themselves and are positioned in education (Munroe, 2021a) such as streaming, omission and exclusion of Black people and their histories from curriculum, high rates of suspension and expulsion (McPherson, 2020; Munroe, 2021a; Prah, 2016). Their identities are also key to understanding the need to generate critical intersectional social justice approaches to support the holistic wellbeing of Black students.

Research about Student Placement

Internships as experiential learning, provide students with valuable benefits that better prepare them for post-secondary education and the job market. These benefits include professional hands-on knowledge, access to professionals, networking capabilities and better preparation for employment (Kenon et al., 2019; Smith et al., 2019; Williams et al., 2020). Additionally, internships promote the development of soft skills along social, emotional, and interpersonal dimensions (Smith et al., 2019). Similar to internships is the apprenticeship model of learning that describes how individuals learn through participation in meaningful, goal-oriented activities (Kirshner, 2006). In addition, youth-centered apprenticeships are learning environments that are responsive to the skill levels and interests of young people, seek to honor their lived experiences, and foster feelings of community and safety (McLaughlin, 2000). Through the BSSLP, the aim is to promote an experiential learning environment that is culturally responsive and at the same time, students engaging youth in YPAR are immersed in meaningful, social justice activities tied to their overall experiences while in placement. Often, outcomes of YPAR projects result in local actions taken in the school and/or community, where young people have a voice in contributing to improvements and leading community change (Wright, 2015).

Black Student Leadership

To gain a better understanding of Black students’ leadership, an analysis of the impact of learning environments on Black students’ leadership development is needed. Learning environments that support the needs of Black student leaders should be safe spaces where Black students can interact with each other, professionals, have agency in expressing their full selves, be welcoming and supportive (Beatty et al., 2010). The BSSLP was developed to provide such a space for Black students that promoted and affirmed positive racial identities, highlighted Black people in

leadership positions across a wide range of careers, and students have agency in responding to injustices that are meaningful to them.

Other studies on the development of Black student leadership have also examined the role of identity. Previous studies have looked at the intersections of student leadership in student organizations and other out-of-school activities and the beneficial effects of engagement on identity development, retention, and other outcomes for Black students (Harper, 2004, 2006c; Harper et al., 2005). However, it has also been reported that Black students fail to participate in mainstream student organization spaces because of traditionally narrow conceptions of leadership, that promotes the individual versus collective action and Black students fears of 'acting White' (Arminio et al., 2000; Fries-Britt, 2000). Therefore, the importance of constructing leadership opportunities outside of the traditional school space that can also facilitate positive racial identity becomes more urgent with respect to Black students and their career paths. The BSSLP seeks to promote such learning environments as to focus on meeting the needs of Black students towards promoting career and positive psychosocial development.

Benefits of Community Engagement

Within the anti-racist and critical scholarship on student engagement, there is a consensus that building strong partnerships with members of the students' community promote students' cognitive and prosocial development (Chikkatur, 2021; McMahon, 2003). According to Darling-Hammond et al. (2018), schools and educational institutions that actively strive to affirm students' lived experiences through inviting members of their community to the classroom tend to have students with higher academic outcomes (Chile & Black, 2015; Tunstall et al., 2019; Wiggan & Watson, 2016). School and community partnerships can take different forms ranging from an established program where members of the community teach students about community history and social justice issues impacting their communities to programs in which students can work or volunteer through community-based projects. Students can learn about their community while they gain valuable work experience (Ayaya, 2020; Flowers, 2020; Henderson, 2016).

Placing students at the heart of community engagement can engender a level of active citizenship that is beneficial beyond higher education. Furthermore, this level of engagement promotes democratic principles in leadership, creates agents of change for social justice, increases the desire for higher education, and builds character (Ayaya, 2020; Chile & Black, 2015). Providing students with varied opportunities to participate in community-based social justice projects can further expose them to meso and macro level analyses of injustices that impact their communities. Unfortunately, Black students do not always have access to valuable school-

community partnerships (Lawson & Alameda-Lawson, 2012; Marchand et al., 2019; Reddick et al., 2014; Wiggan & Watson, 2016). It is important for community stakeholders to leverage their influence and resources in advancing Black students' achievement and leadership within their communities. If achieved, students and the community stand to gain immeasurable benefits.

What is Youth Participatory Action Research?

Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) is a way for young people to engage in research based in social justice principles to improve their lives, their communities, and the institutions intended to serve them (YPAR Hub, 2015). This interactive inquiry process is meant to result in advocacy for tangible change in communities. Using a YPAR framework, the Black Student Summer Leadership Program was established to train self-identified Black students to develop leadership competencies through community-based research projects and become agents of social change. This annual program uses YPAR as the foundation to identify, design and promote Black students' engagement and leadership in a variety of experiential learning opportunities. With the aim of developing student researchers, BSSLP provides mentorship, community networking and peer connectivity to Black students in Grades 9-12. As this initiative enhances youth leadership, agency and advocacy skills, students often use the YPAR framework to plan and implement research projects that shape policy change with respect to issues of anti-Black racism, while exploring Black identities, cultures, histories, and community.

Why PAR in Education?

Participatory action research (PAR) is a research methodology that emphasizes participation and action. Action within PAR is driven by the needs, concerns, interests, and knowledge of community members who are active co-researchers in all the stages of the study (Wright, 2015; Irizarry & Brown, 2013; Rodriguez & Brown, 2009). By seeking to understand the social, structural, and political factors of the problem from the perspectives of community members, PAR aims to advance social justice and equity (Wright, 2015; Irizarry & Brown, 2013). Traditional education models fail to value and acknowledge students' lived experiences and the knowledge they bring to the classroom. Given its approaches and objectives, PAR is suitable and valuable to the context of K-12 education as it challenges traditional educational methods, where students are passive receivers of knowledge (Irizarry & Brown, 2013; Rodriguez & Brown, 2009).

PAR interrupts the insidious role of politics and power dynamics which sustain, naturalize and frame Eurocentricity and the values and norms embedded within it (Irizarry & Brown, 2013; Rodriguez & Brown, 2009). In PAR, power structures and hierarchies are disrupted by positioning

marginalized students within the school system and community members as co-researchers. PAR addresses the historical and contemporary sociopolitical context of K-12 education towards ensuring that schools are humanized spaces (Irizarry & Brown, 2013) for students, parents, teachers, administrators, and community members whose identities are marginalized and oppressed. PAR also underscores self-reflective inquiry that researchers and participants undertake to better understand and improve upon the practices in which they participate and their individual contexts.

YPAR Principles and Processes

YPAR is a recurring process of learning, action, and reflection. It can be useful for young persons desiring to impact on social, cultural and or political contexts. The research conducted is intended to inform solutions to problems that youth care about. YPAR can be empowering for young people who are experiencing marginalization due to racism, sexism, and other forms of oppression. The YPAR process is as follows:

1. Identification of a problem
2. Development of the research design
3. Data collection
4. Analysis and mobilization

Developing BSSLP Student Leaders' Understanding of YPAR.

Throughout the BSSLP program, the research team facilitated small workshops on the YPAR process during the first four weeks of the program. The research project provided the opportunity for student leaders to engage in online workshops, interactive activities, onsite professional learning, and a passion project. Through collaborations with post-secondary institutions, community educators and corporate partners, the experience was designed to provide student participants with knowledge, workplace learning and practices, as well as skills for career exploration.

Presentations of the YPAR framework were offered twice per week on Mondays and Fridays over a 75-minute session.

Methodology

A Critical race mixed methodology (CRMM) approach was used in this study (White et al., 2019). CRMM is “an approach which focuses on integrating CRT (Critical Race Theory) within traditional

mixed methods frameworks” (White et al., 2019, p. 58). CRMM was intentionally used because many Black students’ lived experiences and voices are often ignored in traditional mixed methods research. The main data source used in this report is derived from the administration of four quantitative surveys which included two student and experiential partner pre-and post-surveys respectively. Qualitative data was also used to further support the quantitative data. To protect the participants’ privacy, no names or personal identifiers are used in this report.

