

THE CENTRE OF EXCELLENCE FOR  
BLACK STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

# 2023 BLACK STUDENT SUMMER LEADERSHIP REPORT



# TITLE: The Centre of Excellence for Black Student Achievement: 2023 Black Student Summer Leadership Report

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**CITE AS:** Munroe, T., Gyamerah, K., Walker, A., Douglin, M., Opondo, W., Ogbu, S., Hardware, S & Newell, N. (2024). The Centre of Excellence for Black Student Achievement: 2023 Black Student Summer Leadership Report. Toronto, Ontario, Canada: Toronto District School Board.

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## Executive Summary

The Center of Excellence for Black Student Achievement (hereafter, the Center of Excellence) completed its fifth annual Black Student Summer Program (BSSLP) from July to August in 2023. The BSSLP seeks to improve a wide range of Black junior leaders' (i.e., BSSLP participants') competencies including their leadership, critical thinking, research and interpersonal skills as well as their well-being while affirming their identities. One hundred and six (106) junior leaders participated in the seven-week BSSLP program which consisted of an experiential placement, Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR), Cooperative (CO-OP) Education and wellness sessions. The 2023 BSSLP program witnessed a 10% increase in junior leaders over the past year due to peer-to-peer referrals by past junior leaders and enhanced staff support following the formation of the Center of Excellence. The expansion of the BSSLP is evidence that junior leaders found the program valuable for their personal and professional growth.

This report provides an overview of the BSSLP's design and delivery in 2023. It draws on junior leaders' and experiential learning agencies' responses to surveys which capture their perspectives of the program and their recommendations for improving the said program. Some of the key findings from the analysis of the surveys were that most junior leaders: 1) found that the BSSLP contributed positively to their identity development and sense of belonging; 2) gained a deeper understanding of their career of interest; 3) felt supported in the program; and 4) enhanced their socio-political consciousness and critical skills through YPAR. Moreover, the experiential partners mentioned that the junior leaders' work and engagement benefited their organizations.

These findings demonstrate BSSLP's effectiveness in promoting Black junior leaders' leadership skills while developing their career knowledge in spaces often underrepresented by members of the Black communities. The recommendations detailed in the report signal the need for more strategic planning and organizing to ensure that the program continues to fulfill the Center of Excellence's mandate to afford Black students with networking, mentoring, and culturally responsive and healing programs.

## Introduction

The Centre of Excellence for Black Student Achievement (“Centre of Excellence” or “the Centre”)<sup>1</sup> launched its Black<sup>2</sup> Student Summer Leadership Program (BSSLP) in 2019. The focus of the program is to provide Black high school students<sup>3</sup> with experiential learning opportunities and various career pathways. BSSLP originally started with ten junior leaders (a term used throughout this report and the program to describe students in the BSSLP) and has since seen a steady increase each year. In 2023, the program had 106 junior leaders participating.

To date, BSSLP continues to assist with building junior leaders’ agency, leadership and research skills, as well as providing mentorship opportunities to support their transition to post-secondary institutions, skilled trades and professional sectors. The BSSLP has created an oasis in which junior leaders can “have a voice and active participation in decisions shaping their lives [including their schooling]” (Munroe, 2023, para. 8). Through the BSSLP, junior leaders engage in peer-to-peer connections, programming and mental health and wellness activities that not only build their capacity but also centre their Black identity through an intersectional lens.

Junior leaders are well supported by a team of qualified and committed Black staff at the Centre of Excellence who provide wrap-around services to ensure that they successfully complete the intensive seven-week program. Given the schooling experiences of Black students and families in Greater Toronto Boards of Education (James, 2020), the program creates the space for junior leaders to affirm their Black identity and feel a sense of belonging, relatedness and community.

Data presented in this report are part of the formative evaluation conducted on the BSSLP using qualitative and quantitative data collection tools. The analysis from the

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<sup>1</sup> [Centre of Excellence for Black Student Achievement](#)

<sup>2</sup> The term Black refers to individuals, peoples or communities of Black /African descent living in Canada. This may include, but are not limited to individuals or peoples from the Black diaspora with varying geographical, historical, cultural, national, ethnic, religious, and ancestral origins and influences (e.g., African, African -Canadian, Afro-Caribbean, Afro Latin, Afro indigenous, Afro-Europeans).

<sup>3</sup> The word student is used to refer to the general student population who have not participated in the BSSLP.

report discusses Black junior leaders' experiences in the BSSLP and experiential learning, program delivery and engagement with Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR).

## **The Focus of the Formative Evaluation Report**

The purpose of the report on the Black Student Summer Leadership Program (BSSLP) is to continue with the evaluation conducted in 2021. The first report provided an understanding of how Black junior leaders and experiential learning agencies interacted with and benefited from the BSSLP (Munroe et al., 2022). The main themes that emerged suggested that BSSLP: 1) had an overall positive impact on Black junior leaders; 2) was beneficial for the experiential learning agencies and their organizations; 3) contributed to Black junior leaders' career development; 4) enhanced Black junior leaders' interpersonal skills; and 5) developed Black junior leaders' research and analytical skills through Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR). Data from 2021 also offered recommendations from the junior leaders and experiential learning agencies which included extending the summer program (Munroe et al., 2022). This 2023 report examines the changes that have been implemented and improvement in the program as experienced by junior leaders and experiential learning agencies.

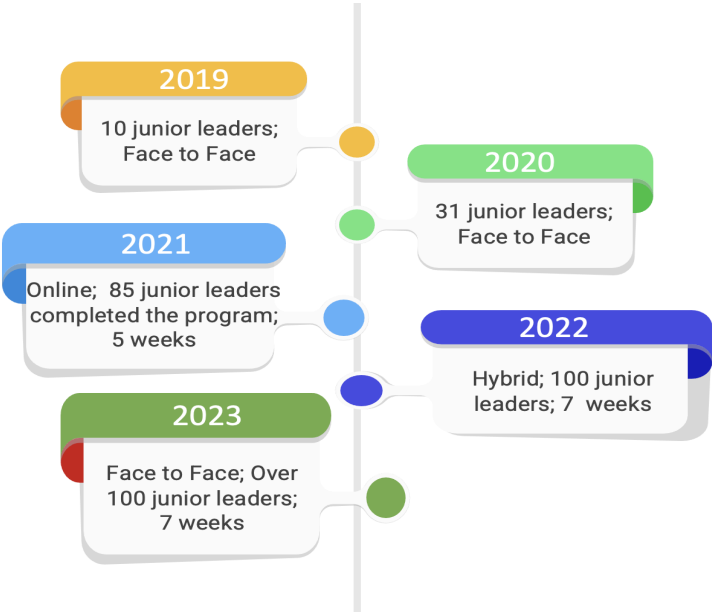
## **Brief Overview of the Black Student Summer Leadership Program (BSSLP)**

The BSSLP has grown in the five years since it started. It is the embodiment of Superintendent Karen Murray's vision to provide Black students in grades 10 to 12 with an opportunity to engage in a 40-hour work week/experiential learning placement. This represents a variety of employment sectors and educational training opportunities. The aim is to support the development of Black junior leaders' interest in career pathways and increase their awareness of industries and professions where Black community members are often underrepresented. The number of participants in the program has blossomed, starting with 10 students in 2019 and witnessing a steady increase each year. In 2023, 103 junior leaders participated (see Figure 1) with over 200 students

applying that year. Through a partnership with the Research and Development Department and the Continuing Education Department at the Toronto District School Board (TDSB), BSSLP attracts Black students who are desirous of obtaining professional development and leadership experiences while building their work readiness and research skills.

Since its inception in June 2021, the Centre of Excellence for Black Student Achievement has housed BSSLP, and the program’s administration is led by Graduation Coaches for Black Students. In line with recommendations made by junior leaders in 2021, the duration of the BSSLP was lengthened from five to seven weeks to ensure meaningful engagement for junior leaders in their experiential learning placement and with YPAR. In addition, the growth of the program from the previous year was attributed to junior leaders’ recommendations to friends and peers. Finally, BSSLP’s consistent growth suggests there is a demand for programs of this nature, as valuable experience is gained through the program’s various unique and meaningful components.

**Figure 1**  
*Expansion of the BSSLP*



## **BSSLP Goals and Objectives**

BSSLP's main goal is to provide paid experiential learning opportunities for Black students to support their post-secondary and career pathways. Two of these main learning experiences involve:

1. Pairing junior leaders with internships based on their areas of passion to obtain hands-on experience in careers and develop job readiness; and
2. Engaging junior leaders to develop their analytical and presentation skills through research.

There are six objectives that are aligned with the above mentioned main goals mentioned above, which are as follows:

1. Enhance junior leaders' interpersonal and leadership skills;
2. Fuel curiosity of junior leaders to learn;
3. Build junior leaders' critical consciousness and thinking;
4. Increase junior leaders' advocacy in their various communities, especially their schools;
5. Develop junior leaders' research skills; and
6. Strengthen networks and professional connections within the Black community and with Black-serving or Black-led organizations.

## **BSSLP Components and Design**

BSSLP creates a holistic approach to developing Black students' leadership, academic, research and work skills development (see Figure 2). These components include:

- **Experiential Placement:** Junior leaders engage in various experiential learning agencies three days per week (Tuesdays to Thursdays). Junior leaders are supervised by Graduation Coaches while they are in their work placements.
  
- **Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR):** YPAR comprises two phases, both of which are supported by the Centre's Research Associates.
  - Phase 1 (April to mid-June) and introduces junior leaders to the principles of YPAR and theoretical foundations of research.
  - Phase 2 (July to August, held on Mondays and Fridays) supports junior leaders with finalizing their research questions and data collection tools, gathering and analyzing their data, and their findings.
    - PODS: Junior leaders do not work through the research process alone. Each junior leader is invited to join a Pod with their peers/colleagues to engage in research, and even collaborate to present their findings as a pair or group if they so choose. Each Pod is supported and led by the Centre's Research Associates, and junior leaders can choose the pod which align most with their interests. Options of Pods were as follows: writing, video essay, art, storytelling, photovoice, podcast, spoken word, or presentation tools.
    - Note: Junior leaders whose research explored ways of improving Black students' school experiences were invited to present at a YPAR conference held at York University in October 2023.
  
- **Voluntary Cooperative (CO-OP) Education:** CO-OP provides junior leaders with the opportunity to obtain two extra credits. By participating in CO-OP, they develop skills, interests and professional connections while still in high school, and create a personal career plan based on realistic, practical information.
  - Note: As part of the CO-OP program, junior leaders completed a weekly self-assessment of their progress and were evaluated by CO-OP teachers who ensured the fidelity of the program with TDSB CO-OP guidelines.

- **Junior Leaders Wellness Sessions:** These sessions are designed by the wellness team (TDSB Social Workers and Child and Youth Counselors) who engage the junior leaders in self-care activities to promote their self-awareness and self-regulation throughout the program and in their experiential learning placement.

## Figure 2

*Components of the BSSLP*



## Theoretical Approach

This report uses decolonizing methodologies to analyze the mixed methods data. Although there is no standard model or practice for what decolonizing research methodology looks like, there are ongoing scholarly conversations about theoretical foundations, principal components, and practical applications (Thambinathan & Kinsella, 2021). Nevertheless, at the core, decolonizing methodologies emphasize the pursuit of

alternative and contested forms of knowing, centering historically marginalized voices and communities, and crafting the research process, not only to be inclusive but also to disrupt colonizing hegemonies (Keikelame & Swatz, 2019; Lipscombe et al., 2021). Based on this understanding, the report centers the knowledge and experiences of the Black students who participated in BSSLP. More importantly, the report also shows how centering the voices and experiences of Black students shaped both the program design and implementation.

Thambinathan and Kinsella (2021) highlighted that by drawing on theories of decolonization, researchers can (1) exercise critical reflexivity, (2) promote reciprocity and respect for self-determination, (3) embrace “Other(ed)” ways of knowing, and (4) embody a transformative praxis (p.1). Therefore, the use of decolonial methodologies is an appropriate approach for reviewing literature and data analysis. It is vital to highlight that diverse ways of knowing is not a concept that creates artificial binaries and clear-cut demarcations of multiple epistemologies. It calls for an acknowledgement of diverse knowledge systems and ways of knowing and to engage in reciprocity with co-producing ways of knowing.

Embracing the ethos of decolonizing research methodologies, this report utilizes Afrocentric approaches (Asante, 1991; 2007) and culturally relevant and responsive pedagogies (Gay, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 1994, 2016). These theoretical approaches underscore the importance of amplifying Black students’ voice, agency and identity through research that promotes culturally centered Black/African historiographies, literature, economic development, spirituality(ies). Moreover, it is imperative to recognize that for research to be relevant and enhance the quality of life for Black people, it must be informed by their worldviews, identities, knowledge systems, intersectionalities, cultural values, and a language that is meaningful to them (Evans-Winters, 2019).

## Literature Review

### Role of Mentorship in Black Youth Career Aspirations and Interest

Mentorship is instrumental in motivating Black students to pursue their career interests; dominant understandings of mentorship are grounded in the general principles of mentor-mentee relationship, transference of knowledge, and the overarching benefits to their existing and aspiring profession (Bozeman & Feeney, 2007; Brown II, 2023; Mentor Canada, 2021; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2022; Salami et al., 2022). These bodies of research and others (Brown II, 2023; Mitchell, 2022; Robinson & Reio, 2012) have also attested to the value of mentorship in building a trusting and consistent relationship that empowers both the mentor and mentee (TDSB, 2023) in providing altruistic rewards for mentors and creating networks of support for youth.

Research identified Black Canadian students' positive experience in their schools and communities with the long-term benefits of mentorship (Mentor Canada, 2021; Ontario Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services, 2022; Salami et al., 2022). More specifically, mentorship has been shown to improve the access of Black youth, aged 6-18 years, to career pathways and to increase the rate of employment after graduation (Mentor Canada, 2021; Ontario Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services, 2022). For example, 95% of Black youth in Ontario who received mentorship completed high school, while 92% were employed and/or were still studying (Mentor Canada, 2021). Lopez (2013) and Lopez and Jean-Marie (2021) proposed a collaborative mentorship approach that is based on critical dialogue, through an equity and diversity lens, between mentor-mentee.

In the educational space, a core principle of collaborative mentorship is for educators to critically consider and understand anti-Black racism and create positive spaces where they can build their own reservoir of resources to meet the diverse needs of students (Lopez, 2013; Lopez & Jean-Marie, 2021). Hurd et al. (2012) and Mitchell Dove (2022) further suggest that mentors from the same racial identity and career

background help Black youth to critically analyze existing challenges in their social world and find solutions to resolve them. Findings in these same studies highlight the role of Black mentors in affirming and supporting Black youth's career aspirations.

## **The Role of Mentorship in Developing Transferable Skills for Graduation Pathways**

Integral to these overarching benefits of mentorship is the development of transferable skills for graduation pathways. Transferable skills are viewed as learned skills and character traits that are necessary to support students' personal growth, lifelong learning, and employability (Murthy, 2021; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2020-24). The Ontario Ministry of Education (2020-24) contends that transferable skills are essential assets that do not occur in a vacuum, but serve to assist students in transferring their learning to different levels of their education. As Canadian youth enter an increasingly technologically advanced and globally connected workforce, they require a range of transferable skills to successfully navigate their professional space. Drawing attention to this issue highlights the need for K-12 education systems and their affiliating organizations to hone Black students' transferable skills to support and prepare them for post-secondary education and the workforce (The Ontario Ministry of Education, 2020-24).

Transferable skills fall under four distinct categories: cognitive, social, individual or emotional, and instrumental. The cognitive dimension encompasses students' ability to learn and utilize their creative, critical thinking, and problem solving skills across different professions (Chase, et al., 2020; Materu, 2017; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2020-24; United Nations Children's Fund, 2022). Instrumental dimension is evidenced in students demonstrating aptitude in their decision-making, leadership, negotiation, and cooperation skills, while individual dimension is in reference to their sense of reliance, emotional intelligence, self-esteem, self-confidence, and communication skills (Chase et al., 2020; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2020-24; United Nations Children's Fund,

2022). Social dimension within the context of transferable skills contributes to students, including Black youth, developing respect for diversity, empathy, conflict resolution, and networking skills among others (Chase et al., 2020; Materu, 2017; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2020-24; United Nations Children's Fund, 2022). The literature suggests Black students with these acquired transferable skills exhibit behaviours that reflect a deeper level of commitment and passion for their profession (Chase et al., 2020; Materu, 2017).

