

2021 Leadership In Action Experience Reflection: 'Future Program' in Partnership with Youth Assisting Youth

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Introduction

This report outlines my involvement in the 6-week leadership-in-action experience in partnership with the non-profit organization based in Toronto, Canada called Youth Assisting Youth. I will share about the development of the project, the challenges I faced, and conclude with what I learned and the impact I was able to make through this program.

Identifying Needs and Developing Partnerships (Week 1)

The initial planning phase for the leadership in action project involved two steps. The first step was identifying a need and determining how Laidlaw Scholars can contribute to meet this need. The second step was to find community organizations that were willing to collaborate in this joint effort. Last summer, I alongside Laidlaw Scholars across Canada, the US, and the UK, had previously worked with the nonprofit organization, Makesense, to create the pilot program called Re_Action for Education. The program's goal was to help parents, teachers, and students transition to remote learning by providing training, tutoring, and logistical support. Because this

was an ongoing area of need, I decided to continue to pursue the path of leadership in education for my leadership in action experience this summer.

I had the pleasure of working alongside Brandon Yu, a fellow Laidlaw Scholar at the University of Toronto, who also shared a passion to empower young students to achieve success. In our weekly meetings, we brainstormed various leadership projects that had the potential to be impactful within our local communities. However, Brandon and I viewed the transition from high school to university as one of the biggest challenges students currently face. Taking into account the effects of Covid-19, the pandemic has not only shone a spotlight on, but also exasperated vast educational disparities within our communities. The ones who were most severely impacted were at-risk students in underserved neighbourhoods. Identifying that this is a crucial area of need, Brandon and I decided to develop a program for students entering their junior and senior year in high school to help them develop the necessary skills to achieve their full learning potential.

Research and Program Design Phase (Week 2-3)

After identifying an area of need, the second step was to find community partners in Toronto that were already contributing to helping students and that were eager to work on a joint-project with the Laidlaw LIA program. After researching and contacting various community partners, Youth Assisting Youth was the organization whose goal and mission aligned most closely with ours. This non-profit organization was dedicated to helping youth in underserved communities across the city of Toronto and York Region.

In collaboration with the volunteer recruitment and tutoring coordinator and the community and partnership lead at Youth Assisting Youth, we sent out a Google form gathering survey data on the type of topics students would like to hear about. For instance, we included potential ideas such as how to network during Covid-19, how to overcome failure, resume building, effective study habits, improving personal finance, and so on. We wanted to create a program where students would be able to participate in workshops about topics that covered both academic and practical life skills.

After collecting and reviewing the survey results, we decided to pick themes for each workshop and combine ones that were similar. In developing the name of the program, we decided on “4uture”, meaning “your future for you”. Through the power of mentorship, our goal for the pilot program was to connect at-risk youth to enriching leadership experiences in order to help them realize their full potential. We advertised the 4uture program as a well-rounded workshop series focused on capacity building and academic skills with a leadership component sprinkled throughout each session. Both Brandon and I, along with the team at Youth Assisting Youth, wanted this project to focus on sustainability, leadership, and community engagement. If the program proved successful, our hope was to implement an ongoing workshop series for the years to come. Finally, all that was left was the recruitment process. We advertised the 4uture program to high school students across Toronto who were within Youth Assisting Youth to participate in this program. In addition, participants would also earn volunteering hours.

My Facilitator Experience (Weeks 4-6)

Brandon and I planned to present each workshop every Tuesday and Thursday over a period of three weeks starting on July 27th, 2021 and finishing on August 12th, 2021. Prior to each workshop, we prepared the slides, videos, activities, and created a comprehensive case study for the program. For the purposes of clarity and cohesion, we developed a 6-part case study that related to each of the six topics of the workshops. After each session, the participants would read the case study and answer the discussion questions as a group in order to apply the new concepts they learned to a related scenario.

Our first workshop was called “Kickoff & Introspection” to start the 4uture program. The purpose of this workshop was to first take a deep look inside as individuals, because to truly know ourselves is the most important skill we can possess. In this workshop, we walked participants through a series of self-reflection activities and handwriting exercises, such as exploring strengths and weaknesses and identifying personality traits. It is important to learn about ourselves because we can identify the areas in which we excel and the areas in which we need to improve. Only then will we be able to maximize our skill set and discover what sort of opportunities are out there for us.

The second portion of the workshop was dedicated to leadership. We began by asking students what their view of leadership was, followed by examples of leadership and leaders they admire. The main takeaway was that being a leader does not depend on a type of personality, a position, nor does it depend on a title. Rather, leadership is leading by action and example. We wanted to convey to the students that leaders are everywhere and they can be a leader right where they are today. All they have to do is find it, revive it and let it flow. Sometimes the most unlikely people become the greatest leaders.

The second workshop was titled “Building Motivation and Making Progress”. In order to stay motivated, we emphasized that we have to be aware of what we do on a daily basis, which includes our routines and lifestyle. For this workshop, we focused on how to create motivation, beginning with the ways in which one can build good habits and break bad ones. Why do we need to be motivated? To make progress in life. And how do we make progress in life? By learning to accept challenges and overcome failure.