Using a CRT framework, with a mixed methods design helped us to conceptualize the design of a Black student leadership program that involved experiential learning and research experience. While the quantitative surveys permitted us to capture desegregated data about students’ and experiential partners’ understanding of BSSLP and their role and expectations of the program, the qualitative data collected through participant observations allowed for the representation and situated knowledge of both the researchers and the participants (Mulvihill & Swaminathan, 2016). The varied use of methods provides a comprehensive analysis of the objectives and scope of BSSLP.

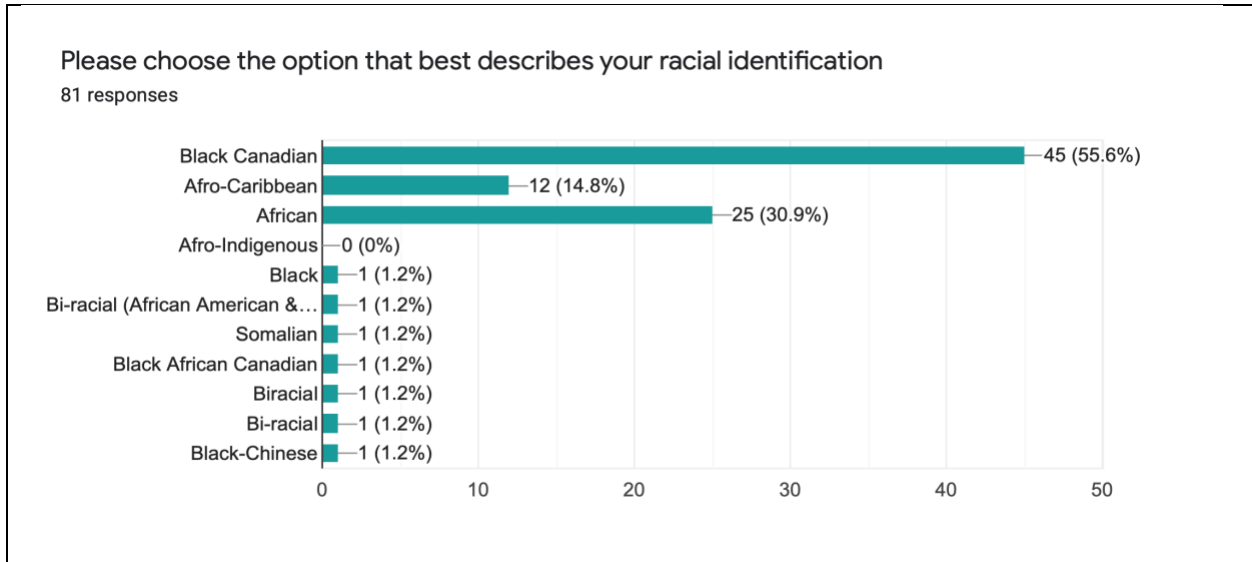
Project Participants

Student Racial Demographics

The student participants who participated in this program identified as racially as Black. Figure 2 shows the breakdown of their individual ethnic/racial identities indicated in student pre-survey. The top three representative ethnic/racial identities indicated were: 1) Black Canadian; 2) African, and 3) Afro-Caribbean. All 85 participants responded to the pre-survey and 75 students responded to the post-survey. In addition, 12 of the 75 students who responded to the post-survey were invited back to give additional feedback.

Figure 2

Students Racial and/or Ethnic Self-identification



Community Partners

All the community partners who completed both the pre- and post-surveys occupied mainly senior management positions. Their positions ranged from president to supervisors of the organizations they represented.

Data Collection Tools

Surveys

Surveys were used to capture the students' and experiential partners' general input about BSSLP. Although surveys have been largely critiqued in critical research for its limitation in allowing participants to make meaning (Sablan, 2019), when combined with critical scholarship, surveys have the potential to help research participants discuss their lived experiences.

Student Pre-survey: Two subsections that captured students' demographic information and students' interests, expectations, and abilities.

Student Post-survey: The subsections captured student information, students' impression of BSSLP., students' experiences of their placement and the support they received, and students' recommendations for BSSLP's improvement.

Experiential Partners Pre-survey: The experiential partners pre-survey captured the experiential partners' demographic information, their organizational commitment to Equity Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) and their ability to support racialized students and communities and recommendations to expand the project.

Experiential Partners Post-survey: The experiential partners post-survey included their demographic information, perceptions of student(s)' engagement in their placement, their own experiences with the program and future recommendations.

Participant Observations

Participant observation is widely used in critical qualitative research as it allows researchers to immerse themselves in participants' lived experiences. Using video-conferencing software such as Zoom, the BSSLP research team were able to learn about the student participants' experiences through recorded observations of the students' (group and individual) interactions with YPAR content, their demonstration of their understanding of YPAR as well as their non-verbal cues during their individual check-ins with the researchers. Some of the benefits of using videoconferencing to conduct participants' observations include the researcher's ability to cover a wider geographical area, because of the reduction of travel time and online observation reduces risk of exposure and harm to research participants (Kitchin, 2010).

The data collection tools used in this study allowed us to capture the participants' experience with the BSSLP from their perspectives as well as make recommendations for the program's improvement. Since the student participants were actively conducting participatory action research on relevant social justice issues in their community and their personal development, it was only fitting that the data collections tools provide a space for them to make meaning. This intentional design allowed us to "base our understanding of quantitative data through the unique voices and experiential knowledge of the participants, thereby advancing the CRT agenda of challenging dominant narratives" (White at al., 2019, p.59). Connected with CRT, we were purposeful in ensuring that our data collection steps were respectful of our participants' time and activities.

Structured Interviews

Additional feedback about the students' experiences were captured after the program ended. A few weeks following the end of the program students were invited to reflect on their experiences in the program. Initially, five students were identified and invited to give further feedback on their overall experience via email. Due to the low response rates using that approach, the BSSLP researchers followed up individually with 12 students to gain an understanding of their overall

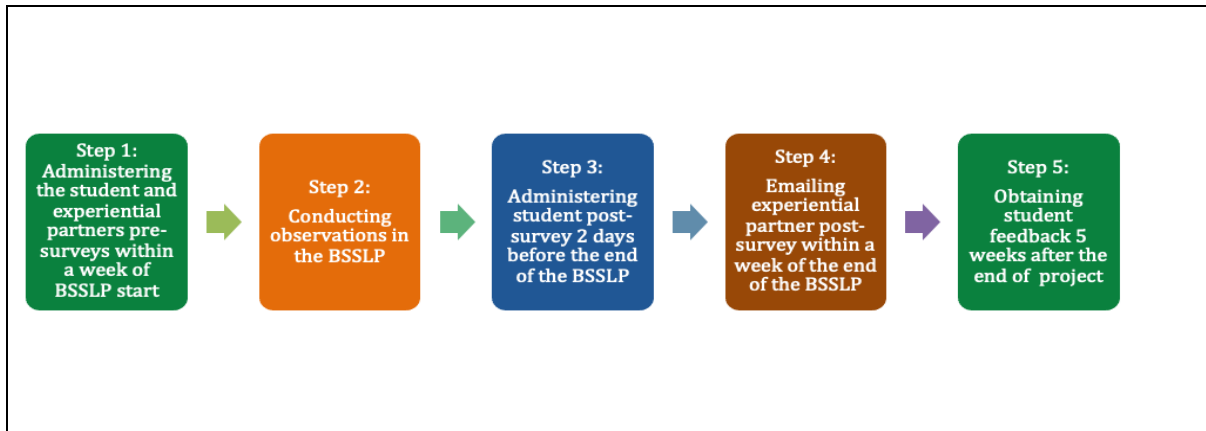
perspective on the program⁷. Staying true to critical scholarship (Aluwohare-Samaranayake, 2012), we made use of the students' exact excerpts which were not corrected for grammar, to not weaken their voices in the report.