Other research suggests that Black youth develop these noted essential skills and competencies from their mentors (Mentor Canada, 2021). These studies offer insight into the influence that mentors have on enhancing Black youth leadership, communication, teamwork, problem-solving, time-management, critical thinking, creativity, adaptability, organizational, and leadership skills (Black Mentorship Inc., 2020; Mentor Canada, 2021). Such competencies are realized when mentees set realistic goals, demonstrate keen interest in learning and listening, engage in open communication, and recognize the importance of mutual respect, trust, and commitment, while being open to feedback from their mentors (Joseph & McKenzie, 2022; Materu, 2017). Black students developing their interpersonal skills through mentorship is, therefore, foundational in complementing and enhancing their professionalism, knowledge, and abilities in their core area of specialization (Keevy, 2016; Materu, 2017; Mentor Canada, 2021).

## **Graduation Pathways and Black Students**

Although Ontario has one of the highest rates of university attendance and graduation across Canada, there remains barriers in access to and continuity in post-secondary education for many Black students (Gordon, 2019; Miner, 2011; Stol, et al., 2016; Thompson, 2023). Contributing to these long-standing inequities and barriers to post-secondary education are issues related to Black students' socio-economic issues, mistrust, as well as limited financial, professional, and academic knowledge about post-secondary education among others (Dupere, et al., 2017; Thompson, 2023; Toronto Youth Equity Strategy, 2017). Other scholarly works have identified educators

having low expectations of and racism towards Black studies as key factors that discourage Black youth from realizing their academic and career goals (James & Turner, 2015, 2017).

Despite these challenges, programs do exist that provide mentorship support for Black students (Black Ladders, 2022; Miner, 2011; Parents of Black Children, 2022; Stol, et al., 2016). For example, TDSB has partnered with Seneca College among others in offering students and parents from Grade 7 and up with the opportunity to enhance their academic qualifications (Miner, 2011; Stol, et al., 2016). Gordon (2019) identified group and one-on-one tutoring and mentorship support as avenues that introduce students to areas of interest at the post-secondary level. Other organizations that offer mentorship support for Black youth include Mentor Canada, Hamilton Centre for Civic Inclusion, and the Somali Centre for Family Services. Mentor Canada (2021) is a group of partnering mentorship organizations (Big Brothers Big Sisters of Canada, Alberta Mentoring Partnership, and the Ontario Mentoring Coalition) that aims to build youth capacity in areas of research, technology, public education, and networks across Ontario and Alberta.

Additionally, the Black Youth Mentorship Program (BYMP) at the Hamilton Center for Civic Inclusion provides mentorship services to youth aged 13-25 years (n.d.). As part of its core mandate, the BYMP supports youth in discovering their talents while developing resilience as they navigate varying challenges. The BYMP also offers group and one-on-one sessions to help students set and meet their career goals. The Somali Centre for Family Services has an established 'Together We Can Mentorship' program that creates opportunities for approximately 40-50 Black youth and their families. As part of their offered services, Black youth are partnered with Black professionals who not only provide mentorship, but entrepreneurship and employment opportunities. The success of these programs are documented across community centers and universities in the Toronto region with evidence of Black students enrolling in after school programs and finding pathways to post-secondary education (Dupere, et al., 2017; Miner, 2011).

This ongoing practice of partnering with community organizations and colleges illustrates the intentional steps taken among schools to reduce the gap in Black students' graduation and access to postsecondary education (Gordon, 2019; Miner, 2011).

## **The Impact of Mentorship on Black Student Well-being**

Recently, the well-being of Black students has garnered increased and urgent attention (Canadian Institute for Health Information, 2009; Fante-Coleman & Jackson-Best, 2020). The World Health Organization (WHO) (2021) conceptualizes well-being as individuals, including students, experiencing a positive sense of self and quality of life that allow them to purposefully contribute to society. Shah (2021) argues that many of these definitions of well-being often fail to acknowledge that colonialism and systemic racism have created harmful environments for Black students. Fundamental to students' ability to recognize and overcome their challenges is their access to equitable resources and support when struggling with psychological/emotional, mental, cognitive, and social well-being issues (Lara & Volante, 2019; WHO, 2021).

Across Ontario schools, there are growing concerns that many Black students do not have equitable access to resources and support to manage their mental well-being challenges (Fante-Coleman & Jackson-Best, 2020). This has been illustrated by Black students conducting Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) at the TDSB who highlighted the limited and inequitable access to mental well-being resources at the TDSB (Francis & Ibrahim, 2023; Ibrahim & Mohamoud, 2023; Mohammed, 2023). They further suggested that anti-Black racism, discrimination, lack of trained staff to support their needs, and lack of representation in schools are key factors that impact their mental health and well-being (Francis & Ibrahim, 2023; Ibrahim & Mohamoud, 2023; Mohammed, 2023).

Driving this focus on Black students' well-being are issues related to anti-Black racism, stereotypes, discrimination, racial trauma, and other social challenges (Anderson, 2020; Fante-Coleman & Jackson-Best, 2020; Houle, 2020; Landertinger, et al., 2021; Salami et al., 2022; School Mental Health Ontario, 2022; Turner, 2015). For example, Cenat et al.'s (2021) study on Black Canadian's mental health found that 68.5% of the participants, aged 15-40 years, reported severe depressive symptoms due to systemic violence. While these statistics do not speak specifically to high school students, they point to the growing need for programs, such as BSSLP, that contribute positively to their mental health, including their identity being affirmed and validated, positive relationships with staff and sense of community to help mitigate systemic racism and its devastating impact on their mental health.

Evidence from the literature indicates that mentorship helps to remediate these noted well-being issues and others among youth (Big Brother of Greater Vancouver, 2023; Lorenzetti et al., 2022; Mentor Canada, 2021). These studies further show that mentorship is a source of support for Black youth's mental, emotional/ psychological, social, and cognitive well-being (Big Brother of Greater Vancouver, 2023; Lorenzetti et al., 2022; Mentor Canada, 2021). Given that Black students' experiences are not homogenized, the Ontario Ministry of Children, Community, and Social Services invested \$2.2 million in mentorship programs to create greater access to resources and support for students to reduce their mental health concerns and improve their academic success (Ontario Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services, 2022).

Not only are these efforts by the Ontario government timely; they are also critical to addressing the 'mentorship gap' for Black youth who continue to encounter barriers. Notably, many Black youth have limited access to and understanding of the value of mentorship and how it can position them for success (Keevy, 2016; Mentor Canada, 2021). Community organizations in Ontario, such as the YMCA's Black Achievers' Program in the Greater Toronto Area, have developed mentorship programs to strengthen Black students' social well-being and improve their academic achievement. Similarly, the TDSB, through the Centre of Excellence for Black Student Achievement,

has established an ecosystem of support aimed at enhancing Black students' overall well-being through various student-centred programs to support their identity development and building their capacity as they transition from high school (Munroe et al., 2022; Munroe, 2021).

Overall, these research findings foreground the importance of mentorship in helping Black youth develop the needed tools to counter the effects of systemic racism and discrimination, in all its forms, on their mental, emotional, psychological, and social well-being.

## **Sense of Belonging**

Sense of belonging, particularly within the context of a school setting, has been examined in relation to Black Canadian students' educational outcomes for decades. Sense of belonging signifies students' feeling of relatedness or connection to others (Aden et al., 2020; The Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD], 2017). According to Boston and Warren (2017), Black students who report a strong sense of belonging to the school environment experience positive educational outcomes. In fact, they noted that a high sense of belonging to school has been positively associated with high academic achievement, high school graduation rates, and school satisfaction (Boston & Warren, 2017).

Black students' sense of belonging forms part of their psychological well-being and is understood as their connection to their school, local community, social group, culture, family and other related groups (Brown II, 2023; George et al, 2021; Gray et al., 2018). The OECD (2017) described students' sense of belonging as students experiencing a feeling of acceptance, connection to their peers and school community. Researchers noted students' sense of belonging can contribute to their identity, engagement, motivation, academic success, and psychosocial development (Booker, 2006; Faircloth & Hamm, 2005; Foxx, 2021; OECD, 2017). Related literature reveals that critical intervention is necessary to foster Black students' sense of belonging at the

school level with specific focus on increasing diverse representation of staff across all levels of the education system (Brown, 2018).

By centering students' experiences and cultural background, and connecting them to the appropriate school services and support, students are more inclined to develop a positive sense of self and determination to excel academically (Gordon et al., 2009; Strayhorn, 2018). Recent findings from the TDSB's focused conversation with Black students, parents and community stakeholders illustrate the growing need for the TDSB to establish more positive school environments for students to thrive and experience a sense of belonging (Munroe, et al., 2022). Junior leaders in this study shared the imperative of the TDSB extending support to Black students during different stages of their development. Oba (2021, 2022) also discussed the impact of racism and silencing of culture, values, and experiences that affect Black students' sense of belonging and learning.

## **Black Students' Identity Development**

Racial identity is a multidimensional construct that focuses on the importance and meaning individuals assign to race in their self-definition (Medina, 2016; Sellers et al, 1998). The constructs Sellers et al. (1998) propose include (but are not limited to): centrality, which is the extent to which race is a part of an individual's normative self-definition; private regard, which refers to how positively or negatively an individual feels about his or her membership in the racial group; and public regard, which refers to how positively or negatively an individual thinks other people feel about the racial group.

Du Bois (1998) and other Black scholars noted that Black identity is historically constructed through Black people attaching their self-identity to Africa because of individual and collective struggles with oppression, institutional and structural racism, and other forms of mistreatment towards their race (Munroe, et al., 2022; Stanely et al., 2021). These researchers also connected Black identity with community, specifically as it relates to the principles of cooperation and the values they uphold to support each other. Walker and Tracey (2012) noted that Black people with a strong internalized

sense of identity and self-worth tend to have strong convictions about their career path and their choices made to support their future success. Therefore, Blackness as a collective identity serves to create a sense of pride, belonging, acceptance, and autonomy (Munroe, et al., 2022; Stanely et al., 2021).

For Black and African diasporic youth in Canada, identity represents a mosaic of race and culture. Although Black families continue to affirm the identities of Black children both in the home and in community, it continues to be disrupted in school and classroom spaces. Kohli et al. (2017) reinforced the idea that Black students' experiences with ongoing anti-Black racism, stereotypes, and discrimination at school have implications for how they view themselves. Munroe et al.'s (2022) research revealed that Black students in K-12 education associate their understanding of being Black with notions of beauty, victory, joy, anguish, and pain among others. The study further highlighted the recognition among Black students of how they have affirmed and celebrated their varying intersecting identity (e.g., gender, sexual orientation, religion, class, etc.) in schools. It was also further observed in Munroe et al.'s (2022) research that while Black students' identity continues to be negotiated in schools and among staff and peers, the ways in which identity is taken up within the current state or context of education is an ongoing discussion in realizing change.

## **Black Students' Engagement in School**

Student engagement plays a pivotal role in increasing students' academic achievement, sense of belonging, development, and graduation rates. Van Uden et al. (2014) and other scholars described student engagement as the overall interest, positive attitude, motivation, attention, and curiosity students exhibit during the teaching-learning process (Nguyen et al., 2018; Skinner et al., 2016). These researchers view student engagement as multi-dimensional and embedded in three

overlapping categories: emotional<sup>4</sup>, behavioural<sup>5</sup>, and cognitive<sup>6</sup>. In recent student engagement studies, other researchers such as Reeves et al. (2022) added agentic<sup>7</sup> engagement as another aspect of student engagement.

Black students' engagement across K-12 education in Ontario has been a point of concern for decades, with evidence of marked differences in student outcomes (Dei, 2003; James, 2020). Canadian education scholars and researchers continue to highlight socioeconomic factors and systemic and institutional racism as some of the prevailing issues affecting their experience in school (Dei, 1993; James, 2012; Maynard, 2022). To counter this negative schooling experience, other shared perspectives have pointed to the need to understand Black student engagement through an Afrocentric education lens. For example, Radebe's (2017) research highlighted the link between Black Canadian students' interest in education and education systems acknowledging their humanity and empowering them to connect their community experiences to their learning. The author discussed the importance of understanding student engagement through an Afrocentric lens because it affords students the opportunity to learn from an African worldview that centers their cultural background, history, and people (Radebe, 2017). The benefits and practices of an Afrocentric education allow all students, especially Black students, to develop a sense of agency, independence and self-worth in a racially and culturally affirming space.

Notably, Dei (1996) and Jean-Pierre (2021) posited that African focused pedagogy is based on teachers modifying their curriculum to reflect students' diversity along the lines of race, culture, knowledge, beliefs, and values. These scholars also maintain that educators whose pedagogies are culturally relevant create the space for students to learn and expand their cultural knowledge. Likewise, Ginwright (2004) and

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<sup>4</sup> Students' emotional engagement is premised on their response to their teachers' pedagogies. These responses are usually evidenced in their interest and enthusiasm in class (Van Uden et al. 2014).

<sup>5</sup> Students' behavioural engagement and affiliated agentic engagement is based on their ability to ask related questions in class/sessions and complete tasks (i.e., active engagement) and how attentive they are in class (i.e., passive behaviour) (Nguyen et al., 2018; Skinner, 2016). Students with demonstrative ability to engage in behavioural and agentic engagement are intrinsically motivated to share their views on particular topics.

<sup>6</sup> Cognitive engagement is students' ability to recognize that education is foundational to their career path and seek to verbalize their learning (Nguyen et al., 2018).

<sup>7</sup> Agentic engagement relates to students proactively and constructively influencing decision making in their learning spaces (Zambrano et al., 2023).

Asante (2003, 2009) contend that Africentric focused education contributes to Black people, including students, centering and recognizing themselves as agents of change in examining, and resolving issues in their communities.

Other key principles and benefits of student engagement through African-centered education include developing Black students' self-determination, leadership capacities, sense of agency, unity, and an orientation for social justice (Radebe, 2017). In fostering a positive and equitable learning experience for Black students, scholars, policy makers and other educational stakeholders have called on school boards and educational institutions to partner with community members to support the totality of student and school success (Chikkatur, 2021; Dei, 2008).

## **The Importance of Community Engagement**

Student and community engagement are interrelated and manifested in different ways. Community engagement revolves around the inclusion of all stakeholders, including parents, in decision-making processes about issues concerning sustainable services and future outcomes of their communities and schools (Butler, 2021; Howard & James, 2019; Latunde & Clark-Louque, 2016; Mitchell Dove, 2022). Munroe (2022) also contends that community engagement in Ontario is focused on schools creating partnerships with stakeholders, including Black organizations and businesses, to realize the totality of Black students' overall achievement. Additionally, scholars assert that schools can establish best practices such as inclusion of community stakeholders in classroom settings to share the challenges impacting their communities and the measures they have taken to effect change (Dei, 2008; Flowers, 2020; Munroe, 2021). Other forms of partnership involve organized volunteer programs for Black students to engage in unpaid or paid work (Ayaya, 2020; Munroe, 2022).

The Black Student Summer Leadership Program (BSSLP) created by the Centre of Excellence for Black Student Achievement at TDSB is an example of the board collaborating with community organization and experiential learning agencies to provide

students with a range of experiential learning opportunities (Munroe, 2022). In addition to these benefits, Black students, otherwise regarded as junior leaders within the program, are given agency in making decisions concerning their choice for placement in Black organizations that align with career goals (Munroe, 2023). In doing so, Black students are able to visualize a promising future for themselves where they have the autonomy to choose their own path to excellence.

To further support this engagement, the Ontario Ministry of Education provided multi-year funding for school boards to establish partnerships with community stakeholders to remove barriers to Black students' success and inequity in access to post-secondary education, among other barriers. To actionize these long-term goals, the Ministry mandated school boards to develop culturally responsive programs and hire graduation coaches who can relate to the lived realities of Black students (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2022). As advisors and mentors to students, graduation coaches are integral in building bridges between communities and schools, while extending support to meet Black students' well-being and academic needs (Munroe, 2021; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2022).

School-family-community engagement, therefore, holds promise in creating a safe and positive environment and enhancing Black students' achievement (Munroe, 2022). It also involves the support and involvement of families caring for Black children working alongside educators to improve their schooling experience and graduation pathways. This engagement using a wrap around approach also involves mentorship and career exploration opportunities for Black students to help mitigate the layered barriers they often experience as they transition out of high school.