For the third workshop, “What Makes a Successful Student?”, we wanted to focus more on develop academic strategies to succeed in school. We explored the common barriers to time management, how to manage our time well, and concluded with various tips on how to study smart, including preparing for tests and essays.

In 2021, social media has pervaded every aspect of life especially for young people. For the fourth workshop, Brandon and I wanted to discuss a topic that is not always explicitly taught, but one that is pivotal to our future as students and working professionals. In our fourth workshop, entitled “Social Media & Friends”, we explored the common uses and abuses of social media and how to maintain a professional online presence. We also looked at personal branding and how to leverage social media to leave a positive digital footprint and open doors for future opportunities. In the second half of the workshop, the discussion was focused on friendship. We emphasized that the type of people you surrounds yourself with eventually shapes you as a person. A key takeaway from this session was that the dream in our hearts might be bigger than the environment we find ourselves in. Sometimes, it is necessary to step out of that environment in order to see that dream fulfilled.

The fifth workshop, “Budgeting for the Future: How to make money and keep it”, was focused on giving the participants a basic overview of personal finance. For high school students coming from different financial backgrounds, we wanted to demonstrate that there are simple yet effective ways they can start saving money for university and future endeavours.

In order to complete the 4uture program, the sixth and final workshop was called “Your Future, Your Way”. The purpose of this workshop was to apply the main ideas from the previous workshops to their future. During this session, Brandon and I shared our personal stories of triumph amid adversity and in the second half of the workshop, we invited a guest speaker to share about his professional and academic experiences. For us, it was important for the participants to hear about our stories and learn from them. Ultimately, we wanted the participants to understand that whether it is failure and pain or progress and joy, it is up to them to decide how they will use their experiences to transform them and make a difference in their communities and beyond.

Impact Created

A partnership-focused approach should not be centered on what the facilitators and leaders can gain from the experience, but rather what the participants can take away from these workshops and bring to their own communities. In particular, a student emailed me after the workshop saying how my personal journey of growth inspired and helped them gain motivation. Another participant expressed how he wanted some advice on how to make the most of his final year in high school before going off to college. He shared that he was interested in going to the University of Toronto for political science and wanted to hear about my experience studying at the University of Toronto and more broadly, navigating life after high school.

At the end of the workshop series, we also sent a Google Form feedback survey to the participants of the 4uture program. Here are some examples of the feedback we received from students:

Question: “What kind of feedback would you give on the topics presented?”

Reponses:

- *“The topics covered helped me develop and build important skills to have in life.”*
- *“The topics were great and relevant as a high school student. This workshop taught me about topics that I didn't learn in school and what I should do for my future.”*
- *“I think transitioning from high school to university is a good topic to cover as well because there are a lot of high school students in this program. As well a topic or activity to help people who are not as sure about what university or career they want to go to would also help.”*
- *“The delivery was good I really liked how for workshop #6 [“Your Future, Your Way”] the hosts shared their personal experiences. I found that very motivating and inspiring.”*

What I Learned: My Leadership Development Journey

A goal I set out to achieve during the leadership in action experience was to improve on public speaking. Becoming a confident, compelling speaker may take a lifetime of learning and practicing, but it starts with getting out of one's comfort zone. Naturally, we are drawn to familiarity, security, and certainty. When we step out of our comfort zone, we are taking a risk, opening ourselves to the possibility of the unknown. Launching the pilot program and subsequently leading each workshop was a daunting and challenging task. I do not have extensive knowledge on topics such as financial literacy or digital professionalism; thus, I felt unqualified to lead an entire workshop session on them. However, I was determined to rise to the challenge and dive into an environment that put me outside my comfort zone. When we are doing something hard, we are growing. In retrospect, I have realized that in that moment of discomfort, I put myself in a position where I could only go forward. As a result, I was able to experience both personal and professional growth.

Another goal I set out to achieve was to improve my self-reflection capacity. In order to achieve this goal, at the end of every session I set out clear goals and milestones for the next workshop. This process involved the rose, thorn, and bud form of introspection. I wrote down a rose of the session: a highlight, a success, a small achievement, or something positive that happened; a thorn: a challenge or something I could use more support with; and a bud: something I look forward to in the upcoming session or an idea that has blossomed out of this program and that

has yet to be explored. By reflecting on the workshops and establishing regular milestones for myself, I was able to contribute as a vested partner to lead a successful program.

Conclusion

Ultimately, I am very grateful to have been a part of the Laidlaw leadership in action experience this summer and to have mentored brilliant young minds across the city of Toronto. They have inspired me to continue to work hard and strive for excellence. Going into this program, I did not know what I could accomplish in only six weeks. However, both the Laidlaw team at the University of Toronto and our partners at Youth Assisting Youth have always emphasized that we would create a project that has great potential. Within a short amount of time, I was able to launch and lead a pilot program to help those in underserved communities across Toronto.

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