Data Collection Process

The data collection process is outlined in Figure 3 below.

Figure 3

Data Collection Steps



Findings and Discussions

Student Participants Findings and Discussion

The data used in this report was analyzed in an ongoing and recursive manner. In relation to the student participants' responses, we first provide an overview of students' expectations of the program and understanding of the program. The later part of this section is a discussion of the key findings in relations to these expectations.

Student Survey: Expectation of BSSLP

Before starting their experiential learning placements, most students demonstrated interests in their placement choices, with 44.4% indicating being "very interested" and 40.7% as

⁷ This is covered in the students' consent form they completed during registration.

“interested.” Students also ranked their reasons for participating in the program. The following list shows the order in which students identified their reasons for participating:

1. Improving their interpersonal skills including communication, teamwork, and leadership skills
2. Gaining work experience related to their career interests
3. Networking
4. Developing a greater sense of self
5. Financial benefits
6. Improving their employability and chances for professional success

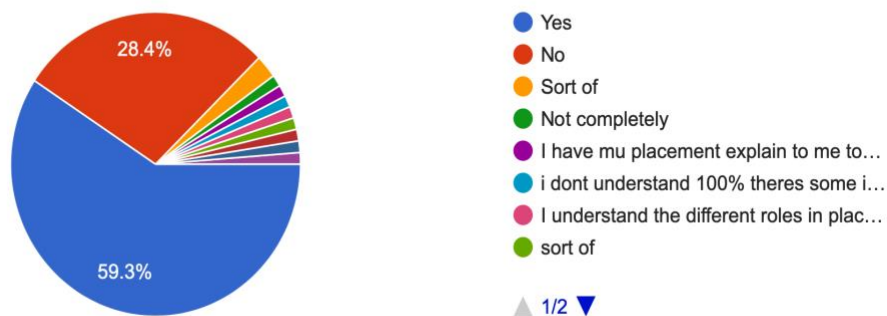
The top reasons for participation aligned well with the current BSSLP’s objectives which were to increase students’ employability and their interpersonal skills.

Seventy-five students responded to the post-survey and viewed BSSLP as beneficial to their career and interpersonal development. Figure 4 compares students’ understanding of their work placement and job requirements prior to the start of the program and following the end of the program. Pre-survey results revealed that only 59.3% of the students had their role explained by a Graduation Coach. Twenty-eight percent selected “no” and the other 13% felt they needed more clarity and direction. However, at the end of the program, the majority of students (88%) indicated that they understood their role, with 12% indicating that they partially understood their roles. Some indicated that the length of the program was too short and that there were communication and organizational issues which affected the program’s overall quality. These benefits and issues will be discussed thematically below.

Figure 4
Students’ Understanding of their Placement (Pre- and Post-Survey)

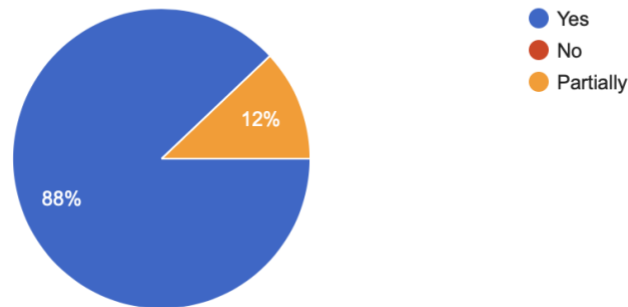
Is your role within this program and your work placement clear to you?

81 responses



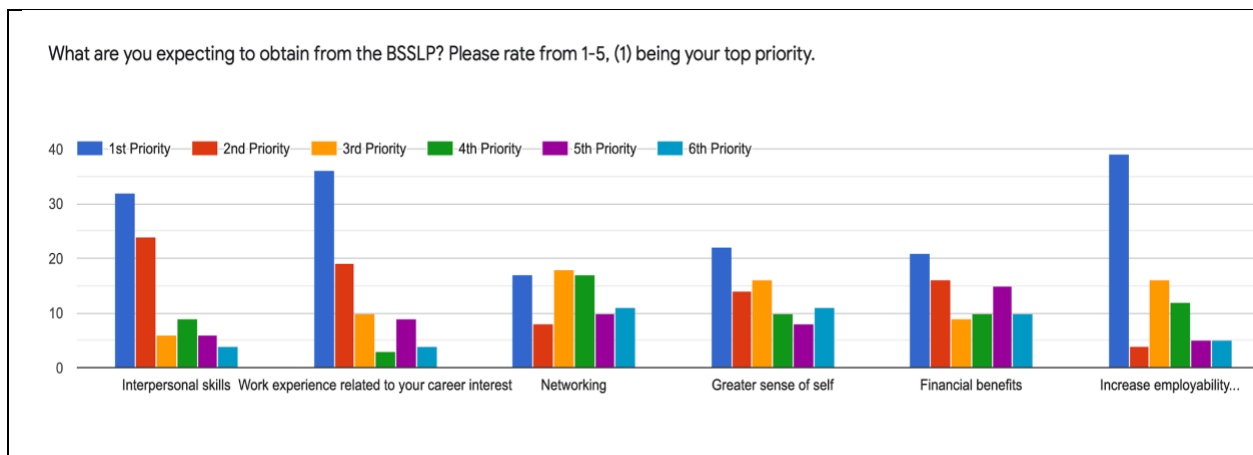
Was your role within this program and your work placement clear to you?

75 responses



In the pre-survey, students reflected on how BSSLP assisted them with their career decisions were in line with their ratings of priorities on the pre-survey. As seen in Figure 5 below, the students noted that their top priority was to increase their employability and chances for professional success. Their second highest priority was to improve interpersonal skills.

Figure 5
Student Pre-Survey: Ratings of their Career Priorities



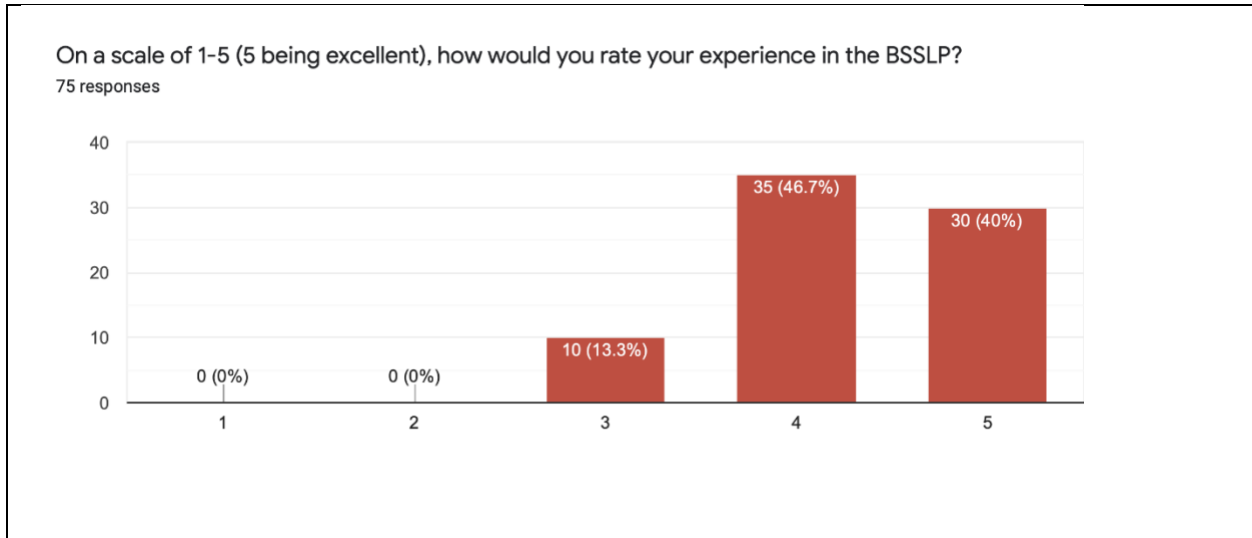
Theme 1: Overall Positive Rating of the Black Student Summer Leadership Program

Participants rated their experiences using a scale of 1(lowest) to 5 (highest). Figure 6 shows students’ responses to their overall experience in the BSSLP. An overwhelming majority of the

students enjoyed the program with “good “(4) and “excellent” (5) having a combined rating of 86.7%.