## **Methodology**

The formative evaluation utilized a mixed-methods approach. Data were collected through two surveys: a student survey which was designed to understand junior leaders' experiences and feedback on the program, and a survey designed to

gather feedback from experiential learning agencies who provided a placement for junior leaders. The survey tools included a combination of closed- and open-ended questions which provided an opportunity for junior leaders to expand on their responses and share their perspectives in their own words.

## **Data Sources**

The student survey consisted of 37 questions about the BSSLP experience, including questions on student demographics, program expectations and objectives, and feedback regarding the experience of the program itself, the experiential learning placement, the research component (YPAR) and general recommendations. The agency's survey comprised 23 questions that included placement information, student engagement in their placement, experiential agencies' engagement, program design, and recommendations to enhance future iterations of BSSLP. In regard to the data collection process, the surveys were created using Google Forms and shared with junior leaders via email through a survey link in August 2023. Following that, time was allocated for them to complete the survey in person on the last day of the BSSLP program in order to gather ample input. The partnership survey was also distributed at the end of the program.

Closed-ended data from the surveys were analyzed using descriptive statistics including frequencies and percentages, while open-ended comments were analyzed thematically (Braun & Clarke, 2006). To protect the confidentiality of junior leaders' responses, all identifying information was removed from the report.

## **Main Findings**

This section presents the findings from the BSSLP Student Survey and the BSSLP Experiential Learning Agency Survey. The findings are grouped based on the data sources.

## Results from Student Survey

### Junior Leaders' Profile

A total of  $N= 88$  junior leaders responded to the BSSLP Student Survey. The survey had approximately an 81% completion rate. The highest proportion of junior leaders was in Grade 11 (42%) and the lowest proportion was in Grade 10 (9.1%). Nearly one-quarter of junior leaders (23%) were in Grade 12 and over one-quarter (26%) were transitioning to post-secondary education at the time of the survey. Figure 3 provides a statistical overview of BSSLP junior leaders by grade who completed the survey.

**Figure 3**

*BSSLP Junior Leaders' Self-Identified Grade*

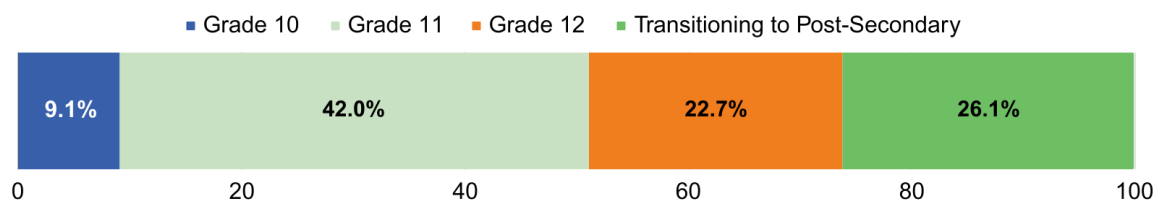


Figure 4 shows junior leaders' racial and cultural self-identification. The largest group (38%) identified as African, followed by those identifying as Afro-Caribbean (33%), and nearly one-quarter (24%) identifying as Black. The remaining 5% of junior leaders used other identifiers, such as Afro-Canadian, Black and Latino/Blaxican<sup>8</sup>, and Mixed to describe their racial identity.

<sup>8</sup> Blaxicans, or multiracial individuals who are the products of unions that are composed of one biological (or birth) parent who is identified and designated as Mexicana/o or Chicana/o, and one parent who is identified and designated as African American or Black.

**Figure 4**  
BSSLP Junior Leaders' Racial Identification

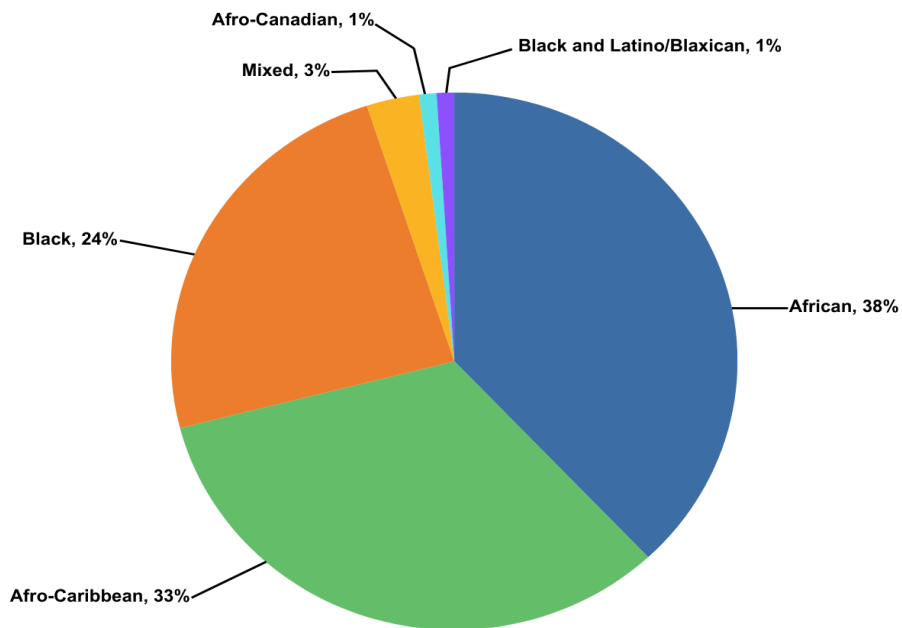
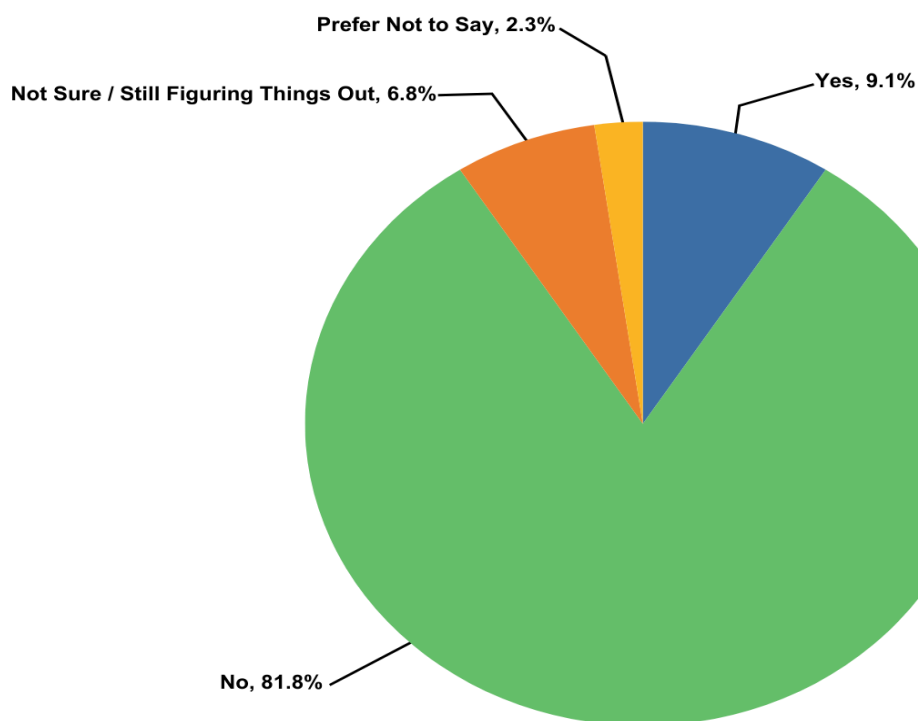


Figure 5 provides a numerical breakdown of junior leaders' identification with the 2SLGBTQIA+ community.

## Figure 5

### *BSSLP Junior Leaders' Identification with the 2SLGBTQIA+ Community*



Information was also captured regarding the percentage of returning junior leaders. When asked if they had previously participated in BSSLP, 31.8% of junior leaders said "Yes," while 68.2% said "No," indicating that they had no prior BSSLP experience.

More than half of the junior leaders (51.1%) attended one of the information sessions (January 17<sup>th</sup> and January 24<sup>th</sup> 2023), while 48.9% indicated that they did not attend any of the information sessions.

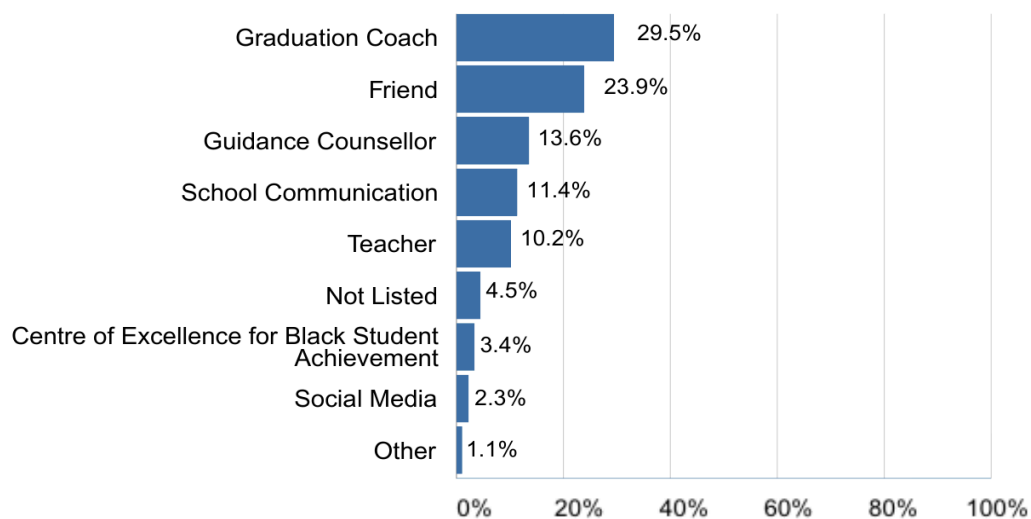
## Program Awareness

Most of the junior leaders who participated in BSSLP heard about the program through their graduation coaches (29.5%), friends (23.9%) and guidance counsellors (13%). The rest were spread across other sources such as teachers, CEBSA and

school communication and other channels. Figure 6 below provides an overview of junior leaders' awareness of BSSLP.

**Figure 6**

*Junior Leaders' Awareness of the BSSLP*

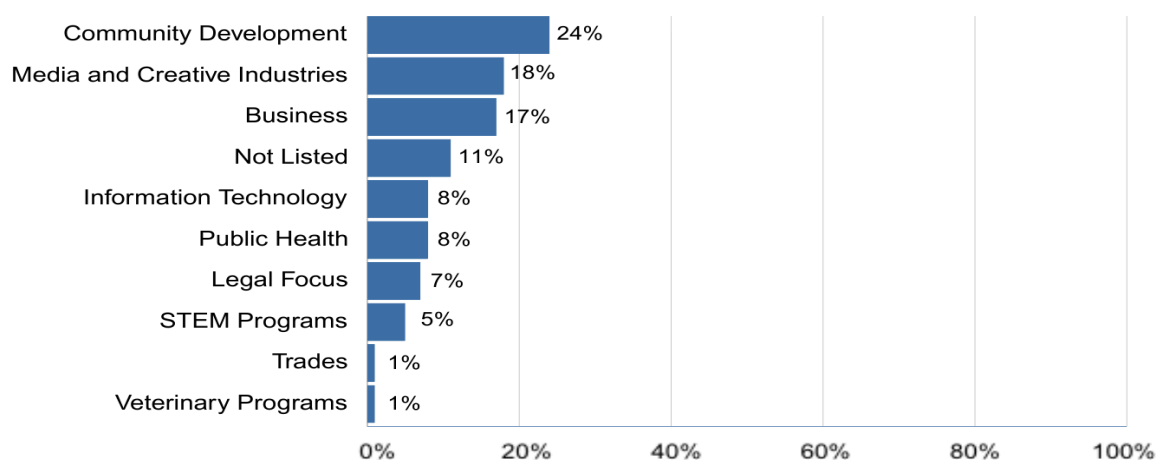


### Student Experiential Learning Placement

In the BSSLP student survey, junior leaders were asked to indicate the focus of their experiential learning placement. As shown in Figure 7, junior leaders participated in a variety of placements. The highest number of junior leaders were in community development, media and creative industries, and business.

## Figure 7

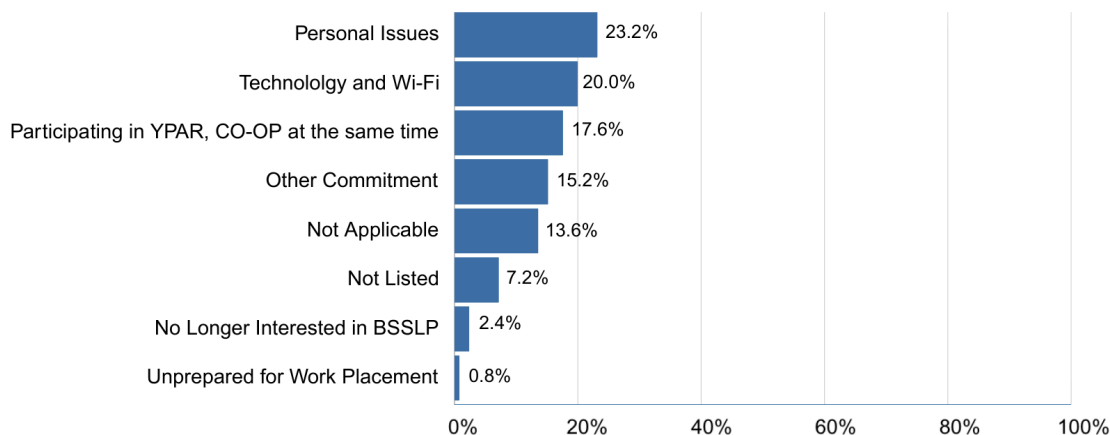
### *Focus of Junior Leaders Experiential Learning Placement*



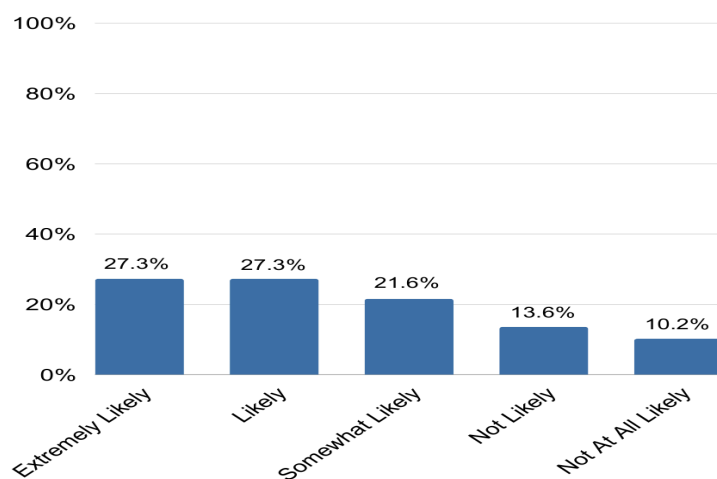
A total of  $n=9$  junior leaders had their placements “Not Listed.” Out of this data,  $n=4$  of them indicated that they had their placement with the Toronto Transit Commission,  $n=2$  were placed at the TDSB and the remaining junior leaders  $n=3$  worked in youth development, public relations, and Skills for Change, respectively.

