



Towards a new generation of urban planning

Laidlaw Scholars Leadership & Research Programme
Leadership in Action: Report

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in collaboration with Urban Minds



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About Urban Minds



PHOTO: Students at Urban Minds' IUP Leaders Lab, a two-day conference in August 2024.
Image: Augustine Wong

URBAN MINDS IS a Toronto-based non-profit organisation aimed at introducing high school students towards urban planning, architecture and design. Urban Minds is an organisation dedicated to creating meaningful ways for youth to shape equitable and sustainable cities by delivering city-building workshops, performing consulting services for youth engagements, and enabling students to create their own community design-build projects in schools.

As co-founder Angela Ng put it, Urban Minds wants to “change the perception of youth as lesser, passive participants to that of youth as capable, active co-creators.”

Organisation

Co-executive directors



Ryan Lo



Angela Ng

Organisation structure / hierarchy

Urban Minds has two distinct branches that work with youth-engaged projects, as well as an extra high-school programme called the 1UP City Builder programme that works directly, as well is run by, high school students.



Youth Engagement

Youth engagement is at the core of Urban Minds' strategy with the aim of introducing students to urban planning as an exciting profession. This takes place via design-thinking workshops, architecture and engineering office tours, and tailored school lessons delivered in schools.

Business Consulting

Businesses, professionals and other organisations look for opportunities to involve and empower youth in their work. Urban Minds helps to fill this gap by providing municipal and civic organisations with the ability to reach out to youth and build youth-friendly spaces, programmes and services. Consulting includes services for Toronto's Chinatown community, Bike Share Toronto, and more.

1UP City Builders Programme

As Urban Minds' high school programme and original mission, the 1UP City Builders Programme enables high school students to lead their own community design-build projects by providing inspiration, leadership training, and project mentorship.

Activities include an annual conference, summer leadership program and yearly student chapters.

Project Description

While Urban Minds has been a Toronto-based non-profit organisation since its founding eight years ago, questions arose towards co-executive directors Ryan and Angela. How could Urban Minds reach more youth within the GTA, while sustaining its Toronto-based presence at the same time? My time at Urban Minds saw combined efforts to help expand Urban Minds' presence in the Greater Toronto Area, Waterloo-Kitchener Region, and

Hamilton, Ontario. Concurrently, the 1UP Leaders Programme is essential to Urban Minds' core mission to promote urban planning as a viable career to students. As such, I was also assigned to the immediate execution of the 1UP Leaders' Lab, a two-day conference on the 17th and 18th of August that acts as an orientation camp for high school students across Ontario who want to lead their own school chapter.

Achievements / Responsibilities

During my time at Urban Minds, I was responsible for facilitating a diverse range of activities. This included:

- Finding and reaching out to potential sponsors for financial support
- Accompanying 1UP student fellows on office tours such as WSP and architects-Alliance
- Organising and chaperoning students for the 1UP Leaders Lab
- Running pop-up booths to promote Urban Minds and attract Hamilton and Kitchener/Waterloo-based youth
- Performing consultation surveys for Bike Share Toronto in a collaborative cycling event with Scarborough-based cycling groups
- Using my graphic design skills to help promote Urban Minds' consulting branch
- Develop and expand existing strategies for event tabling, pop-up booths and other promotions
- Creating 8 workshop plans made to respond to the newly revised Ontario Grade 9 Geography curriculum
- Facilitating discussion and teamwork amongst students during the 1UP Leaders' Lab's Design Jam activity
- Photographing participants and recording video testimonials during the 1UP Leaders' Lab.



Left: Running a pop-up booth at Waterloo Park.

Right: Running another pop-up booth at a community centre event in Hamilton, ON.



Left: Students discuss street redesign proposals during an office tour of WSP.



Right: Firm workers discuss during an office tour of the firm architects-Alliance.



Left: Students listen attentively during group discussion at the IUP Leaders' Lab.



Right: Cyclists rest midway through a group bike ride on the Meadowway while consulting on behalf of Bike Share Toronto.

SMART Goals, Leadership Attributes

Objective 1. Encourage high school student participation with Urban Minds by increasing outreach efforts with secondary schools.