Figure 6

Student Post-Survey: Students’ Ratings of their Experiences in BSSLP



Participants also had an opportunity to share their thoughts and one student expressed, “it’s a really great program and I love how much I learned.” Other students described how “grateful” and “excited” they were for the opportunity provided by the Centre of Excellence. For several students, the program also meant an opportunity to support skills tied to their career or professional aspirations. As illustrated by another participant, “my placement was fantastic. I really tried to put my all in this and it really helped me.”

Their testimonials further supported their positive experiences of the program. Participants who submitted feedback noted that the program promoted their interpersonal and professional development. Significantly, the notion of the BSSLP promoting Black excellence was a strong theme that emerged:

This program evokes passion. It allows the multitude of hidden talents and perspectives within our Black community, to finally have that stepping-stone to reach out and have a seat at the table within multiple industries. Seeing the Black excellence and poised behavior that mirrored from screen to screen made me feel something that I have indeed never felt. A wave of motivation and fascination hit me like a large tide ready to swallow a surfer. At that moment, seeing how everyone was able to present their experiences through spoken word, visual art,

rap, journals and so much more, I knew that I was at home. Home is not necessarily the four walls that you live in but the feeling of connection and warmth when you are with your people--which is what I felt.

These testimonials revealed that the BSSLP achieved one of its main goals which is to create a thriving space for Black students to learn, build their agency and affirm their identities. In this regard, one student noted:

The leadership program was such a perspective-shifter for me personally in all accords of my life. From the work experiences to developing excellence in our skills, this program was beyond motivational for the future events or successes to come.

It is clear that student-centered programs⁸ can aid with the development of Black students' self-identity and agency. In addition, having access to mentorship opportunities during their placement promoted Black students' professional growth and skill development. The program was identified as transformative in its endeavours to improve the upward mobility of young Black people:

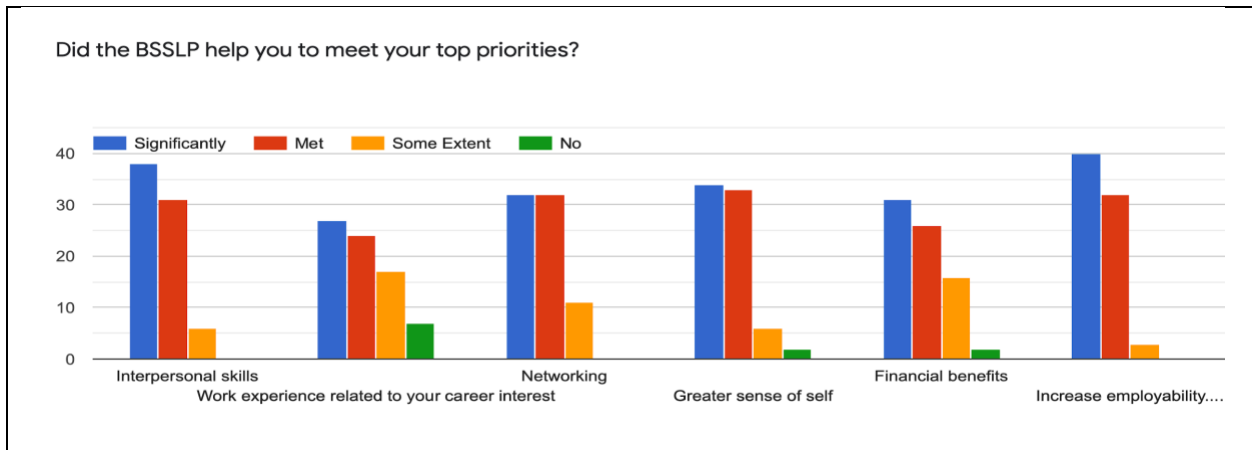
The BSSLP was undoubtedly one of the most transformative experiences of my life. From day one, I was met with the support, encouragement, and connections I needed to pursue my grandest aspirations. There were over eighty Black students to engage with, as well as many Black graduation coaches, Black teachers, Black principals, and Black professionals who constantly emphasized our agency for success. My placement was with The York University TD Community Engagement Centre and Black Excellence at York University. We focused on increasing access to higher education for Black students, improving academic standings, and creating environments that support our well-being while dismantling anti-Black racism. This program fortified my academic and professional trajectory, as well as helped me find real ways to create better opportunities for students like me. Thanks to the BSSLP, I will continue my work at university to help Black high school students realize their potential and choose their educational path, despite the challenges they are bound to encounter. I feel blessed to have been able to participate in the BSSLP. I'm looking forward to seeing how much the

⁸ Ross, A. T. J., Powell, A. M., & Henriksen, R. C., Jr. (2016). *Self-identity: A key to Black student success. Ideas and Research You Can Use: VISTAS Online*. Retrieved from https://www.counseling.org/docs/default-source/vistas/article_64ce5528f16116603abcacff0000bee5e7.pdf?sfvrsn=6

program will grow and flourish in the coming years. I'm very confident in the program because I've witnessed firsthand the time, love, and dedication all the coordinators put into the program. Without hesitation, they would stay way past their work time to make sure we were succeeding. I'd like to extend my deepest gratitude to every single person involved in the foreground and behind the scenes that work so hard to support this program.

Figure 7

Student Post-Survey: Students' Ratings of the Extent their Priorities were Met



Finally, in response to students' expectations in relation to career development, the post-survey indicated that that students' top priority for the program was met (see Figure 7 above). The expectation to increase employability and chances of professional success was the highest priority met. Work experience related to their career of interest was ranked as the priority which was the least met. This may be because of the short duration of the placement, where students spent 3 weeks in their work placement.

Theme 2: Career Development

Majority of the students noted that the BSSLP enhanced their career decision-making and introduced them to new career paths. As seen in Figure 8b, 88.9% of the students believed that participating in the program improved their career decision-making capabilities, while 11.1% believed that it did not. This positive rating is notwithstanding that 85% of students who completed the pre-survey felt that their experiential learning area/placement matched their career interest, see Figure 8a.

Figure 8a

Student Pre-Survey: Students' Expression of the Level of Interest in their Experiential Learning Area