### **Student Engagement in the Black Student Summer Leadership Program (BSSLP)**

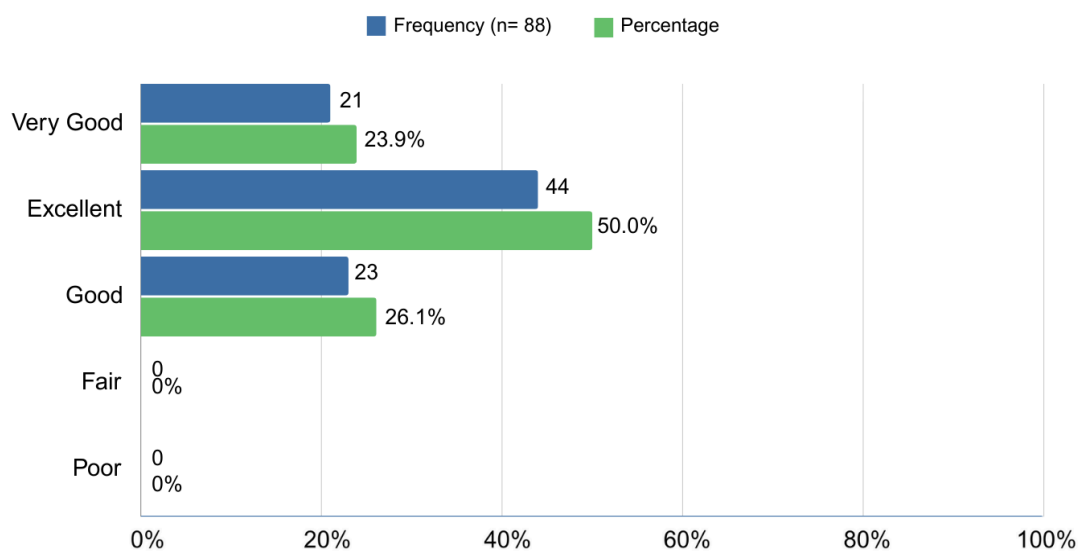
Overall, 23.2% of the junior leaders reported that personal issues affected their participation in BSSLP. Also, 20% of them had challenges with Wi-Fi and technology. Additionally, 17.6% noted that participating in YPAR, CO-OP and work placement at the same time was a major point of concern. Other commitments impacted the participation of 15.2% junior leaders, whereas 2.4% of them revealed they were no longer interested in the program and that consequently impacted their engagement. Figure 8 reveals the factors that affected junior leaders’ engagement in the program.

**Figure 8***Factors that Impact Junior Leaders' Engagement***Reapplication to BSSLP Program**

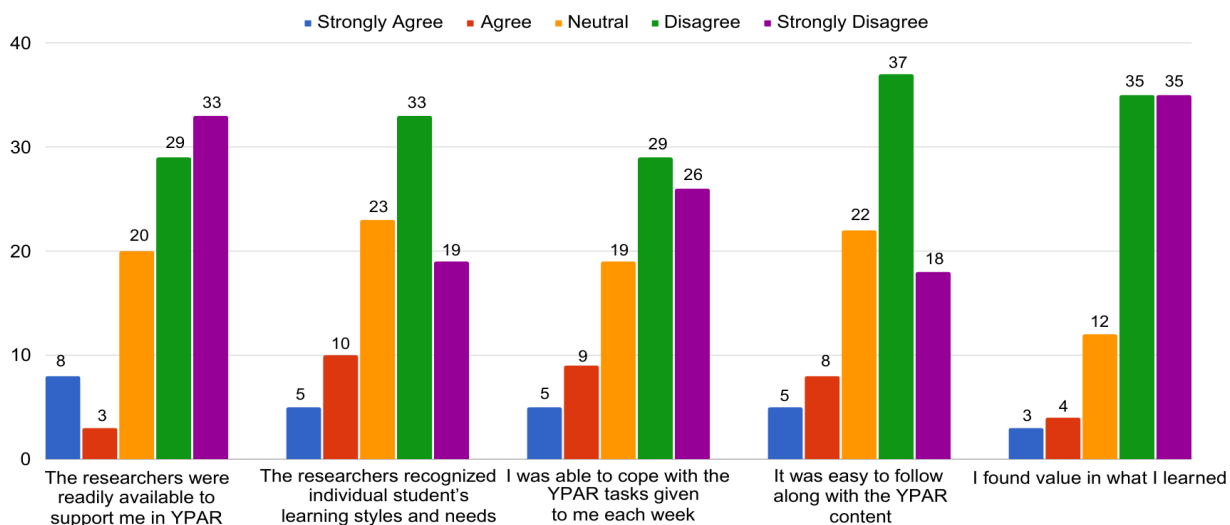
A combined 54.4% of junior leaders who were asked about their likelihood of reapplying to the BSSLP program the following year said that they would be highly interested in doing so ("Extremely likely" and "Likely"). Another 21.6% of the junior leaders said they would "somewhat likely" reapply to the BSSLP program. However, the fact that 23.8% tended to be "Not likely" or "Not likely at all" is essential and suggests an opportunity for improvement in some areas to increase program retention and satisfaction for some junior leaders. Most wanted to continue their involvement, demonstrating a good foundation for program continuation and expansion. Figure 9 provides a visual representation of the results.

**Figure 9***Reapplication to BSSLP Program***Junior Leaders' Experience in the BSSLP****Overall Experience with BSSLP**

Junior leaders' experience with BSSLP was largely positive. When asked to rank it on a scale of 1 ("Poor") to 5 ("Excellent"), 73.9% of junior leaders described their whole experience either as "Excellent" (23.9%) or "Very good" (50.0%). The remaining 26.1% reported it as "Good." There were no responses in the lower categories of "Fair" or "Poor" which is significant since it shows a high overall satisfaction level among junior leaders and demonstrates the program's success in providing a favourable experience to most junior leaders (Figure 10).

**Figure 10***Overall Experience with BSSLP***Overall Experience with YPAR**

When asked about different aspects of their experience with the program's research component, YPAR, the responses of junior leaders were mostly positive. A high proportion of junior leaders (70%) felt that the researchers were readily available to support them, while 58% felt that the researchers recognized their individual learning styles and needs. Overall, the majority of junior leaders (80%) saw value in what they learned through YPAR. Figure 11 provides a visual representation of the results.

**Figure 11***Junior Leaders' Experience with YPAR***Personal Highlights within the BSSLP**

Junior leaders were asked to identify personal highlights for them within the BSSLP. These highlights<sup>9</sup> were grouped into the following themes: forming connections, staff support, inclusion and belonging, YPAR, and wellness activities.

**Forming connections.** According to junior leaders, a main highlight of the BSSLP was meeting and interacting with people, making new friends, and developing connections with others in the program and at their placement.

“I met new people, I found people that I’ll be able to keep a connection with in the future and keep in touch with people.” (BSSLP junior leader)

“Meeting very nice and supportive staff, meeting friends from my country, just daily interactions with other brilliant Black students...” (BSSLP junior leader).

<sup>9</sup> The following quotes throughout this section can be attributed to various junior leaders. Names and other identifying information have been removed for privacy.

**Staff support.** Junior leaders shared that they felt supported by staff, including BSSLP staff, graduation coaches, staff at the placement, and YPAR POD leaders.

“I felt very supported and I've never come into an environment where I was always happy to walk into. I genuinely felt supported and felt that I could be my TRUE authentic self EVERY. SINGLE. DAY. I commend the staff for making sure I was okay on a daily basis and for the love and encouragement (BSSLP junior leader)

“I get emotional support and everything” (BSSLP junior leader)

**Inclusion and belonging.** Another highlight from the perspective of junior leaders was their feelings of inclusion and belonging, and feeling welcomed and safe in the space. A key part of this involved their feelings of connection to Black people in the space.

“Personally I have never been in a space where it's all Black kids. My school is predominantly white and I'm one of maybe two Black people in my classes. Being in this space and not being the odd one out really made me feel a sense of community I now know I had been lacking. I'm so grateful for this experience because it allowed me to feel secure in a new space.” (BSSLP junior leader)

“Some of my personal highlights include feeling accepted in a space of Black youth. My thoughts and experiences were affirmed constantly allowing me to be confident in my own skin.” (BSSLP junior leader)

**YPAR.** Junior leaders said they enjoyed working on their YPAR research, getting support from their POD leader, and presenting their work.

“My highlight was doing research and presenting my findings regarding [research topic]. This topic has been a long passion of mine as a Black student with the way it formed part of my identity.” (BSSLP junior leader)

“Definitely presenting my work. I even got the opportunity to do a 1 on 1 interview about my topic.” (BSSLP junior leader)

**Wellness activities.** Junior leaders reported that they liked the various wellness activities that were offered in the program.

“Some highlights for me included the outside activity day for wellness, the dance workshop...” (BSSLP junior leader)

“The wellness sessions. I had fun playing some of the games.” (BSSLP junior leader)

## Junior Leaders’ Understanding and Expectations of the Black Student Summer Leadership Program

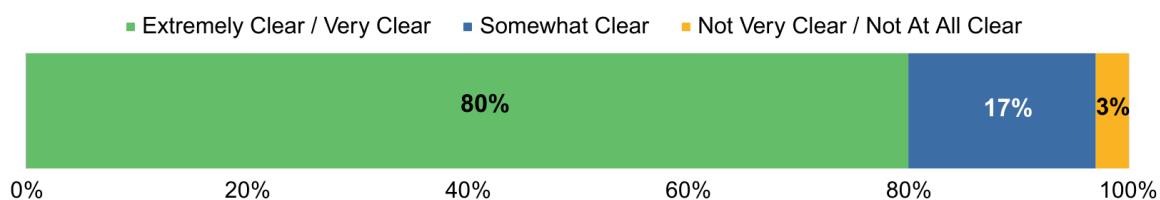
Junior leaders were asked various questions to learn about their understanding and expectations of the BSSLP.

### Clarity of Junior Leaders’ Role in the BSSLP

Junior leaders were asked to rate the clarity of their role within the BSSLP program and their work placement. The majority of junior leaders (80%) felt their role was “extremely clear” or “very clear”, as depicted in Figure 12.

**Figure 12**

*Clarity of Junior Leaders’ Role in BSSLP and Work Placement*



Junior leaders who indicated that they were “somewhat clear,” “not very clear,” or “not at all clear” about their role were asked to explain through open-ended comments what

they needed to better understand their role. Most of the comments on the survey were in relation to junior leaders' work placement. These comments were organized into the following themes: lack of understanding of junior leaders' role in their placement, mismatch between placement, and junior leaders' expectations:

***Lack of understanding of junior leaders' role in their placement.*** Some junior leaders said they did not have a clear understanding of their role in their work placement, as illustrated by the following comments.

"I need more clarification on what exactly the job title implied and what I would be doing specifically." (BSSLP junior leader)

"We just weren't told exactly what we were gonna do." (BSSLP junior leader)

Related to this issue, there were also some comments about the job description either not matching the role the junior leaders completed or junior leaders not having enough information from the description about what their role entailed.

***Mismatch between placement and junior leaders' expectations.*** Another concern expressed by junior leaders was that their placement did not match their expectations. For example, one junior leader explained:

"I think at my placement I was going in expecting to get a full, interactive and hands on learning experience, but I did not get that." (BSSLP junior leader)

***Dissatisfaction with role.*** A few junior leaders expressed being dissatisfied with their role:

"More time for the placement to organize something worth doing instead of filing and scanning documents the whole time" (BSSLP junior leader).

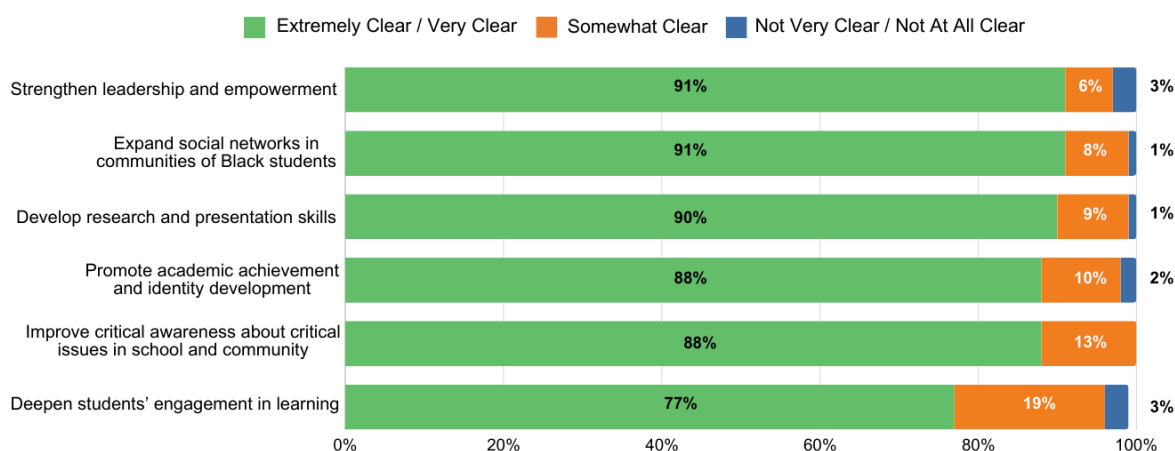
“We didn’t do any work there, we were just there” (BSSLP junior leader).

### Clarity of BSSLP Objectives

Junior leaders were also asked to rate the clarity of BSSLP objectives. All of the objectives were perceived to be “extremely clear” or “very clear” by the majority of junior leaders, ranging from 77% to 91% (see Figure 13).

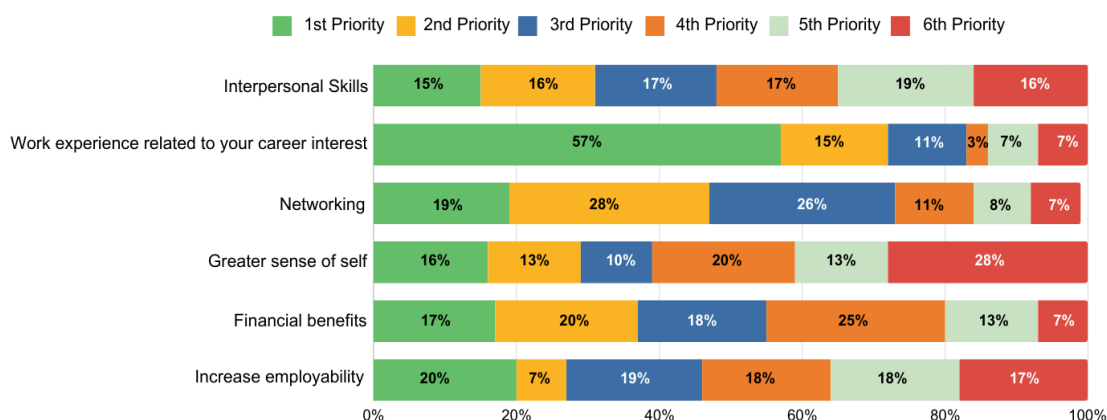
**Figure 13**

*Junior Leaders’ Perception of the Clarity of BSSLP Objectives*

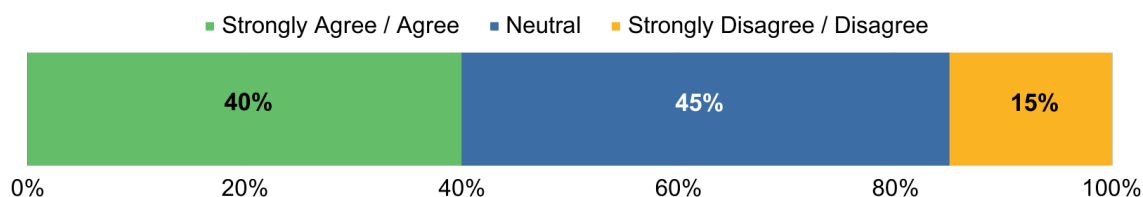


### Junior Leaders’ Expectations of BSSLP Outcomes

Another question on the survey asked junior leaders to rank specific outcomes they expected to develop in the BSSLP. Figure 14 shows junior leaders’ expectations for the BSSLP and the priority rankings for each outcome. For over half of the BSSLP junior leaders (57%), a top priority was gaining work experience related to their career interest. The second ranked priority was networking which was selected by 28% of junior leaders. Finally, increasing employability rounded out the list of top three priorities, with 20% of junior leaders citing its importance.

**Figure 14***Junior Leaders' Ranking of Priorities for the BSSLP*

When asked the extent to which their expectations of the BSSLP program were met, the feedback was mixed, with 40% indicating their agreement with this statement and another 45% indicating they felt “neutral” (Figure 15) while 15% strongly disagreed/disagreed.

**Figure 15***BSSLP Junior Leaders' Level of Agreement that their Expectations of the BSSLP were Met***Junior Leaders' Feedback on the Program****Duration of the BSSLP Program**

The distribution of responses to the question about BSSLP's duration reveals that 54.5% of junior leaders thought it was "just right," while 34.1% thought it was "too short."

Only 11.4% of junior leaders thought it was "too long." This indicates that the majority of the junior leaders believed the program's duration was appropriate, while a few of them would prefer a longer duration to maximize its benefits.