My initial interpretation of this goal fell short compared to the final results because my expectations were misaligned with the tasks I eventually ended up undertaking for Urban Minds. This was mainly because I didn't understand the internal structure at first, leading me to declare that I would secure 10 schools for Urban Minds to connect with during the upcoming school year. This conjecture did not come to fruition, but during my first week I was involved in finding up to 100 contacts in order to acquire sponsors and similar organisations that could help us promote our activities and thus grow our presence on Instagram. We also ended up reaching out to high school students directly through our pop-up booth outreach events, which was more crucial to our goal of attracting more people to participate in the Leaders' Lab.

In this way, I managed to achieve my goal meaningfully, although not in the way that I had expected. Nonetheless, this was a good goal that was reasonably achieved through specific objectives with measurable metrics of success.

Objective 2. Increase student interest in Urban Minds workshops.

At the time of writing, I declared that student interest in Urban Minds workshops would be determined by several factors, such as how often they were paying attention, engaging in discussion, or how often they were using their phones. This statement was made in expectation that I would help Urban Minds run school workshops, but it became evident that because school was not in session during my LiA project, we were not focused on running school workshops. During the Leaders' Lab, we did encounter a large number of participants who were totally unengaged in the programme on the first day. I could not communicate with them, as I was not a facilitator but more primarily of a videographer and photographer during this time. However, during discussion panels where my presence was actively involved, I tried to keep students engaged by telling jokes, while dropping engaging facts at the same time, such as the impacts of construction and demolition on the environment.

Another way that I achieved the greater objective at hand was by doing my best to keep all students in my Design Jam group engaged in the process at all times. During discussions, I tried my best to make sure that participants understood the task at hand, and were talking with one another in a collaborative and constructive manner.

Finally, one more way that I achieved this goal was to be as empathetic as possible when I was tasked with examining a revised Grade 9 Geography curriculum in order to create new workshop ideas tailored for teachers to apply to lesson plans. This ranged from lessons on urban sprawl, to flooding, food security and other topics. These lesson plans often included role-play as different stakeholders in scenarios, but also introduced more unconventional workshop elements such as doing research on the cost of housing, and creating competitive scenarios on how to weaken and strengthen food supply chains simultaneously. While the effects of this exercise are yet to be seen, I feel that I did my best to make urban planning seem more interesting towards students as a profession.

Objective 3. Create meaningful impact from student participation such as to communicate towards official planning authorities or creating follow up activities.

This objective fell short of expectations, once again due to misalignment between original vision and tasks assigned. I originally aspired to help students continue exploring urban development on their own. This was left unachieved. However, I did manage to achieve a similarly meaningful goal through my engagement with Bike Share Toronto, Scarborough Cycles and Toronto East Cyclists. Urban Minds was responsible for engaging cyclists to understand how Bike Share racks in Toronto's east regions could be more effectively placed, especially in Scarborough where transport is predominantly car-centric. These findings had a positive and direct impact as Urban Minds was able to act as a communications medium between the public and Bike Share Toronto, which will have a positive impact on sustainable communities. In the future, strengthening cycling infrastructure in Scarborough by communications with official planning authorities will have long-lasting and meaningful effects on the local community.

A brief collection of graphic design material designed for Urban Minds.

Fresh Perspectives in Public Participation



Urban Minds can help your team...



Youth's visioning ideas for the Downsview Airport lands

1 collect meaningful insights from youth to inform your project.

We can analyze data and develop recommendations to supplement your report.



2 Strengthen your proposal with our creative and targeted strategies.

We can propose effective engagement tactics that respond to your client's needs.

Student Ambassadors for Centennial College's Active Transportation Study



Idea Jam & Pizza Party for the City of Toronto's Jane Finch Initiative

3 boost your capacity to engage hard-to-reach youth audiences.

We can recruit and train local youth to reach their existing networks.

Create intergenerational communities with Urban Minds as your **youth engagement consultant.**

Let's chat: hello@urbanminds.co
urbanminds.co
in @urbanmindsTO



Community Impact

How did my work address the needs of secondary school students when it came to promoting urban design and planning?