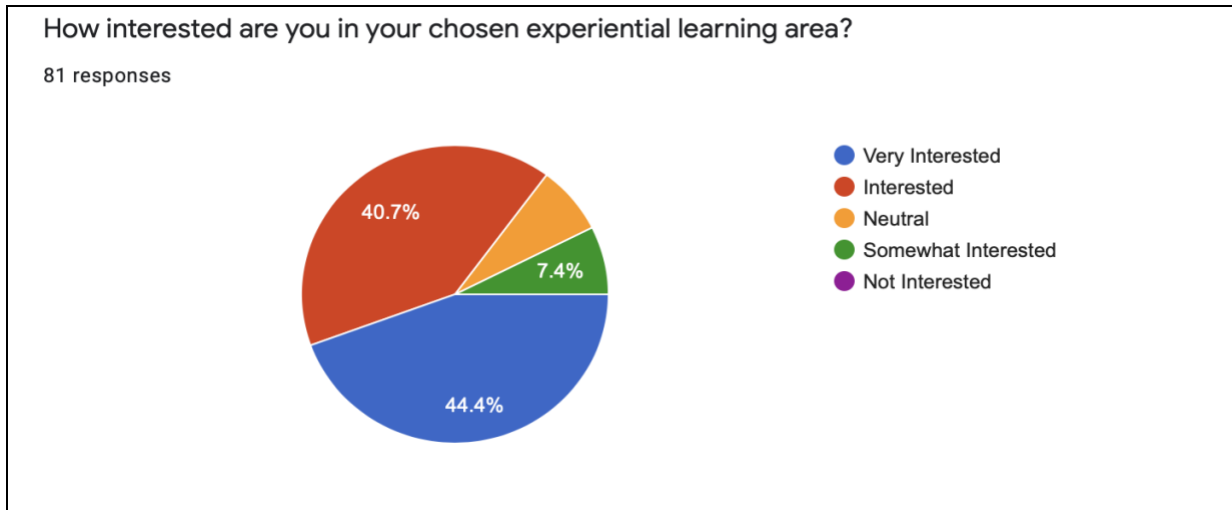
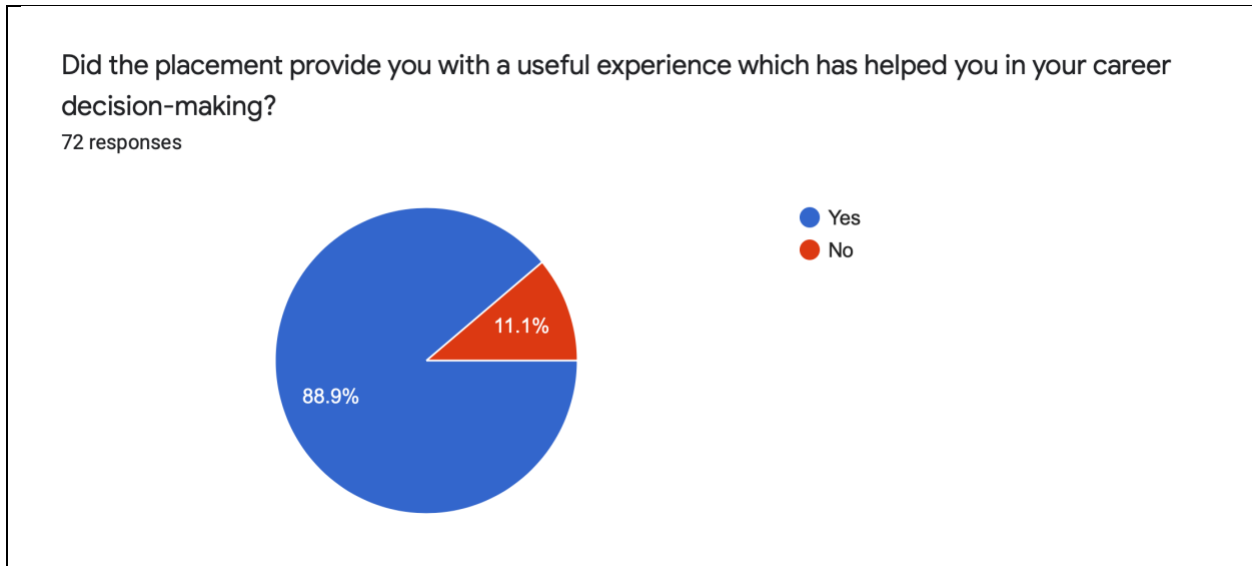


Figure 8b

Student Post-Survey: Students' Perceptions of Program's Utility in Career Decision-Making



Although the placement was time-limited, the intensive learning experience appeared to have broadened the students' work-readiness. Students reported that the BSSLP helped in three

main areas: (a) introducing different career options, (b) providing information on different career choices, and (c) providing more clarity around a career they have already decided on.

Introducing Different Career Options.

One student commented on how the program broadened their scope of career paths:

my placement explained to me how vast the hands-on career path is. before I started the placement, I only knew of the more known career paths like engineering. but I learnt what skilled trades are, and how vast it was. so, I decided to take my time and reconsider my career path and my variety of options.

It is evident that students' knowledge about the industries and career options have broadened through their participation in the program.

Information on Different Career Choices.

A few students stated more specifically that they were considering pursuing careers related to the ones they were exposed to in their placements even if they already had decided on a different career prior to entering the placement. Students indicated that their knowledge about various industries and career options deepened because of their engagement in the BSSLP work placements. In addition, a few students commented on the value of being exposed to other skills and careers outside of their desired profession. One participant added, "this placement helped me realize I'm not really a hands-on person and that I would be better suited working a desk job." Thus, placements opportunities were instrumental in helping students learn about their strengths, weaknesses, capabilities, and interests and more importantly, allowing students the opportunities to make more informed career decisions. Another student noted:

Well, it's kinda confused me because I want to be a real estate broker, but the placement was so good that now I might want to go into film. So, it's helped me, but not really lol. It was amazing though and I learnt a lot.

Clarity around Career Decision.

Gaining work experience related to their career interests was another program objective that aligned with the goals of many participants. Exposing students to these work placements helped in some cases to solidify career choices and offered authentic access to their field of

interest. Many of the students who commented that the BSSLP placement helped them to consolidate their career choices were transitioning to universities, hence, they might be thinking more about their careers in relation to this point. For example, one student responded:

I have already made my decision to go into nursing. However, with the opportunity of speaking to nurse [name], I was able to get more of an understanding about the healthcare system which was eye opening.

Another student further expanded on this point and explained how they benefited from career discussions at their placement and “learn[ed] about possible routes to get there.” Insights shared by participants showed that even as students were convinced about their career pathways, having access to mentors and professional development opportunities provided an in-depth understanding of their career choice and how to achieve their career goals. Therefore, the mentee and mentor dyads were particularly salient and yielded positive outcomes. One student commented:

The placement has helped me with my career decision-making because it has given me that level of experience of actually working for a public relations and marketing agency which is something that I definitely want to pursue in the future.

Their responses offer insights to why nearly 90% of the student participants indicated that their placement in BSSLP was useful for their career decision making.

Theme 3: Development of Interpersonal Skills

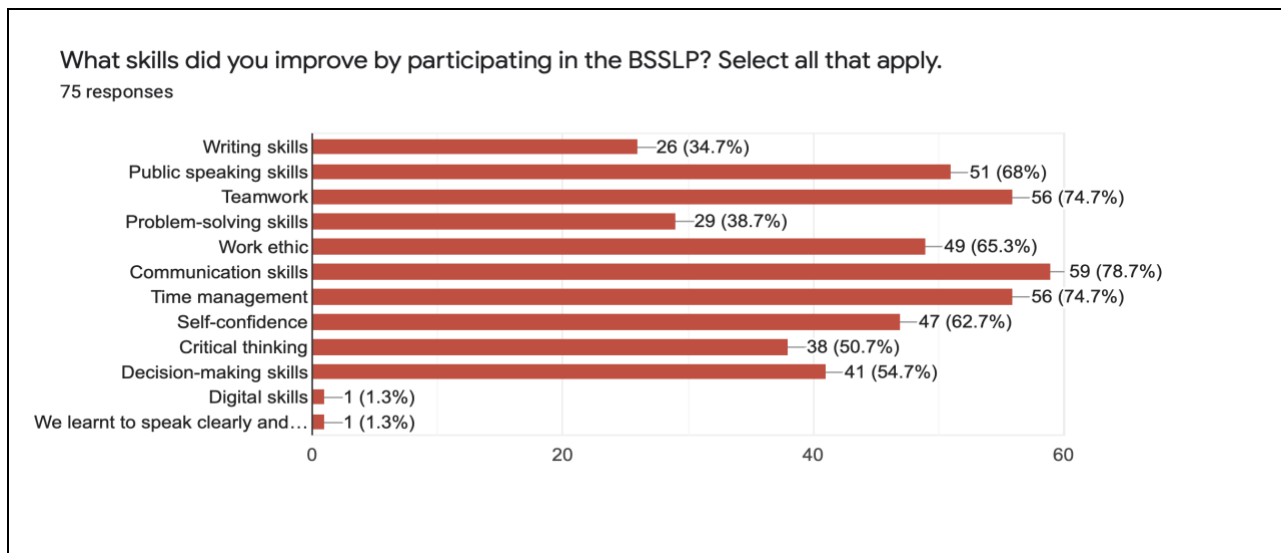
The third major theme that emerged from the analysis of the student post-survey was development of interpersonal skills, which was indicated as their second highest priority. Having access to the leadership program provided a space to refine and develop interpersonal skills and behaviours, hence, enhancing the student experience. When asked which skills were most improved by participating in the BSSLP, the student participants noted that they witnessed significant improvements in the following areas:

1. Communications skills
2. Teamwork
3. Time management
4. Work ethics
5. Self-confidence

6. Decision-making skills
7. Critical thinking skills
8. Problem-solving skills

Figure 9

Student Post-Survey: Students' Perceptions of Skills Improved in the BSSLP



Students shared that within a period of 5 weeks, their presentation skills drastically improved and as shown in Figure 9, public speaking skills ranked third at 68%. The findings and anecdotal feedback from participants suggested that they had a chance to mature socially through peer-to-peer interaction, working together as part of a team and developing self-confidence, negotiation, and communication skills. Students also discussed learning about conflict resolution, decision making and leadership. As one student said: “The BSSLP has helped me discover my strengths and has made me gain a lot of confidence with voicing my opinions and thoughts.” The student voice reflects BSSLP’s ability to build students’ self-esteem and strengthen their learning experiences which is much unlike their experiences in many public schools (Munroe, 2021b).

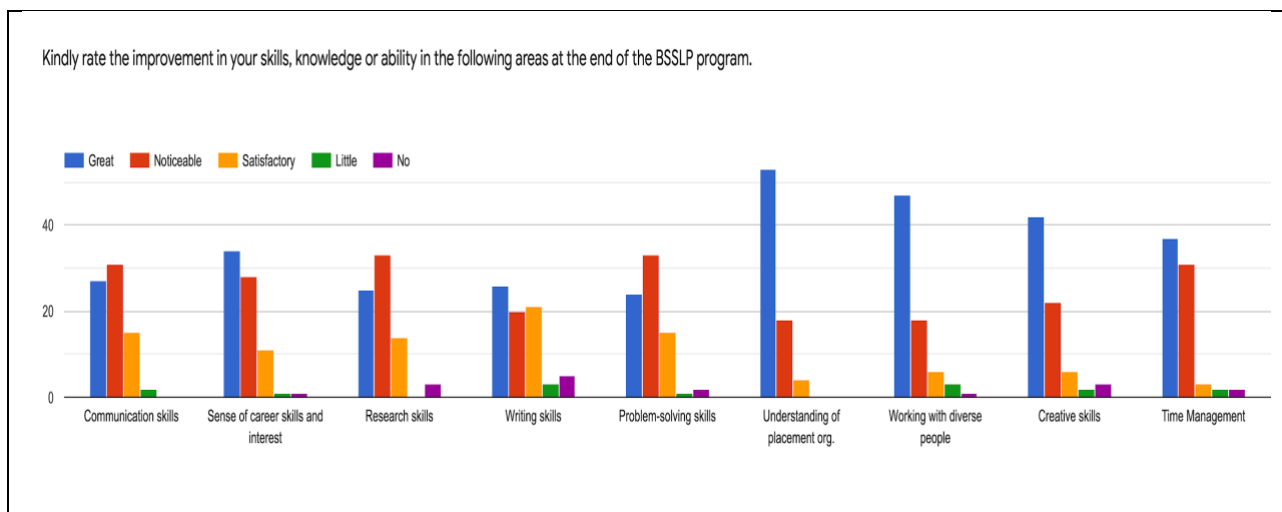
Student involvement in the BSSLP, along with support from staff, and workshops provided, helped to build the students’ self-esteem, and strengthen their learning experiences which is much unlike their experiences in many public schools⁹. This was also bolstered through

⁹ Munroe, T. (2021 b, February 17). How to curb anti-Black racism in Canadian schools. The Conversation. Retrieved from <https://theconversation.com/how-to-curb-anti-black-racism-in-canadian-schools-150489>

networking, completion of their assigned roles at their placements, and presenting their research findings. The findings demonstrate that the design of the BSSLP provided space for students to share their ideas openly and receive positive feedback which in turn contributed to improvement in their self-confidence. As one participant shared, “Being part of the program just made me them a “more confident man.” They further explained that the BSSLP “helped me grow as a person, mentally and physically....” Building students’ awareness of their marketability as well as drawing attention to the skills they need are key elements of effective career development and was also a priority for BSSLP. The findings highlight that the design of the BSSLP provided space for students to share their ideas openly which in turn contributed to improvement in their self-confidence.

Figure 10 shows students’ ranking of the development or improvement of their interpersonal skills in BSSLP. The greatest improvement was seen with working with diverse people, followed by improving their creative skills. Problem-solving was the least indicated interpersonal skill developed.

Figure 10
Student Post-Survey: Students’ Indication of Skills Improved through the BSSLP



Theme 4: Students’ Engagement with Research

YPAR is an important component of the BSSLP. The benefits of participating in research was viewed as an effective strategy to enhance Black students’ awareness of issues that impact them as individuals or their communities. Participants saw the benefits of being co-researchers and becoming involved in research and evaluation through collaborative partnerships. For some

students, the program was an opportunity to develop their writing skills, which they believed would add value to their (post-secondary) educational outcomes. One student noted:

I also realize that as a university student and political coordinator, I'll be doing a lot of writing, so I want to use this research opportunity to better my writing skills and have a piece of work to introduce to the McGill administration when I begin my studies.

Students appreciated the workshops and resources provided to learn about different research designs and methods. This included the extra support of the research team, teachers and graduation coaches, and the choice of creative inquiry for their final presentation (e.g., photovoice, creative writing, spoken word, podcast). The choice to engage students in research proved to be beneficial across multiple levels and overlapped in other areas of the BSSLP. Firstly, YPAR contributed to (a) strengthening leadership and empowerment; (b) increasing research and communication skills; (c) improving critical awareness about social problems; and (d) expanding social networks in their communities¹⁰.

Though participants recognized the learning opportunities attached to YPAR, there were mixed feelings about the process. Conversely, challenges around project completion were also highlighted. Some of the students identified the need for “*clear instructions for research*” and “*less abstract research work.*” Many students felt that having “more time [for them] to prepare their research questions” would have allowed them to better conceptualize their community-based study. The inability to work independently on assigned tasks also led to many difficulties for participants struggling to implement their projects. As students tended to have fixed tasks within a relatively short period, the time constraints did not allow the students to complete their research on time, and ultimately, many felt they did not accomplish their social action goals.

Community Partners Findings and Discussion

The following section examines the themes that emerged from the analysis of partners’ responses and reactions to the BSSLP. Partners in the BSSLP were asked to rate their

¹⁰ Kim, J. (2016). Youth involvement in participatory action research (PAR). *Critical Social Work*, 17(1). <https://doi.org/10.22329/csw.v17i1.589>

experiences with students and the extent to which their organization benefited from the partnership with the Centre of Excellence.