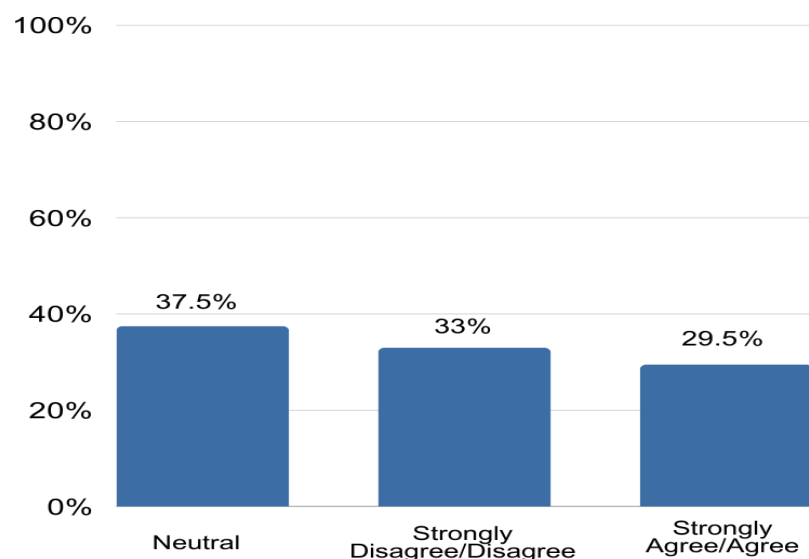
While the majority of junior leaders felt the duration was "just right" when it came to their preferred duration, junior leaders had varying viewpoints on the suggested length of the BSSLP. Of the 45.5% (n=40) junior leaders who felt that the duration was "too long" or "too short," 22.5% said the program should last seven weeks. Ten percent of them preferred a 6-week duration, while few junior leaders (7.5%) chose five weeks. Notably, none recommended a four-week timeframe. A sizable fraction of junior leaders (60%,) suggested "other" durations which had a period of eight or more weeks, as indicated by the quotes below.

"I wished for the program to be longer." (BSSLP junior leader)

"It should be 8 or 9 weeks so we aren't rushing to do the YPAR work." (BSSLP junior leader)

### **Organization of the BSSLP**

When junior leaders were asked to provide feedback on how well the BSSLP was organized, their response was positive. The junior leaders gave their opinions on whether the program was adequately organized on a scale of 1 ("strongly disagree") to 5 ("strongly agree"). A sizable portion (37.5%) provided a "neutral" response. On the other hand, 33% selected the option to "disagree" or "strongly disagree" that BSSLP was well organized, while 29.5% of junior leaders chose "agree" or "strongly agree" (Figure 16).

**Figure 16***Organization of BSSLP***Junior Leaders' Feedback on the BSSLP Program Schedule**

Mixed results were found when junior leaders assessed the program schedule's adequacy in juggling the placement and other BSSLP obligations. Nearly half of junior leaders (53.5%) said they "agreed" or "strongly agreed" that the program worked well, 25% remained "neutral" and 25% "disagreed" or "strongly disagreed."

**Presentation by Guest Speakers**

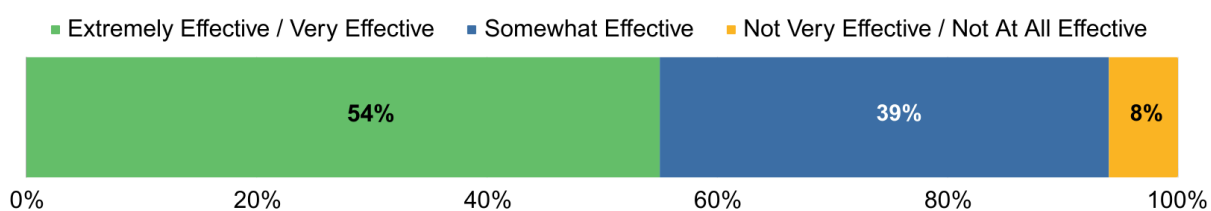
Junior leaders provided positive feedback on presentations by staff and guest speakers who were invited to share knowledge with them. The majority of the junior leaders (65.9%) "agreed" or "strongly agreed" that the presentations by staff and guest speakers were helpful, 15.9% of them chose a "neutral" stance, while 18.2% "disagreed" or "strongly disagreed." These results indicate that the majority of junior leaders found these presentations to be helpful in their academic and professional development.

## Perception of the Wellness Sessions

More than half of the junior leaders (54%) rated the wellness sessions offered in the BSSLP program as being “extremely effective” or “very effective” and only a small percentage (8%) thought they were “not very effective” or “not at all effective.” Figure 17 shows the distribution of the results.

**Figure 17**

*Junior Leaders’ Perception of the Effectiveness of the Wellness Sessions*



## Mentorship and Support

### General Support from BSSLP Staff

The assessment of BSSLP staff's helpfulness and attentiveness to junior leaders' needs or concerns displayed an essentially good sentiment. The majority of the junior leaders (80.7%) "agreed" or "strongly agreed" that the staff were helpful. A small group (6.8%) of them chose a neutral stance, and a few of them 12.5%, "disagreed" or "strongly disagreed." The significant number of junior leaders who “strongly agreed” suggests they were pleased with the support they received, which highlights how well the program met junior leaders' needs.

### Junior Leaders’ Perceptions of Support from BSSLP Staff during Placement

There was a strong sentiment regarding junior leaders’ perception of support from BSSLP staff during their work placement, with a combined 78.4% "strongly agreeing" or "agreeing" that they felt supported. Slightly more than 10% of junior leaders

(13.6%) chose "neutral" as their response, indicating that there was space for improvement in the nature of the support provided. Only 8% of junior leaders "disagreed" or "strongly disagreed."

When asked to provide comments on the level of support they received from their Graduation Coach or Centre of Excellence staff, junior leaders conveyed overall positive sentiments. Praising staff, they mentioned specific qualities, skills, and behaviours by which staff demonstrated their support.

**Staff personal qualities.** In terms of personal qualities, staff were described as being kind, understanding, encouraging, and helpful, and providing a welcoming environment to junior leaders.

"I think the BSSLP staff were super supportive for me. The environment in general was super welcoming and I felt super encouraged to be my best self everyday I walked into work." (BSSLP junior leader)

"They supported us with the presentations and with encouragement." (BSSLP junior leader)

**Staff skills.** With respect to skills, staff were described as being "easy to communicate" with, communicating often, and possessing strong listening skills.

"[BSSLP staff member] listened attentively to any questions and concern[s] I had..." (BSSLP junior leader)

**Staff behaviours.** Junior leaders also described the supportive behaviours of staff. For example, it was shared that staff "checked in" on junior leaders.

“My Centre of Excellence staff member checked in multiple times throughout the placement and made sure that she discussed any issues we brought up with our placement/Centre of Excellence.” (BSSLP junior leader)

An additional behaviour described by junior leaders was staff making themselves available to support junior leaders, when needed.

“They provided help for me whenever I needed help.” (BSSLP junior leader)

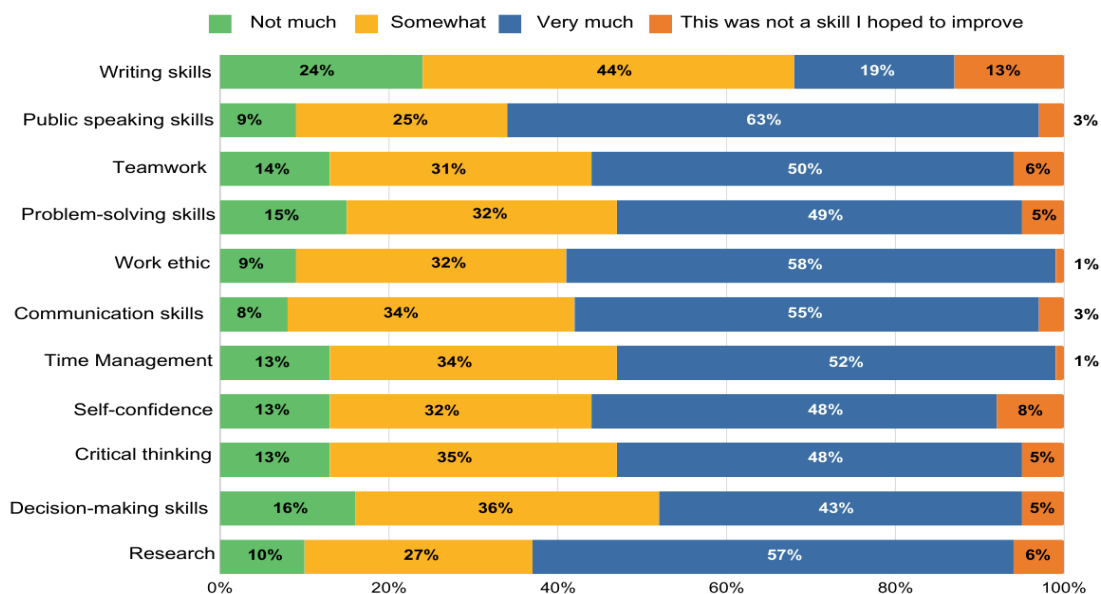
### **Junior Leaders’ Perception of BSSLP Staff’s Clear Communications**

When asked about the clarity of BSSLP staff’s communication, most of the junior leaders (51.1%) "strongly agreed" or "agreed" that staff members communicated clearly, whereas 33% of junior leaders chose "neutral." Only 15.9% "disagreed" or "strongly disagreed" that they received clear communication from staff, underscoring the significance of ongoing efforts to improve communication clarity within the program.

## **Key Outcomes of the BSSLP**

### **Junior Leaders’ Perception of Skills Developed in the BSSLP**

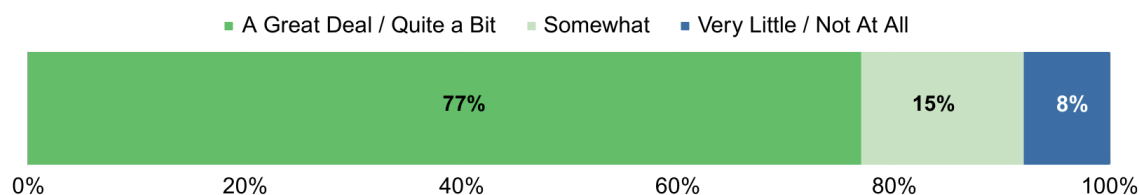
Junior leaders were asked to indicate their perceived level of improvement on a range of skills they developed in the BSSLP. The highest area of improvement involved the development of public speaking skills. Notable improvements were also found in regard to work ethic, research skills, communication skills, time management, and teamwork (Figure 18).

**Figure 18***Junior Leaders' Perception of Skills Developed in the BSSLP***Junior Leaders' Perception of the Helpfulness of their Work Placement**

An additional question was asked about the extent to which junior leaders' work placement provided a useful experience that helped them in realizing their career aspirations. Over three-quarters of junior leaders (77%) felt the work placement helped them "a great deal" or "quite a bit" with their career aspirations (Figure 19).

**Figure 19**

*Extent to Which Work Placement Assisted Junior Leaders with Career Aspirations*



To gain further insight into this question, junior leaders were asked to share in open-ended comments on the survey how their work placement was helpful or not helpful in realizing their career aspirations. There were a variety of ways that junior leaders found their placement to be helpful, which were networking, gaining exposure to a field, and interest in a career.

**Networking.** Networking was the most prevalent theme mentioned by junior leaders in relation to the helpfulness of their work placement. Through their placement, junior leaders said they developed networks and connections with people in fields that they wished to pursue in their future career. Networking also allowed junior leaders to develop skills, learn about job opportunities, or connect with mentors.

“I got to directly connect with many nurses and other medical staff...and made connections in the field I plan to work in.” (BSSLP junior leader)

**Gaining exposure to a field.** Gaining exposure to a field was another positive aspect of the placement that helped junior leaders to gain experience or exposure to a specific field or career path they had wanted to pursue in the future.

“Gave me a[n] inside look in the engineering world.” (BSSLP junior leader)

“I got to learn more about tech in the financial industry.” (BSSLP junior leader)

***Interest in a career.*** Some junior leaders gained a better understanding of their career interest as a result of their placement, while a few junior leaders learned what field they were not interested in.

“The placement helped teach me about the career that I wanted to go down. I was very unsure before going to my placement.” (BSSLP junior leader)

“My placement made me realize that I don’t have an interest in...[field] jobs.” (BSSLP junior leader)

***Increased knowledge.*** Junior leaders also spoke about the knowledge they gained in their placement. The type of knowledge was varied, and included topics such as the world of work, racism in the workplace, the courses required to pursue a certain field, and skills junior leaders need to develop for the career they are interested in.

“I learned a lot about work life balance.” (BSSLP junior leader)

“I learned how to reach out to people and communicate with new people. I hope to become a psychologist and this is a good skill to possess.” (BSSLP junior leader)

***Development of personal skills and insights.*** Through their placement, some junior leaders developed different skills and insights and had inner transformation on a personal level. The skills mentioned included public speaking, communication, and resume building. Some junior leaders spoke about having an inner transformation including self-advocacy, self-confidence, and feelings of empowerment.

“My placement made me feel empowered not only as just a ‘Black youth’ but a member of the African diaspora, shaping what kind of courses and pathways I chose going into university.” (BSSLP junior leader)

“It helped by...Giving a space to make me feel a sense of belonging...Making me more confident in myself and abilities.” (BSSLP junior leader)

***Match between placement and career interest.*** When considering the helpfulness of their placements, junior leaders spoke about the alignment or lack thereof between their placement and their career interest. This match or mismatch was reflected in some of the junior leaders’ comments.

“My placement at [name of organization] perfectly aligned with my interest so it definitely helped a lot.” (BSSLP junior leader)

“This placement did not help me with my career aspirations because we literally did nothing related to my career of interest at all.” (BSSLP junior leader)

## **Results from Experiential Learning Agency Survey**

A total of  $N=12$  experiential learning agencies responded to the BSSLP Experiential Learning Agency Survey. The survey had approximately a 60% completion rate.

### **Partnership and Collaboration between the Centre of Excellence and BSSLP Experiential Learning Agencies**

Results from the partner survey revealed the number of years that BSSLP experiential learning agencies have been working with the Centre of Excellence. Half of the agencies that participated in the survey ( $n=6$ ) were in their first year of collaboration,  $n=2$  were in their second year,  $n=1$  was in their third year, and  $n=3$  were unsure about

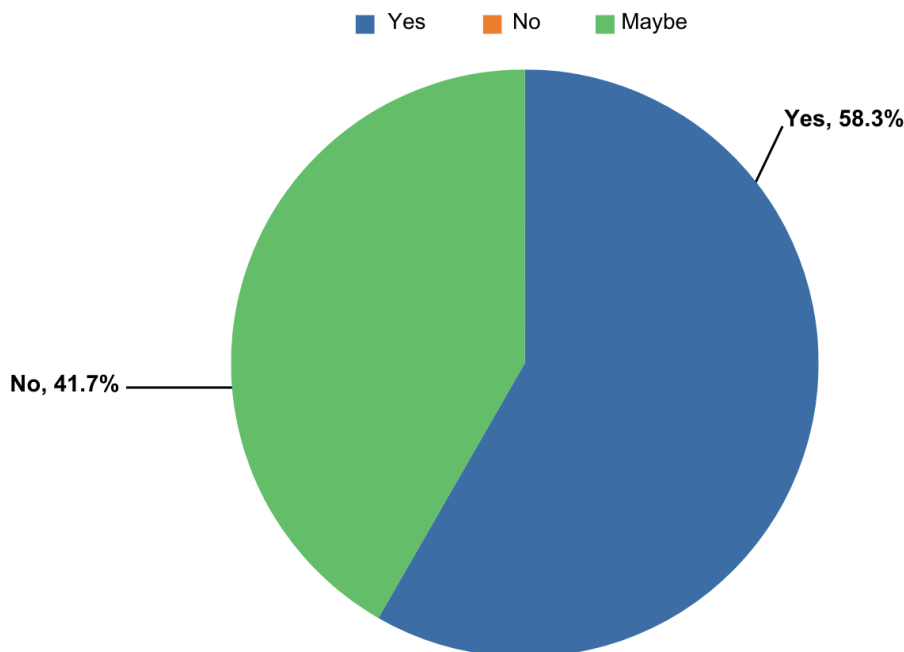
the length of their partnership. Moreso,  $n=1$  of the respondents had a sustained relationship but was unsure of the exact number of years. Most of the returning experiential learning agencies mentioned the need to support youth in developing their employability skills, past positive partnership experiences, and supporting Black junior leaders to excel in career opportunities as one of the reasons why they returned as BSSLP partners.<sup>10</sup>

“We really enjoyed the merits of the program and support[ing] Black students excel in exploration of career opportunities.” (BSSLP Experiential Learning Agency)

The majority of the experiential learning agencies (58.3%) responded “yes” when asked if they would be interested in working with the BSSLP in the forthcoming year. Comparatively, 41.7% of experiential learning agencies responded “maybe,” indicating that they are open to future collaborations. None of the experiential learning agencies explicitly rejected further collaboration. The results, as shown in Figure 20, highlight a high level of openness to ongoing involvement with the BSSLP, encouraging prospective future partnerships.