My work significantly addressed the needs of secondary school students by fostering a deeper understanding of urban design and planning through a variety of targeted activities and initiatives, including but not limited to:

Securing Financial Support and Resources

I successfully reached out to 40 potential sponsors, securing financial backing that enabled the participation of a larger number of students during the 1UP Leaders' Lab, as well as securing prize coupons for panelists, participants and facilitators. Reaching our goal of \$18,000 dollars was crucial in providing resources that made the learning experience more accessible and enriching for the students

Engaging Students in Real-World Experiences

By accompanying student fellows on office tours to WSP and architects-Alliance, I exposed them to real-world urban planning environments, helping them connect and learn from working professionals. As a result, this hands-on experience broadened their understanding of the field and encouraged them to consider careers in urban design.

Promoting the Organisation and Engaging Youth

Through running pop-up booths, I aimed to promote Urban Minds' mission towards our new target audience: Kitchener-Waterloo and Hamilton residents. This outreach increased student awareness and involvement in urban planning, sparking interest among youth who might not have otherwise considered the field or known of Urban Minds' presence. This was also fulfilled by how I applied my graphic design skills to create compelling promotional posters for our consulting branch. Even though these visuals are intended for businesses and municipal organisations, it promotes our mission of reaching out to young people which will help to further empower youth moving forward.

Conducting Consultation Surveys during the Meadoway Ride

During the Meadoway ride led by Bike Share Toronto, Toronto East Cyclists and Scarborough Rides, I facilitated consultation surveys that gathered local perspectives on urban cycling infrastructure. The feedback collected was instrumental in shaping recommendations for previously overlooked demographics such as teenagers, the elderly and those with young families.

Developing Workshop Plans Aligned with Curriculum

I created 8 workshop plans tailored to the newly revised Ontario Grade 9 Geography curriculum. These workshops were designed to meet the educational needs of students, providing them with practical skills and knowledge in urban design, directly aligning with their academic requirements.

Facilitating Teamwork During Design Jam

During the 1UP Leaders' Lab, I facilitated the Design Jam activity, encouraging students to work together on urban planning projects. I strengthened students' design thinking skills, and encouraged them to consider different audiences, weather and seasonal conditions, as well as use cases. Thus, this activity not only improved their teamwork and problem-solving skills but also deepened their understanding of collaborative urban design processes.

Capturing the Conference Experience

By photographing participants and recording video testimonials during the conference, I documented the students' experiences, which were later used to showcase the impact of our initiatives on youth engagement in urban planning. These testimonials highlighted the students' newfound enthusiasm and understanding of urban design, serving as powerful evidence of the program's success.

Challenges faced, lessons learned

During my time at Urban Minds, I encountered several problems that I overcame which made me grow as both a person and a leader: mainly time management and communication issues. My time management was not stellar at the beginning of the programme. I had just finished an intensive research internship at KPMB Architects, which left me drained mentally and physically. As a result, I did not quite have the strength to keep track of everything especially in a new organisation. For instance, Urban Minds would track tasks and time through a plethora of online platforms, from Clockify to Asana, to Google Meets to Hubspot. There were many things to adjust to in a short time frame. This lack of adjustment led me to be late to several meetings in the first few weeks, as I neglected to check my calendar properly to attend meetings. On top of that, I missed a weekly check-in meeting with my supervisor due to my negligence, which I am aware created a poor impression of me. I was ashamed, as this behaviour is unusual for me as a timely and disciplined person. The way that I overcame this challenge was by making sure that my expectations for attendance for the week were properly defined by preparing myself for each week's agenda by the end of the weekend. This way, I could come more prepared on time, as well as making up for performance by being more proactive during meetings and in-person events. Nonetheless, I feel that my impression on my peers could not be changed, which is a regretfully painful lesson I've learnt during my time at Urban Minds.