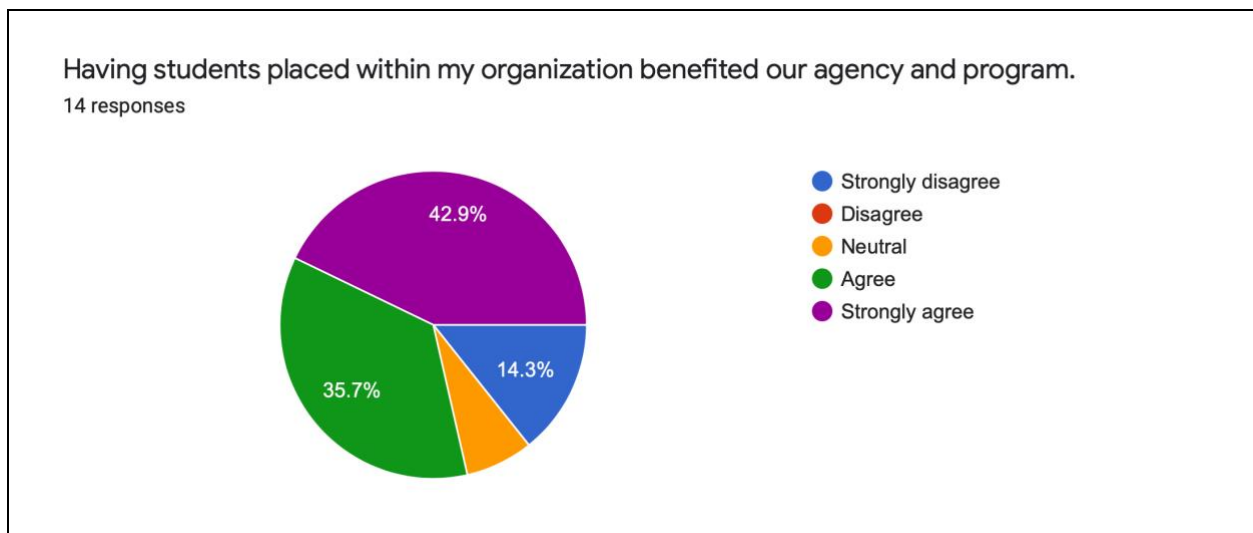
Theme 1: Benefits of Partnerships

Overall, the experiential partners provided positive feedback and highlighted how they benefited from the partnership with BSSLP and practicum students. Data results from Figure 6 indicated that 49.2% of the experiential partners “strongly agreed” with the benefits of having students placed in their organization or program. Community partners commented on the opportunity the BSSLP offered them in relation to mentorship and developing student leaders, with one partner commenting, “Thank you for sharing this wonderful opportunity for TVO to support the Black youth in the Toronto community. It was a pleasure to expose, develop and mentor 5 student leaders.” Overall, the partners agreed that BSSLP students’ knowledge of issues that are relevant to young people helped their own understanding in connecting with youth, particularly Black youth. They also added that BSSLP’s knowledge of issues that are relevant to young people assisted their organization in connecting with youth:

The BSSSLP Experiential Placement Partnership has afforded our agency the opportunity to have youth research social justice topics and issues that matter to young Black identified youth voices, advise our program staff about program activities/workshop topics youth would find engaging, co-design social media announcements and messages that would appeal to young people about ways to include restorative practice in their daily lives.

Figure 11

Community Partners' Assessment of the Benefits of Students' Placements

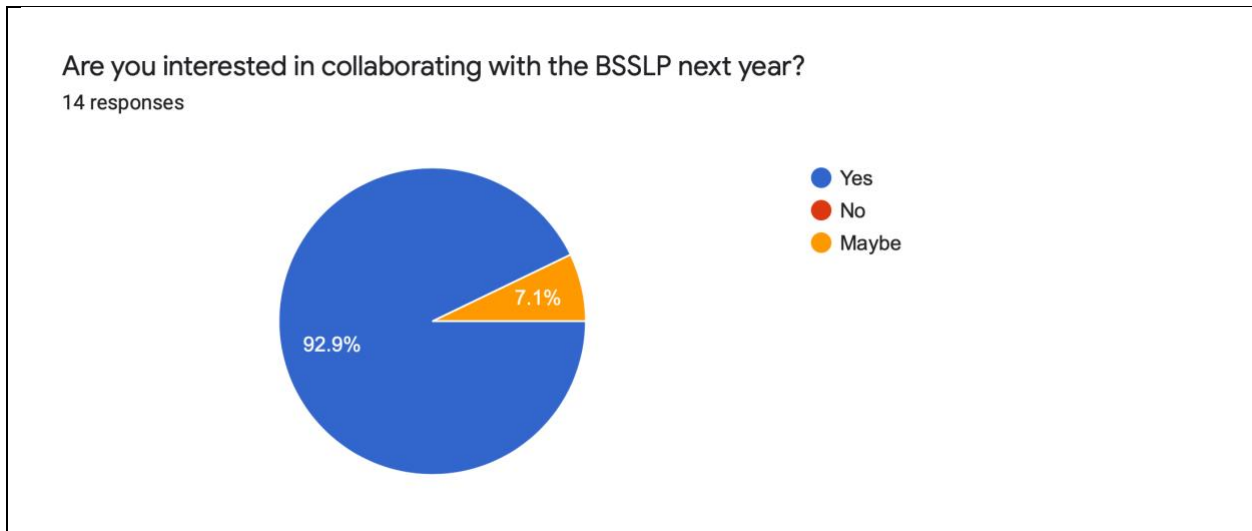


Employer engagement has an essential and unique role in modern education, and students benefited from these opportunities. As illustrated in Figure 11 and in addition to students' responses, community partners' engagement and their involvement in the BSSLP was reciprocally beneficial. Firstly, partnership engagement supported our commitment at the Centre of Excellence to providing learning experiences and opportunities for Black students¹¹. Secondly, the work placements created pathways for Black students to interact with private and public sector organizations. Additionally, given that school is an important place to begin critically assessing career pathways, having experiential learning partners helped to respond to that awareness for Black students. The partners provided opportunities to broaden students' horizons outside of classrooms, raised their aspirations, and highlighted the range of jobs and career routes available to them.

An overwhelming majority of partners, 92.9%, reaffirmed their commitment to collaborate with the BSSLP program next year (see Figure 12). To illustrate, one partner confirmed their continued support in developing and mentoring Black student leaders, by indicating they "would be happy to continue engaging Black youth next summer, and also throughout the year." Partners also commented on the expansion of BSSLP within TDSB to be available to more Black students and stated, "I would like to see the TDSB offer this program in all school districts.

¹¹ <https://www.tdsb.on.ca/About-Us/Equity/Black-Student-Excellence/Black-Community-Partnership-Event-a-Success>

Figure 12
Community Partners' Responses to Future Collaborations

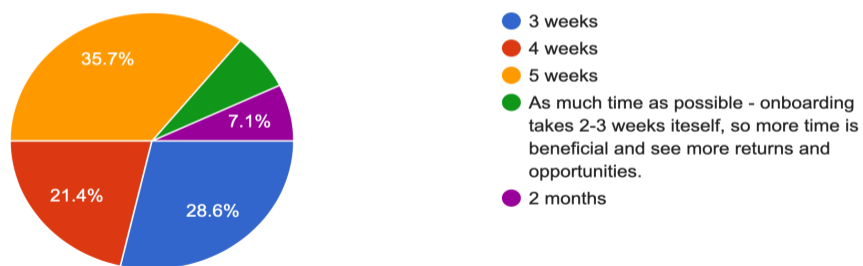


Theme 2: Extending the Experiential Learning

In addition to expressing their interest in future collaboration, experiential partners made suggestions to improve the BSSLP program for all involved: students, partners, TDSB and community members. One recommendation included the extension of the length of the program from the current 3 weeks (see Figure 13 below).

Figure 13
Partners' Responses to Placement Duration

Please indicate the suggested length of time you think BSSLP participants should stay in placement:
 14 responses



Regarding the length of the placement, 35.7% of the experiential partners recommended that the practicum should be five weeks long, which was also echoed in their testimonials, “I would love for the program to run longer!”; “[i]t would be nice to not be restricted to such short timelines - the initial investment in onboarding takes 3-4 weeks, so being able to extend this beyond the summer would be amazing.”

Another partner also proposed a more definitive length for the program, “So far, I would say this program was perfect. Except from the fact that the placement was too short. I would suggest that the placement should range from four to six weeks”. Furthermore, it was suggested that the program start earlier to accommodate more time for planning, “earlier collaboration with us during our early Winter planning cycles will help ensure we’re ready to support more students and to support them with even more intentional experiences and opportunities.”

However, 21.4% of partners advised a four-week program length and 28.6% opted to keep the current 3-week timeframe. Notably, experiential partners’ suggestion of extending the program closely aligns with the students’ suggestion to increase the timing of the BSSLP. Students proposed a longer placement, ranging from seven weeks to the entire summer. Several students expressed the importance of having sufficient time to enhance their placement experience and to further meet their priorities and skills development needs.