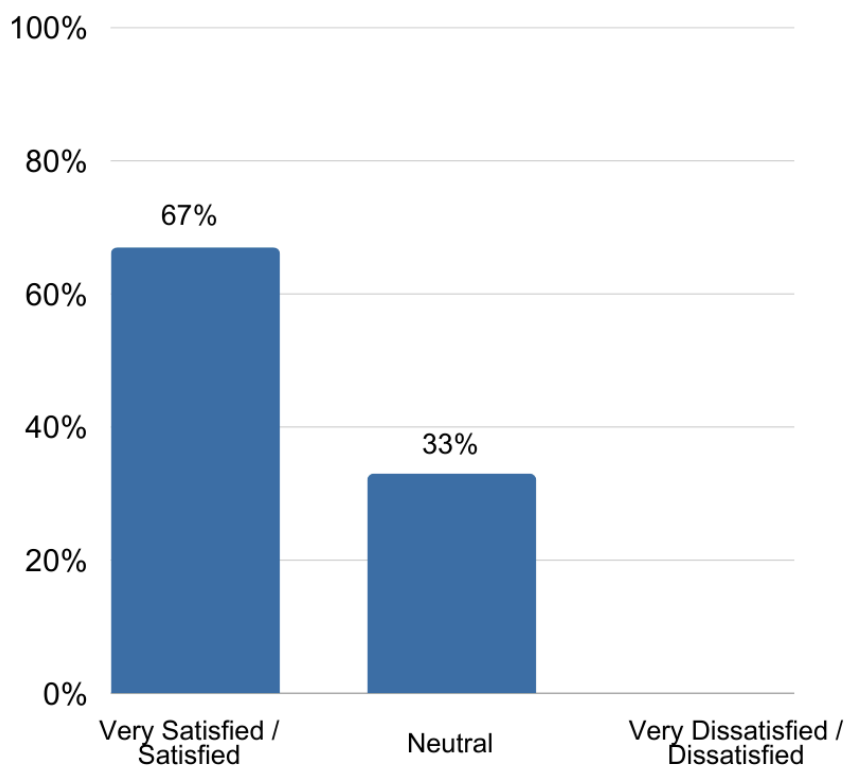
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<sup>10</sup> The following quotes throughout this section can be attributed to BSSLP Experiential Learning Agencies. Names and other identifying information have been removed for privacy.

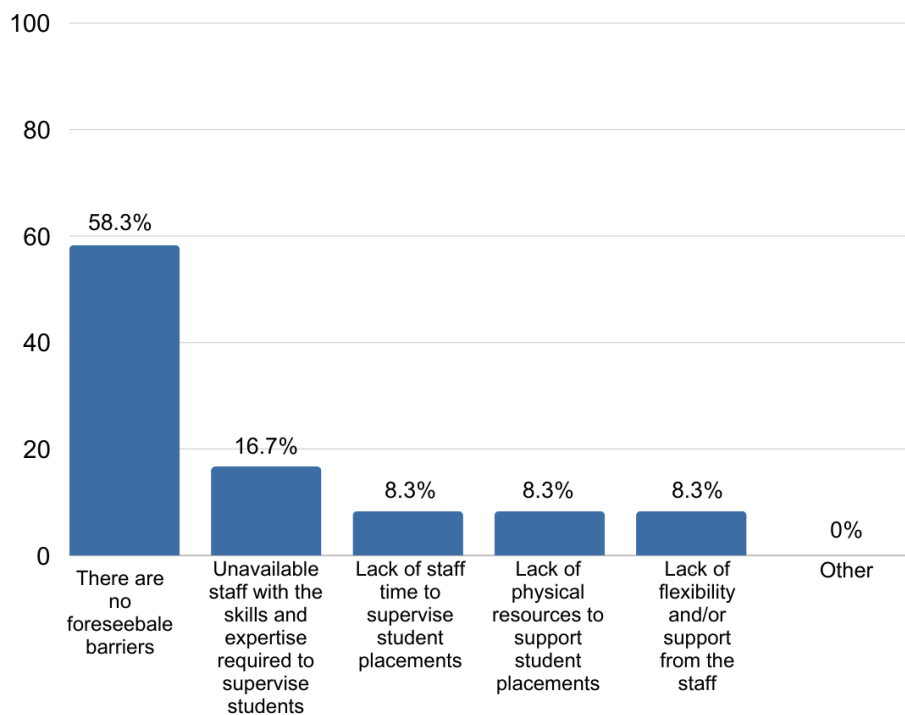
**Figure 20***Collaboration with BSSLP Next Year*

### **Partnership Experiences between BSSLP and Experiential Learning Agencies**

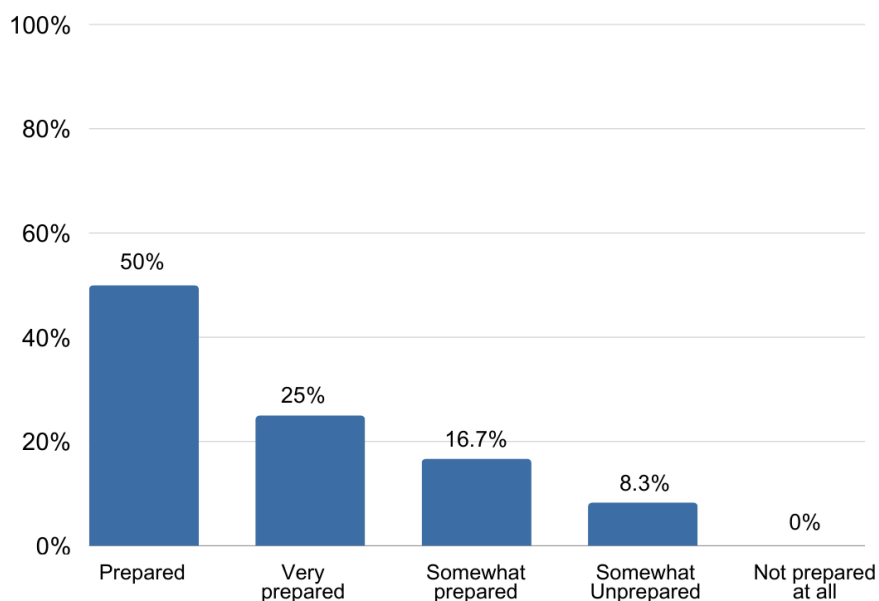
Excellent partnership experiences are key to ensuring sustained and continuous successful relationships and ultimately the success of the BSSLP program. When asked how they would rate their overall partnership experiences, the majority of the experiential learning agencies (67%) were either “very satisfied” or “satisfied,” while (33%) were “neutral.” No experiential learning agency indicated that they were “very dissatisfied” or “dissatisfied.” These findings show that the experiential learning agencies felt the collaboration was worthwhile and fruitful. The neutral responses, however, can suggest that there is still room for progress in some areas of the collaboration (Figure 21).

**Figure 21***Experiential Learning Agencies Experiences of the Partnership***Barriers to Future Collaboration**

The majority of experiential learning agencies (58.3%) expressed confidence, with "no foreseeable barriers" for future BSSLP engagements. However, some challenges were raised: almost a quarter of agencies (24.9%) cited a lack of staff supervision of students, physical resources, and flexibility to future collaboration, while 16.7% reported an unavailability of staff who could adequately supervise students (Figure 22).

**Figure 22***Barriers to Future Collaboration with BSSLP***Perception of Junior Leaders' Level of Preparedness**

Experiential learning agencies were asked to indicate how prepared BSSLP junior leaders were when they started their placements on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 denoting "not prepared at all" and 5 denoting "very prepared." Out of the 12 agencies, 75% indicated that the junior leaders were "prepared" or "very prepared." while 16.7% indicated somewhat prepared. The remaining 8.3% of the agencies indicated that junior leaders were "somewhat unprepared." Overall, the data from learning agencies indicated that the junior leaders had some level of preparedness during their placement (Figure 23).

**Figure 23***Perception of Junior Leaders' Level of Preparedness*

When the experiential learning agencies were asked to elaborate on the junior leaders' preparedness upon entry into their placement, their feedback was positive. Survey results from experiential learning agencies showed that the junior leaders demonstrated punctuality, adherence to safety measures, willingness to learn new skills, and making use of opportunities that arose. Responses from learning agencies indicated that there were instances when some junior leaders demonstrated professionalism and received praise from learning agencies.

“They seemed eager to learn and aware of the type of work they may be asked to perform.” (BSSLP experiential learning agency)

“He was eager and keen to learn and participate, and also professional. He may not have had the relevant technical legal skills, but we did not expect him to. He was so well prepared that everyone he interacted with commented on how much they liked working with him or just speaking with him. (BSSLP experiential learning agency)

The junior leaders' onboarding with BSSLP appeared to have fostered in them a sense of enthusiasm and adaptability.

“We observed that the junior leaders were eager and ready to get started because of the onboarding provided by BSSLP. They were open to experiencing new opportunities.” (BSSLP experiential learning agency)

However, the learning agencies noted some challenges that arose as the placements started. These included communication issues such as some junior leaders' slow response time to emails that contributed to onboarding delays, and some junior leaders missing kick-off meetings. In addition, some junior leaders mentioned that they were not involved in selecting their placement projects.

“Not all students attended the program kick-off meeting for managers to meet students and help prepare prior to the start of their placements.” (BSSLP experiential learning agency)

“Students seemed confused about what their placement entailed and informed us that they did not get to select the project they were placed in. Many students were not responsive to emails, and this caused a delay in their onboarding at [Experiential Learning Agency].” (BSSLP experiential learning agency)

Despite the challenges, junior leaders showed a positive attitude about their placements by seeming to understand potential tasks, being open to new experiences, and being ready to learn.

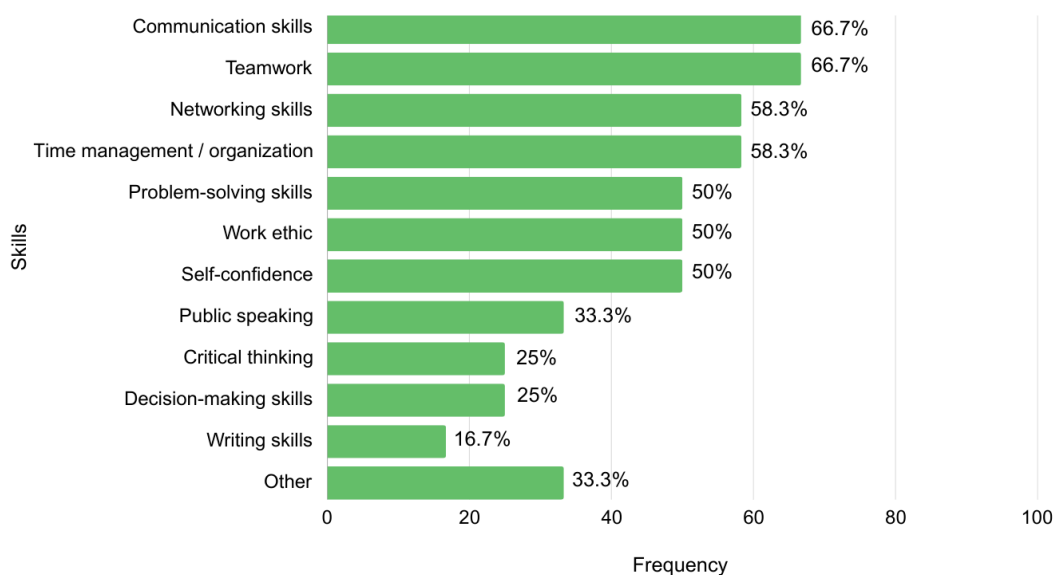
### **Perceptions of Junior Leaders' Outcomes During the Placement**

Throughout their placements, BSSLP junior leaders developed a variety of essential abilities. The majority of the experiential learning agencies ( $n=8$ ) indicated that communication skills and teamwork were the most improved skills among junior

leaders. Over half of experiential learning agencies noted that most junior leaders improved their networking, time management, and organization skills. Half of the experiential learning agencies felt that problem-solving, work ethic, and self-confidence skills were improved among the junior leaders. Experiential learning agencies mentioned little improvement in public speaking (33.3%), while critical thinking (25%), decision-making skills (25%) and writing skills (16.7%) were mentioned as the least improved skills among the junior leaders. The skill development question's inclusion of "other" skills revealed new areas in which BSSLP junior leaders improved. Some experiential learning agencies said their degree of development was at the point of full maturity, with some junior leaders even developing specialized skills (e.g., legal analysis abilities). Research and conflict resolution abilities were also mentioned, highlighting the various talents that junior leaders developed during their placements. Overall, the findings suggest that through the placements, junior leaders were able to develop key skills and competencies needed for future careers (Figure 24).

**Figure 24**

*Perceived Junior Leaders' Outcomes During Placement*



*Note.* Experiential learning agencies were able to choose more than one response, so the percentages do not add up to 100%.

## **Mentorship Supports**

### **Mentorship on Career Aspirations**

Experiential learning agencies were asked to rate their role in assisting BSSLP junior leaders with career aspirations during their placement. The mentorship activities were rated either "extremely well" ( $n=5$ ) or "very well" ( $n=4$ ) by respondents. Interestingly, only  $n=3$  of the agencies felt that they did "not" assist the junior leaders with mentorship on career aspirations opportunities "very well." This information demonstrates how effectively BSSLP and partners were committed to assisting and directing the junior leaders' professional objectives.

### **Mentorship in Educational Pursuits**

Experiential learning agencies were asked to rate their ability to provide opportunities to mentor BSSLP junior leaders on educational pursuits. Nearly two-thirds 67% of respondents gave ratings as either "extremely well" or "very well" for their engagement with junior leaders. One quarter 25% of the agencies noted that their engagement went "somewhat well," while the remaining 8% felt that it did not go very well. These outcomes highlight the partners' success in assisting junior leaders' academic goals.

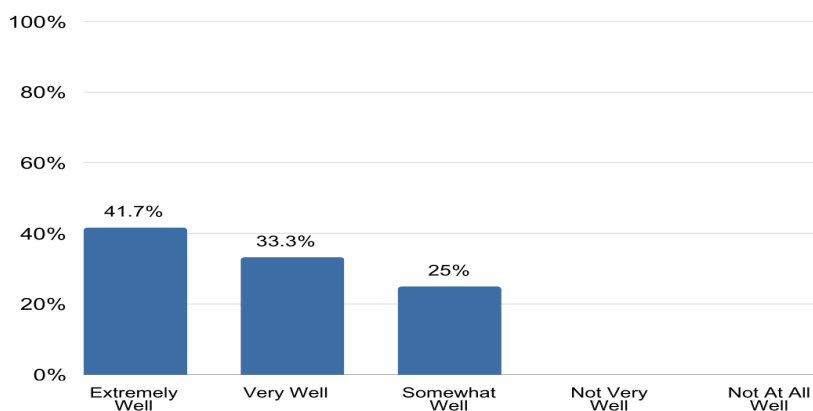
### **Mentorship around Professionalism**

Experiential learning agencies offered guidance on professionalism at the workplace on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 denoting "extremely well" and 5 denoting "not at all well." The mentorship efforts around how junior leaders could comport themselves in a workplace received a positive overall score, with 41.7% rating it as "extremely well" and 33.3% as "very well." In addition, a quarter of agencies (25%) thought it was "somewhat well." Notably, no respondents gave it a "not very well" or "not at all well"

rating. These outcomes demonstrate that learning agencies successfully made BSSLP junior leaders feel comfortable during the placement period (Figure 25).