Lastly, I also struggled with communications throughout my experience. Because Urban Minds is a small non-profit organisation, we do not have any offices to collaborate in person, and everybody works part-time whenever they are available. The main mean of communication was through Discord, which made me feel that we were working in information silos most of the time. From this experience, I became more proactive in reaching out to people and working collaboratively, such as creating my own group chats to keep relevant people in the loop, plus sending regular updates to my supervisors. In this way, I feel that I developed my leadership skills by taking my own initiative to keep people in the loop.



A brief collection of graphic design material designed for Urban Minds. (con't.)

Bring Students and Youth to the Table



Urban Minds can help you:



Student Ambassadors for Centennial College's Active Transportation Study

1 Engage students effectively in campus planning projects.

Deliver creative engagement initiatives that go beyond the typical survey.



Park(ing) Day design-build event at Toronto Metropolitan University

2 Activate your campus spaces as youthful gathering places.

Co-design spaces with students and create hands-on learning opportunities.



Healthy Youth in High Rises research projects with the University of Waterloo School of Planning

3 Boost your research capacity with youth populations.

Develop innovative research methods that centre youth participants' well being.

Plan, design and research with Urban Minds as your youth engagement partner.

Let's chat: hello@urbanminds.co
urbanminds.co
@urbanmindsTO



New perspectives

Newfound respect for emphatic pedagogy

For a person who's been immersed in architecture and urban studies at least three to four years, it's difficult to accept that not everybody finds urban design interesting, nor is it a topic that people think about - it's easy to forget that although the discipline is very influential, it is perceived as a niche discipline associated with engineers more than sociopolitical studies. This was highlighted in my struggle to come up with lesson plans for the revised geography curriculum. All the lesson workshop plans had to be interactive to keep students engaged, had variation between them to provide unique experiences, and required deliberate planning and empathising with high school students on my behalf in order to attempt to decipher what might make urban planning seem appealing to them. I discovered that many tools in the classroom relied on student engagement through persona roleplay and access to unconventional teaching material, such as sketching, online research and hand modelling. This suggested to me that urban planners might increase their appeal to young people as an unconventional, socially impactful and creative profession, which I could also use to my advantage in future projects. Nonetheless, all this work was incredibly difficult to me, leading me to gain newfound respect towards teachers who try their best to engage their students and teach with interesting content. Thank you, professors and teachers!

The struggle for support

It was insightful to have the opportunity to look behind the scenes of what goes into delivering a successful event. While I was more involved with student outreach, I had not expected how intense outreach efforts could be to secure funding, promote our event and ensure that everything was running smoothly between guests as well as our internal team. I have Angela to thank for her unwavering dedication to event operations for that. From this overall experience, I also learnt how important it was to keep track of everything in motion, which is much more complicated than it sounds for a two-day event. As a result, I've gained a deeper understanding of event coordination, which I hope will help me with organising my own events in the future.

Conclusion

My time at Urban Minds introduced me to an organisation with a powerful mission which required incredible outreach and event coordination efforts in order to create a successful event. This meant that although I had plenty of previous experience working with event organisation and marketing, for the first time in my life I was working with an organisation with external impact, influence and reputation that needed to be maintained. This meant that the stakes and efforts required were much higher than I had previously come into contact with. In addition to helping to secure sponsors, create icebreaker games, and create photo and video content for the 1UP Leaders Lab, I also grew by using my own initiative to take on new tasks, as well as developing more traits in my extroverted personality to reach out to understanding various audiences' needs. For instance, the ability to network within an organisational structure that induced information silos was crucial to achieving my day-to-day tasks - especially combined with the courage to ask my supervisors questions and collaborate with team members in a short time-frame. From this, I learnt that proactive communication, along with understanding people's workflows, is a key leadership skill that I've gained, but still needs work.

In working with Urban Minds, I also came to appreciate the vast amount of logistical efforts that go behind organising an event, and my role that comes from supporting said efforts involves my own discipline to respect and match the efforts of others. Not only does this involve being stricter with my timeliness, but there is also the obligation to deliver high-quality results to the table. My experience has motivated me to become more well-disciplined, a more proactive communicator and executor, and has increased understanding of how I can use my empathetic training to help push students to find their personal goals.

Acknowledgements

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Wireframe proposals envisioned for Maple Leaf Square by participants at the 1UP Leaders' Lab.