The push from experiential partners to extend placements signals that some employers are open to changing how they think about and operationalize supports for the Black community, who often face unique challenges or barriers to employment¹². This includes when and where placements are offered to Black youth. These emergent findings further support the relevance and value of such initiatives as the BSSLP.

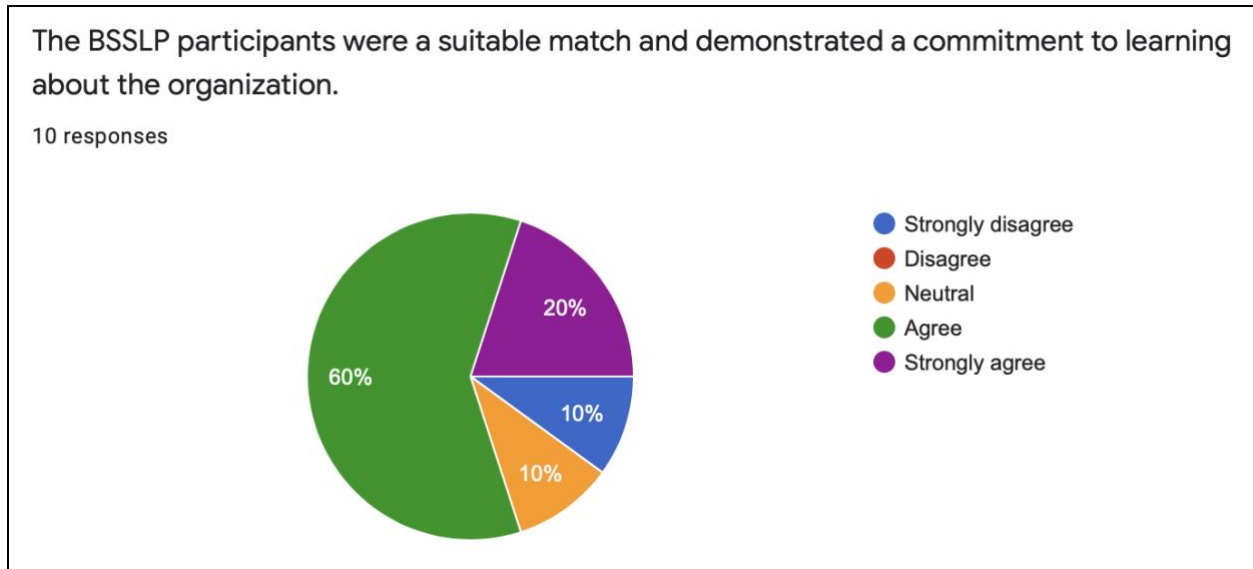
Theme 3: Collaborating with Staff to Prepare Students for Placements

When asked to rate the compatibility between their organization and the student participant as well as students’ commitment to learning about the career, the majority of the experiential partners (80%) believed that the student participants were suitably matched. Ten percent of

¹² Stapleton, J. (2019). The working poor in the Toronto Region: A closer look at the increasing numbers. Retrieved from <https://metcalffoundation.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Working-Poor-2019-NEW.pdf>

the community partners disagreed, while the remaining 10% were neutral (see Figure 14 below).

Figure 14
Community Partners' Responses to Student Placement Fit



Comments made by staff from these organizations included supporting students with more pre-placement workshops training and sharing information about the placement organization. Community Partners highlighted challenges with student preparation and as indicated by one “2/3 students needed more preparation but given that the student disclosed to me that the pandemic left them uninspired, I felt it was a "win" if she completed the placement and the work. Another partner made a similar critique by drawing attention to issues with students’ access to technological resources:

We were advised that student leaders would be trained and have the necessary devices to connect, join meetings and collaborate. Five minutes before the kickoff [meeting] we had to transition to Zoom for program delivery due to participant inability to connect via Teams. When we reported the issue, it took 4 days to resolve.

While the dominant consensus might be that organizations and employers are a resource for educational institutions to draw upon student learning, remarks made by the BSSLP experiential partners suggest the need for organizations to be viewed as collaborators that are foundational to learning. Key to this paradigm shift is the need for a fresh approach to negotiate placements. This shift involves the candid disclosure of the requirements, assisting with the planning and expectations, and understanding the needs of students they will be supporting.

To have ongoing partnerships that are sustainable, there is a need to create placement partnerships of equal power and benefit to all stakeholders¹³. For several respondents, this would aid in building their organizational capacity in becoming future providers of employment to Black youth. The commitment to providing placements in a coordinated way that allows for reflection and learning, has significant implications for the quality of experiential learning that Black students will receive. Consequently, allowing for community partners to be involved in the planning stage must be considered as adding great value to the process, and is key to the sustainability of future collaborations.

Conclusion

The Black Student Summer Leadership Program provided positive learning and leadership experiences for students. Results and anecdotal feedback suggest that key success factors included developing Black students' self-efficacy, building trusting relationships, developing their identity and feelings of belonging, advancing equity and inclusion, and fostering independence.

Students found benefits in participating in and learning about youth participatory action research methodology. As part of the process, students developed public knowledge and awareness of issues, they learned how to collaborate through participation, they learned about social change and for many, they developed transferable skills that are applicable in both secondary and post-secondary contexts. Notably, the engagement with YPAR saw an overlap in all areas of the BSSLP. Students felt empowered beyond the role of young people in teams and organizations, and with the development of skills such as public speaking, they were able to make explicit calls to action in their final presentations.

The data highlighted the importance of programs such as the BSSLP which have successfully created access to professions and career pathways in industries that often see less representation from the Black community. Through the collaboration with community partners and organizations, student participants developed mentoring relationships, learned valuable

¹³ Harris, L., Jones, M., & Coutts, S. (2010). Partnerships and learning communities in work-integrated learning: Designing a community services student placement program. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 29(5), 547–559.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2010.502288>

transferable skills, and gained industry-based knowledge that will help them decide on career options or improve their understanding about existing career choices.

Recommendations

The recommendations that follow are informed by the students and the partners who participated in the BSSLP program this year. These recommendations suggest a way forward in improving the program offerings in years to come in relation to student outcomes and partner engagement.

Time Considerations

- An extension in the length of the program will better prepare students to successfully complete the YPAR. The time extension would support the possibility of thorough research skills to be developed and further placement exploration.
- Earlier recruitment of students before the experiential partners to ensure that their career interests are aligned with their placement.
- Recruiting students before the experiential partners and then strategically forming partnerships with organizations that match the students' interests will guarantee better alignment between the students' interests and experiential learning areas offered.
- Facilitate aspects of the research component for student participants prior to the program start.

Mentorship

- Include a mentorship program that includes former BSSLP students.
 - Students suggested that current BSSLP students can learn from and gain insights about the program from past students.

Program Logistics

- Hold information sessions for students and partners to discuss the BSSLP.

- Develop an information guide for partners and students. Student guide to include a general and weekly calendar, the expectations of the program as well as links to documents, to support students' knowledge of the program.
- Facilitate collaborative communication between students and experiential partners prior to the work placements.
- Ensure that expectations around accommodations (e.g., how many students can be placed in each agency), learning goals and desired outcomes are discussed and understood between TDSB staff and partners.
- Begin the process of recruitment of students and potential partners prior to the start of the program (e.g., in spring).

Program Partnerships

- Recommendation for Black Student Summer Leadership Program to work in collaboration with the Continuing Education Department.
- Collaborate with partners at each phase, starting with the initial planning phase of the program.
- Understand the organizational context of experiential partners to ensure that expectations are understood, and strategies are established and implemented prior to the start of the program.
- Facilitate ongoing communication with experiential partners to share information and resources and build and maintain collaborative relations throughout the duration of the program.
- Incorporate interval check-ins with experiential partners to discuss issues relating to the student(s) and their placements and for sharing of information.
 - This ensures that concerns are being addressed promptly and all stakeholders remain updated.

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