**Figure 25**

*Mentorship Around How to Comport Themselves in a Workplace (Behaviour)*



## Opportunities for Professional Development

The results from the experiential learning agencies survey showed they were able to provide BSSLP junior leaders with opportunities for professional development. A majority of agencies 83% rated their efforts as either "extremely well", "very well" or "somewhat well." The remaining 17% of the agencies felt they did "not" offer a great professional development opportunity for the junior leaders "very well."

## Networking and Relationship Building Opportunities

### Networking

The experiential learning agencies' ability to provide BSSLP junior leaders with networking opportunities during their placement was impactful. Most of the partners 83% rated their efforts as either "extremely well" or "very well." The remaining 17% of the agencies both described the ability to provide networking opportunities for junior leaders as "somewhat well" or "not very well," respectively. This result demonstrates

that most experiential learning agencies were successful in helping junior leaders build meaningful networks, which is essential for their ongoing personal and professional development.

### **Establishing Meaningful Relationships**

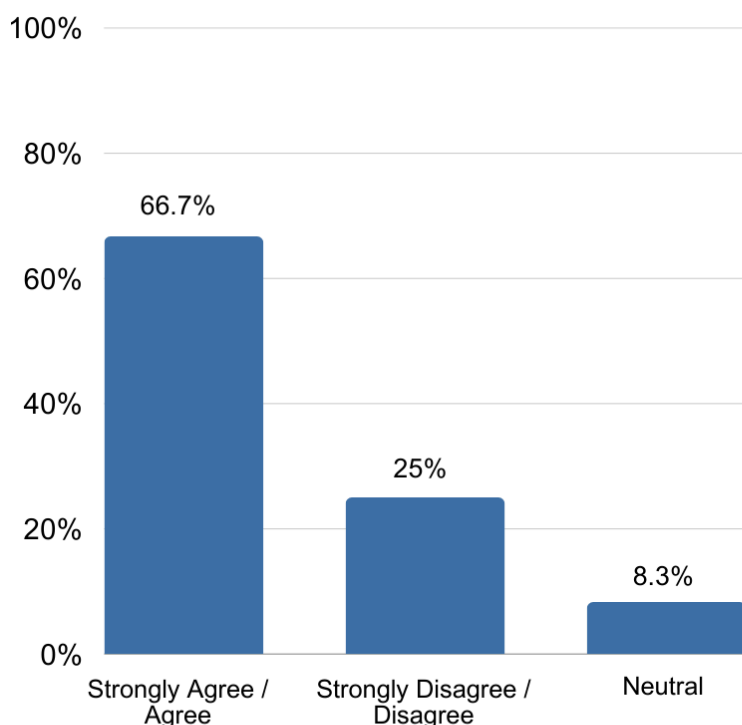
To achieve program goals, experiential learning agencies were asked if the junior leaders were able to develop meaningful relationships with their staff. Most of the partners 83% “agreed” or “strongly agreed” that BSSLP junior leaders were able to build meaningful relationships with at least one of their staff. The remaining 17% of the agencies both were neutral, disagreed” or “strongly disagreed.” This result demonstrates how the placements offered opportunities for junior leaders to develop their relationship building skills.

### **Suitability of Junior leaders’ Placement and Commitment to Learning**

According to most experiential learning agencies, BSSLP junior leaders were a good fit for their organization and demonstrated a commitment to learning about their organization based on the nature of their work. Notably, 67% “agreed” or “strongly agreed” with this statement, showing favourable opinions of the junior leaders’ alignment with the values and objectives of their organizations. Only 8.3% of the partners mentioned that they were “neutral” toward this statement, while 25% “disagreed” or “strongly disagreed” with the statement. These findings indicate the need for improvement in terms of perceived compatibility and commitment. Figure 26 below shows the findings.

### **Figure 26**

*Suitability of Junior Leaders’ Placement and Commitment to Learning*



### Communication between BSSLP Staff and Experiential Learning Agencies

The communication between BSSLP staff and experiential learning agencies garnered positive feedback, with 67% of them giving a rating of "very good" or "excellent." There were 16.5% of learning agencies who indicated that the communication was "good," while *another* 16.5% felt communication with BSSLP staff was "poor" or "weak." Overall, the results indicate generally positive communication between the BSSLP staff and experiential learning agencies.

## Discussion

The findings of this report builds on literature that explores the roles of mentorship, experiential learning for professional pathways, and development of transferable skills for Black youth. The findings demonstrate that (1) work placement, especially when it matches with Black students' career interests, helps them to realize their career aspirations; (2) the need for networking and connections with professionals, particularly with Black individuals, to cultivate Black Canadian students' success and

well-being is significant; (3) how affinity spaces, such as BSSLP, and Black representation can contribute to their well-being, sense of belonging and identity development; and (4) recognizing and understanding the current need for culturally responsive and relevant pedagogy is necessary for Black students' excellence and achievement.

Both junior leaders and experiential learning agencies identified networking and mentorship opportunities as a prominent outcome of the BSSLP experiential learning experience. For junior leaders, networks and relationships with professionals in their placement connected them with resources and opportunities, development of skills, and supported their career future aspirations. For experiential learning agencies, mentorship is a critical avenue for them to provide junior leaders with help in their career aspirations, educational pursuits, navigating professional spaces and opportunities for professional development. Support and guidance for junior leaders were further reinforced by BSSLP staff who were attentive to meeting their diverse needs and cultivating an affinity space where they can feel a sense of belonging and develop their Black identities. These findings point to the criticality of Black-focused programs that are intentionally culturally relevant and responsive, such as Black professional mentors and role models, to support Black students' academic achievement and career aspirations (Hurd et al., 2012; Ladson-Billings, 1994, 2016; Mitchell, 2022). However, the findings from junior leaders suggest that there is room for improvement to better align their career interests with the organization that they are placed in for a better pairing to fully obtain hands-on experiences in fields that they are passionate about and/or might be thinking of as future careers.

The report further highlighted the influence and positive outcome of participating in YPAR for junior leaders even though there was some uncertainty about research compatibility within BSSLP. Despite this concern, the majority of the junior leaders in the survey indicated that they saw value in what they learned through YPAR, and further stated that it helped them to develop their research and public speaking skills. As indicated in the literature, YPAR builds young people's capacity to take action within

their own schools and communities by engaging them as co-researchers and agents of change (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Lindquist-Grantz & Abraczinskas, 2020). Junior leaders' participation in YPAR nurtured their curiosity to learn, critical thinking, problem solving issues in their schools and communities and public speaking capabilities.

## **Conclusion**

The seven-week Black Student Summer Leadership Program (BSSLP) provided Black students with experiential learning in fields traditionally underrepresented with Black professionals, Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) training, wellness sessions and CO-OP credits. These components of BSSLP are meaningfully designed to ensure that Black students gain experiential learning in careers that they are interested in and would not normally be available to them. Further, the components of BSSLP are informed by an Afrocentric and culturally responsive approach to ensure that Black students' identities and knowledge are affirmed.

To evaluate the effectiveness of BSSLP, surveys were used to gather data from junior leaders and experiential learning agencies. Findings concluded the following: 1) junior leaders had positive experiences of mentorship, guidance and support from both experiential learning agencies and BSSLP staff; 2) placement helped junior leaders realize their career aspirations; 3) mentorship and relationships with junior leaders was beneficial and important to experiential learning agencies; and 4) junior leaders enhanced their interpersonal, professional and research skills through their participation in the program. To further enhance the program and its many benefits, numerous suggestions, grouped according to the components of the program, were provided for incoming junior leaders including those returning from the 2023 BSSLP.

## Recommendations

This section will provide recommendations for the 2023 BSSLP based on findings from junior leaders and the experiential learning agencies. The recommendations are intended to further advance the program in its various components for the upcoming years. The recommendations are grouped according to each component of the program: Black Student Summer Leadership Program (BSSLP); experiential learning agencies; Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR); and Cooperative (CO-OP) Education. To implement many of these recommendations, there needs to be better and earlier BSSLP preparation and organization, more BSSLP staff training, stronger systems of communication, and a clearer division of the BSSLP staff roles.

### Black Student Summer Leadership Program (BSSLP)

Themes	Recommendations
Location	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Finding a central location for the program, housed at the Centre of Excellence for Black Students in Scarborough, to make the commute to the Centre more accessible, or as stated by a junior leader, "neutral."</li> </ul> <p>"It would be better if we didn't have to commute 1+ hr to come here." (Junior leader, transitioning to Post-Secondary)</p> <p>"I understand it is difficult to find a perfect location, but I would love for the centre to be neutral to everybody." (Junior leader, Grade 11)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Junior leaders also suggested tokens or PRESTO cards being provided for the transportation to the Centre of Excellence and</li> </ul>

Themes	Recommendations
	<p>their placement, as costs associated with commuting five days a week accumulates and makes saving challenging.</p> <p>“Bus tickets because how are students from all the way on the west side of Toronto supposed to commute...” (Junior leader, Grade 11)</p> <p>“...I think we need more support with bus fare and transportation because working 5 days a week and going back and forth on the bus takes a huge toll and drains our pay.” (Junior leader, Grade 12)</p>
Readiness of Placement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Earlier preparation of the placement for junior leaders so that they can begin their placement as soon as the program begins.</li> <li>● Preparedness entails collaboration and communication, prior to the beginning of the program, with experiential learning agencies to ensure that junior leaders can work as soon as they are placed in the professional field that aligns with their interest.</li> <li>● Organizing the placement in advance would ensure that junior leaders get hands-on experience as soon as they enter their work space to best utilize the weeks allotted for their experiential learning.</li> </ul> <p>“Better collaboration and communication with the placement organization to enable students to have the most time with them as possible. I noticed several students at their placements had trouble with getting cleared to work in that space. If they</p>

Themes	Recommendations
	<p>connected with their placement earlier, maybe they would've had less trouble" (Junior leader, transitioning to Post-Secondary)</p> <p>"It's important that all students are placed pre-commencement of the second half of the BSSLP program." (Junior leader, Grade 11)</p> <p>"Having some of the placements ready when the program starts." (Junior leader, transitioning to Post-Secondary)</p>
<p>Training and Preparation of Junior Leaders</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Professional development for all junior leaders in preparation for working in person at their placements.</li> <li>● Junior leaders suggested strategies to better prepare them for their placement including professional development training on workplace etiquette, interactive workshops to learn about working in corporate settings, and earlier contact with experiential learning agencies to gain and develop skills (e.g., interviewing), while allowing experiential learning agencies decision-making in the hiring and training of junior leaders. This specific suggestion would ensure that junior leaders are acquiring skills and knowledge about the career that they have chosen and for an even more meaningful experience.</li> </ul> <p>"I will say BSSLP was way more organized than last year. I think there could have been some more improvements when it comes to professional development/etiquette training. I remember last year [2022] there was a session about workplace etiquette, but</p>

Themes	Recommendations
	<p>that didn't happen last year. As a result, there was an increase in inappropriate behaviour at people's placements. So I think enforcing this in the beginning of the program would be really beneficial to keep these relationships with organizations and companies. This has also been mentioned before, but providing resources for students to succeed at placements would be helpful (e.g., business casual clothes)..." (Junior leader, Grade 12)</p> <p>"Bsslp: instil [sic] key work values into students before they ever enter the work world. We found this year that a lot of placements were complaining. That is honestly because students were not prepared for the in-person work world. It makes little sense to put students in corporate settings when they have NO prep to enter it. We need to prep students in the first week and before placement. This can look like an interactive workshop on how to act in the workplace." (Junior leader, Grade 10)</p>
Increasing the Placement Duration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● An extension to the length of the program to support junior leaders experiential learning at careers that they are interested in and thinking of pursuing at post-secondary. This recommendation from the junior leaders corresponds with the theme on "duration of the BSSLP program" in which the majority of the participants revealed that it was "just right" or "too short."</li> <li>● A preference for a longer duration further enhances the benefits of experiential learning, such as access to mentors and role</li> </ul>

Themes	Recommendations
	<p>models in careers and professions with an underrepresentation of Black community members.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Increasing the duration of their placement would also make the different components of the program (e.g., placement, YPAR, and CO-OP) more manageable for junior leaders who are expected to manage all the responsibilities of BSSLP.</li> </ul> <p>“My recommendation is for the placement to be longer, YPAR was way too long.” (Junior leader, Grade 12)</p> <p>“... I REALLY wish we had more time at our placements and more hands-on experiences. As much as I loved my placement, I didn't really do any meaningful work which was a bit disappointing.” (Junior leader, Grade 12)</p> <p>“More placement time.” (Junior leader, transitioning to Post-Secondary)</p>
More Experiential Learning Choices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Junior leaders also suggested having more experiential placement choices available to them, as alignment between placements and career pathways is critical.</li> <li>A majority of junior leaders (77%) felt that placement experiences helped them to acquire useful skills and hands-on knowledge to better understand their career aspirations. Thus, strategically forming partnerships with a cross section of organizations will guarantee a better alignment between the</li> </ul>

Themes	Recommendations
	<p>junior leaders interests and the experiential learning opportunities offered.</p> <p>“More placement options.” (Junior leader, Grade 11)</p> <p>“More placement time and options to extend placement after programs.” (Junior leader, transitioning to Post-Secondary)</p>
Communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Ongoing and clear communication with junior leaders about roles, expectations and responsibilities. This theme is in conjunction with the findings regarding BSSLP staff communication, which demonstrate that there is room for improvement particularly around the roles of junior leaders as employees of BSSLP. The consistent reinforcement of junior leaders as employees within BSSLP would enable them to learn habits and skills for success in their placement.</li> </ul> <p>“BSSLP: staff should stop acting like teachers and treat junior leaders like actual employees.” (Junior leader, Grade 12)</p>
Ongoing Community Building	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● The creation and maintenance of community amongst the junior leaders within the organizational context of BSSLP. Community building will ensure that junior leaders feel a sense of belonging with the staff, in the program and just as importantly with each other, which was identified as challenging to do given the many commitments that they undertake being part of the program.</li> <li>● Furthermore, the community building needs to include strong understanding and expectation of Blackness and Black identity</li> </ul>

Themes	Recommendations
	<p>in its multiplicity (e.g., gender, ethnicity, sexuality) to ensure that all junior leaders feel welcomed.</p> <p>“Possibly allowing more time for us to get to know each other and focusing on the community building aspect of this program. It felt like we only had time at lunch to do this.” (Junior leader, Grade 10)</p> <p>“There was some instances of shadism during the BSSLP. Some people were questioning whether or not some individuals belonged at the program, and that made people feel singled out, excluded and feelings of wanting to quit the program. I feel like this needs to be addressed because this is supposed to be a welcoming space for ALL Black youth, yet some individuals went home crying because of the way they were regarded in terms of their colour.” (Junior leader, Grade 12)</p>

## Developing Ongoing Partnership with Experiential Learning Agencies

BSSLP’s experiential placement component provides junior leaders with the opportunity to develop employability skills and experiential learning in organizations with an underrepresentation of Black employees. Thus, the role of experiential learning agencies are critical to the growth and development of junior leaders, as well as the program. The following recommendations from the experiential learning agencies will build on the existing program structure to enhance the relationship and partnership between BSSLP and partner organizations. These recommendations are:

Themes	Recommendations
Communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Ongoing and timely communication with experiential learning agencies to share information, expectations, responsibilities and timelines around supervision of junior leaders.</li> <li>● Experiential learning agencies stated that communications should begin prior to junior leaders onboarding in their placements to ensure that all members of the team - agencies, BSSLP staff and junior leaders - are aware in advance of all matters related to their responsibilities and roles as supervisors such as co-op evaluation and timesheets for junior leaders.</li> </ul> <p>“As we are from a large organization with many departments, an earlier timeline would be required for student onboarding. There was confusion with communication as we were put in contact with many different parties and did not often get prompt communication - it would be helpful if a key contact was identified for this purpose. Additionally, it would be great if a list of requirements for our team would be provided in advance. For instance, we were told about the student timesheets ~12 hours before the submission deadline. This was not enough time to communicate with the students' research supervisors. Similarly, we were not told about co-op evaluation forms until the mid-point of the program.” (Experiential learning agency)</p>

Themes	Recommendations
	<p>“Increased and timely communication between BSSLP and employer partners.” (Experiential learning agency)</p>
Administration Management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● For more efficient relationship between BSSLP and experiential learning agencies and more enhanced placement experience for junior leaders, better BSSLP administration was recommended.</li> <li>● To address challenges that arose during the 2023 BSSLP, the partners suggested an administrative system, established prior to the beginning of placement, with a central person of contact that responded to partner organizations in a timely manner and ongoingly collaborating with experiential learning agencies.</li> <li>● Furthermore, administrative management was identified as connected to the first recommendation, specifically ongoing and efficient communication that would enable experiential learning agencies for relationship building and sustainable partnerships.</li> </ul> <p>“Sorting the administration ahead of time.” (Experiential learning agency)</p> <p>“Great students! For improvement, ran into last minute administrative issues which never got resolved between the organizations so hopefully will be addressed by next placement.” (Experiential learning agency)</p>

Themes	Recommendations
Accommodating Schedule	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● There were several suggestions by the agency partners which include junior leaders' schedules being flexible yet determined by the needs of their placement, and for experiential learning to take place for the bulk of the weekday (e.g., Tuesday to Thursday) and returning to the previous structure, half days throughout the weekday.</li> <li>● Another suggestion to ensure an accommodating work schedule was to connect junior leaders' research and work in YPAR to their placement.</li> <li>● Overall, the consensus amongst the partners is flexibility for junior leaders schedule within the BSSLP to build on their experiential learning and skill development, and to be fully immersed and engaged in the experience.</li> </ul> <p>“Our program was highly successful with the addition of new agencies and more demand for facilitated dialogues circles and workshops. We recommend BSSLP return to the Junior Leaders spending half days Monday and Friday so the agency can better plan and prepare for their engagement out in the community.” (Experiential learning agency)</p> <p>“More flexibility in student schedules based on program needs. Stronger orientation into work ethic and communication skills with supervisors.” (Experiential learning agency)</p>

Themes	Recommendations
Preparedness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● To better address some of the challenges that arose during the 2023 BSSLP (e.g., questions around junior leaders work ethics and preparedness for work), the partners recommended more preparation of junior leaders particularly orientations around work ethics and communication skills.</li> <li>● Another suggestion was the interviewing of prospective junior leaders by partner organizations to know them, their experiences and skills to ensure that support is provided to prepare junior leaders for their placement. “An opportunity to interview prospective student placements may be helpful in ensuring all parties are best prepared for the program time.” (Experiential learning agency)</li> </ul>

## Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR)

YPAR has been an essential component of BSSLP since its inception in 2018 and aligns with three of the six objectives, which are to: 1) enhance junior leaders’ interpersonal and leadership skills; 2) increase their advocacy in their various communities especially their schools; and 3) develop their research skills.

These objectives are important to the BSSLP goal which is to engage junior leaders in critical socio-political analysis through research particularly grounded in Afrocentric education and research methods. YPAR provides junior leaders with the opportunity to learn about and conduct systematic research based on social justice principles to improve their lives, communities and institutions. The following recommendations by the junior leaders are crucial to continuously enhancing YPAR for its many benefits such as amplifying junior leaders' voices, building their research and

social skills, and development of them as co-researchers and agents of change. The recommendations are listed below.

Themes	Recommendations
Communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Junior leaders emphasized the importance of being aware in advance of all matters related to YPAR and the work associated, including timelines and details of the research process (i.e., conducting, presenting, stages of research, YPAR conference) to better manage their time, be accountable to themselves and the program, and the maintenance of their well-being.</li> <li>● Effective communication for junior leaders also includes that the researchers are consistently transmitting the same information, instructions and directives.</li> </ul> <p>“Make sure all the staff are on board with everything as I found there was miscommunication at times. For instance, I was told that I only needed to select one kind of data collection tool, I selected qualitative data, and then two days before my presentation I was told that I was supposed to do a literature review as well. And there have been several occurrences in which that has happened.” (Junior leader, transitioning to Post-Secondary)</p>
Extension of Program	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● An extension in the length of YPAR to better prepare junior leaders to complete the different stages of conducting research. Making YPAR longer would make the research process more manageable for junior leaders and support an enhanced understanding and development of research skills.</li> </ul>

Themes	Recommendations
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Furthermore, the time extension would also bring the research to life for junior leaders by deeply engaging in YPAR, particularly the action component and development of their research presentation to align with the creative mode chosen (e.g., Storytelling, Video Essay, Photovoice).</li> </ul> <p>“More time allocated for YPAR, staff tracking individuals progress each week, more library work time instead of pods since it’s easier to get distracted in pods.” (Junior leader, transitioning to Post-Secondary)</p> <p>“BSSLP and YPAR to give us more time.” (Junior leader, Grade 11)</p>
PODS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Junior leaders are encouraged to present their research in creative methods which they develop in PODS (e.g., video essay, art, storytelling and podcast). Junior leaders recommended an increase in the number of PODS, especially those that are well-received, to accommodate their preferences. Junior leaders also suggested an extension and more support in the program to better enable them for presentations and aligning research to their creative method of choice.</li> </ul> <p>“For popular pods aka video essay, podcast, spoken word I think there should be more than one set of pods if there are a surplus of students wanting to be in specific pods.” (Junior leader, Grade 11)</p>

Themes	Recommendations
	<p>“More support for pod creation, many people spent a lot of time on their research and analysis and had little time for their pod presentation and some did not know what to do in their pod.” (Junior leader, Grade 11)</p> <p>“More freedom to create our research the way that’s best suited for us. I also know this is hard to accommodate with but I would have been more engaged in YPAR if I revived the pod that I truly wanted.” (Junior leader, Grade 11)</p>
Presentations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● An extension in length of the program would offer junior leaders with adequate time to focus on as well as prepare for their presentation in advance of the scheduled days for presentations.</li> <li>● Junior leaders also suggested strategies to address the challenges they experienced with ongoing active engagement during the days of presentations.</li> <li>● These strategies include: spanning the presentations beyond the scheduled couple of days, junior leaders presenting in advance if they have completed their research (which would also serve as an example for others) and more options for research projects to lessen repetitiveness of presentations on similar topics. Lastly, junior leaders proposed presentation formats (e.g., roundtable and panels), which provided opportunities for more students to engage with the presentations."</li> </ul>

Themes	Recommendations
	<p>“Maybe limit how many groups/individuals can do a certain topic, a lot of the presentations were very similar and it got a little boring to sit and rewatch the same presentations for 2 hours.” (Junior leader, Grade 11)</p> <p>“Also the presentations had a lot of material, subjecting students to digesting many presentations on one day can lead to lack of understanding or absorption and processing of the materials covered. The presentations should be spread apart and should start as soon as the first sets of students complete their research so that way the presentations will be well understood as they should.” (Junior leader, Grade 11)</p>
Increase Organizational Structure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Junior leaders suggested both individual and group check-ins, even when working in groups, and more frequent check-ins with Research Associates to support them with YPAR components. The offer of both forms of check-ins would better support junior leaders to receive feedback and aid for their individual research within the group setting and to confidentiality address any group dynamics that occur when working in groups.</li> <li>● Junior leaders also suggested that check-ins and YPAR should be organized in a way that does not conflict with other components of the program to better utilize the time devoted to the development of research skills.</li> <li>● Another organizational recommendation is the restructuring of the lessons to ensure that they are informative while lessening</li> </ul>

Themes	Recommendations
	<p>the focus on revisions of presentations, and more inclusion of interactive and experiential to support the learning needs of junior leaders.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Lastly, better distribution of timeline for the conducting of research so that adequate time, resources and support are available for junior leaders to go through and complete the various stages of carrying out their research project. The better distribution of timeline should also include flexibility to allow junior leaders to progress at their own pace and level to minimize feeling not being able to move forward or going through to the next stage when not ready.</li> </ul> <p>“For YPAR we should have a schedule outline given to students so that they can move on ahead if they have been approved by their RA's.” (Junior leader, Grade 11)</p> <p>“Give clearer examples of what the expectations are. Some times we were pulled during YPAR for unnecessary things that took a long time.” (Junior leader, Grade 12)</p> <p>“YPAR sessions should be less but more focused on doing the research and learning hands on rather than the lengthened sessions at the beginning that consisted of revisions.” (Junior leader, Grade 11)</p> <p>“To schedule the ypar better.” (Junior leader, Grade 11)</p>

Themes	Recommendations
	<p>“YPAR was also better than last year, in terms of organization. For improvements, there should be some extra monitoring for similar/same topic to reduce redundancy when it comes time to presentations. I think also being more clear with expectations and due dates would be great. For instance, I was in a group and we found out that there were different expectations for groups conducting research halfway through the program. Speaking of groups, there should definitely be more push for that next year. As well, when it comes to check in’s for groups, there should be some individual instead of the whole group check in all the time. Personally speaking, I would love to have this option because I had difficulties in my group.” (Junior leader, Grade 12)</p>
<p>Manageability of BSSLP &amp; YPAR Program</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● The organizational structure of BSSLP and YPAR - this recommendation is also applicable for BSSLP which is listed at the top - is impacted by the number of junior leaders accepted into the program - over one hundred for 2023.</li> <li>● The size of 2023 BSSLP was significant, with more than 100 junior leaders participating. Given the number of junior leaders in the program, and in combination with behavioural issues, posed some challenges around managing behaviours, meeting their various learning needs, and developing preparedness for experiential learning at placement. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Note: More on this recommendation can be found above in the section entitled “Increase Organizational Structure” on page 63.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

Themes	Recommendations
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Some of the strategies recommended by the junior leaders include selecting mature candidates for the program, assessment of behaviours and skills and making YPAR optional or different criterion selections.</li> <li>● Another important suggestion for the program manageability is the reduction of the number of junior leaders to provide an enhanced experiential learning experience at placement, development of research skills, wellness sessions and CO-OP.</li> </ul> <p>“Next year choose more Mature students as peer mentors, properly assess their behaviours, work ethic and collaboration skills before employing them.” (Junior leader, transitioning to Post-Secondary)</p>
Significance of YPAR and Afrocentric in BSSLP	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● The significance of YPAR and Afrocentric research approaches is not always fully understood by junior leaders. There must be a strong emphasis on the importance of YPAR within BSSLP and Afrocentric education and research methods to junior leaders at all the different stages including information sessions, interviews for the program as well as during the program. These ongoing affirmations are crucial to the development of junior leaders' consciousness of socio-political analysis, highlighting their knowledge and expertise in issues that impact their lives and communities, and their development as researchers which is significantly important given the underrepresentation of Black people within research and the Eurocentrism in research and education.</li> </ul>

Themes	Recommendations
	<p>“There was no implementation of Afrocentric research methods mentioned or stated at the beginning of the program or even in the YPAR booklet.” (Junior leader, Grade 11)</p> <p>“YPAR made a big mistake throughout the program in framing itself as ‘busywork’ instead of something enjoyable. The idea of over 100 youth becoming researchers alongside each other is groundbreaking, but it didn't take advantage of that...I am most disappointed in the fact that YPAR did not deliver on the Afrocentric education methods as described in the booklet; instead of feeling affirmed or welcomed as we worked on our presentations, a lot of us felt like it was a chore to get through. This really showed in the final week where presentations were framed as things to ‘get through’, with no time to debrief what we learned from one another (or even see many of our peers’ work due to the nature of the roundtable/room system). Still, all of our output has felt very rewarding to see and I hope YPAR does more to make students feel like proud, eager researchers next year.” (Junior leader, Grade 12)</p>

### **Voluntary Cooperative (CO-OP) Education**

CO-OP was offered to junior leaders to provide them with two extra school credits connected to their completion of their YPAR project. The following recommendations will build on the current model to enhance its effectiveness and better support the success of the junior leaders within CO-OP.

Themes	Recommendations
<p>Increase Organizational Management and Consistency</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Junior leaders suggested better organizational management to address the challenges they experienced, such as conflicting schedules of check-ins with CO-OP teachers at the same time as research associates for YPAR, and confusion around the schedule and time of CO-OP.</li> <li>● Enhanced organization and management of CO-OP would ensure that there is a consistency around the requirements of the program for junior leaders, check-ins with teachers and evaluation of the junior leaders for their credits.</li> <li>● Enhanced organizational management of CO-OP would ensure its efficiency and the optimal performance of junior Leaders who participate in both CO-OP and YPAR.</li> <li>● Further suggestions include making CO-OP longer, ideally at the beginning of the program, as well as starting the planning and placement of junior leaders prior to the second phase of the BSSLP program.</li> <li>● These strategies would better support the management of CO-OP and consequently improve the junior leaders experience.</li> </ul>

	<p>“CO-OP - Making sure that our CO-OP check-in sessions or lessons are NOT during the time we have allocated to work with our research associate. Since we only have a limited amount of time with them, it puts us in a position where we have to use office hours or wait until the next week to be able to connect with our RA.” (Junior leader, Grade 11)</p> <p>“CO-OP needs to be better scheduled into the program. Other than the first week I felt really confused about when co-op would happen or where we needed to be.” (Junior leader, Grade 10)</p>
<p>More CO-OP Teachers and Days</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● While there was recognition of the wonderful work done by CO-OP teachers, junior leaders stated that the connection between them and the CO-OP educators needed to be strengthened more. A suggestion made by junior leaders to address the lack of strong connection and possible mismatch between the number of junior leaders and CO-OP teachers is the need for more CO-OP teachers to better meet their needs. Further, junior leaders suggested more co-op days to address the conflicting schedule of check-ins at the same date and time for junior leaders with CO-OP teachers and POD leaders/research associates about their YPAR research.</li> </ul> <p>“More co-op teachers.” (Junior leader, Grade 12)</p> <p>“Co-op could be stronger. Co-op teachers should try their best to interact and build more connections with their students.” (Junior leader, transitioning to Post-Secondary)</p>

## Wellness Sessions

Mental health and wellness was introduced as a core component of the Well-being Strategy that was implemented by the Ministry of Education in 2014. Junior leaders' wellness is identified as critical to their success within BSSLP. As such, the development and implementation of following recommendations is important to incoming junior leaders being able to meet the various components of BSSLP.

Themes	Recommendations
Shorter Sessions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● A reduction in the length of the wellness sessions for junior leaders so that they can spend more time working on their research for YPAR, especially their presentation.</li> <li>● Shorter sessions would assist junior leaders with pivoting to receiving YPAR support to prepare for the various steps of conducting and presenting their research to minimize the stress associated with YPAR and placement.</li> </ul> <p>“Like I said before, have the wellness sessions shorter—take advantage of the first week to have students go straight to working on it and have one last week before the presentation week to work with the students and have them preparing.” (Junior leader, transitioning to Post-Secondary)</p>
Attentiveness to Multiple Dimensions of Wellness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Junior leaders suggested numerous dimensions of wellness (e.g., physical, mental, social and environmental) that would better ensure that their mental and well-being needs are supported.</li> <li>● Strategies recommended by the junior leaders include: affirming their Black identity, mental health check-ins,</li> </ul>

Themes	Recommendations
	<p>physical activities (e.g., reggae, sports), team building and teamwork amongst each other, and spaces for meditation, quiet reflection or time to self.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Junior leaders recommended a wellness system that includes choices and communication with them. This could be in the form of a survey or check-ins at interval stages to ascertain what activities junior leaders would like to take place during the wellness sessions.</li> </ul> <p>“More outside activities.” (Junior leader, Grade 12)</p> <p>“One on one check ins.” (Junior leader, Grade 11)</p> <p>“More student feedback about what students want to do.” (Junior leader, Grade 11)</p> <p>“More about checking our mental health.” (Junior leader, Grade 11)</p> <p>“Allowing leaders more freedom to do what they want. Maybe creating stations where different activities are in stations and we can choose what we want to do for that day.” (Junior leader, Grade 10)</p> <p>“More interactions with the students, instead of breaking us up.” (Junior leader, Grade 12)</p>

Themes	Recommendations
Administration Management for Wellness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Strong organizational and administration management of BSSLP and its numerous components, such as YPAR and experiential placement, was highlighted as crucial for the well-being of the junior leaders. Strategies aligned with organizational management and administration is integral to crafting a culture of wellness for junior leaders that plays a critical role in preventing as well as managing stress and encourages balance between the various components of the program.</li> <li>● The incorporation of more rigorous organization management and administration (e.g., setting up experiential placement prior to beginning of BSSLP, ongoing communication with junior leaders and experiential learning agencies about the expectations and structure) would ensure that the junior leaders mental health and well-being needs are supported.</li> </ul> <p>“BSSLP I would recommend to be more organized as well as YPAR because it’s really stressful when due dates have to change and we’re required to rush to get it done on time. I also feel like it’s stressful for students when BSSLP isn’t organized.” (Junior leader, Grade 11)</p>

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