BUILDING THE BRIDGE TO YOUTH SUCCESS:

OVERCOMING THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

MAY 2021

Building the Bridge to Youth Success: Overcoming the Digital Divide
An Executive Summary

"By collectively investing in the skills and competency development of youth living in low-income communities, Canada will create a dynamic and adaptable workforce that will contribute to a robust economic recovery and long-term growth."

~ Towards Inclusive Growth: Addressing the Digital Divide through Skills and Training, Pathways to Education

According to Statistics Canada, only 62 per cent of Canadians in the lowest income quartile have access to the Internet, compared to 95 per cent of those in the highest quartile. Over the course of the last year, the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the digital divide for youth across Canada. And no group has been more impacted by this uneven distribution of access to information and communication technology, than youth living in low-income communities. But as the pandemic continues to isolate people and lockdown communities, how do we bridge this digital divide for youth and get them access to the tools, training, resources and support they need to reach their full potential and contribute to Canada's economic recovery?

In May 2020, a consortium of eight youth-focused organizations, supported by Employment and Social Development Canada, including the Canadian Council for Youth Prosperity, Indspire, MENTOR Canada, NPower Canada, National Association of Friendship Centres, Opportunity for All Youth, Pathways to Education and Tamarack Institute came together to collaborate and explore opportunities for collective innovation and knowledge sharing on emerging challenges and best practices. The impact of COVID-19 on youth became a focus and a Working Group was formed in September 2020 to discuss solutions to bridge the growing digital divide and how to raise awareness of this important issue.

The result of this collaboration is this series of essays that identify the multi-facets of the digital divide that Canadian youth are currently facing, and how these barriers are affecting their ability to stay engaged in education, employment, and their community. The importance of mentoring, the need for improved access to digital skills training and employment, and ensuring youth have a voice in designing solutions to bridge the digital divide, are consistent themes throughout each of the five essays.

Closing the Mentoring Gap
Currently, there are approximately 15,000 youth in Canada on waitlists for mentoring programs. Young people want and need mentors, but a shortage of volunteers and the digital divide is preventing them from participating in these programs. Research has shown that mentoring has a positive impact on the lives of youth and that those with access to and support from a mentor, are more likely to report positive mental, educational and career outcomes as young adults. Unfortunately, mentoring programs have also seen a significant decline due to the pandemic. According to a survey conducted by MENTOR Canada, people have spent less time volunteering over the course of the last year, and in some cases, stopped volunteering altogether. And while sixty-seven per cent of adults who may be likely to mentor in the next five years would be more likely to do so if they could conduct part or all the mentoring relationship virtually, a number of barriers are making it increasingly challenging to reach youth. Some of these barriers include lack of privacy to engage online while at home, limited connectivity, and

outdated technology. For low-income households, affordability of Internet services and devices are the most significant barriers.

But unfortunately – connectivity, privacy and outdated technology are not the only barriers creating the digital divide. Even if all of these were available to youth, some still lack the digital literacy they need to utilize these tools to their full potential and access training, education, and employment.

Improved Access to Digital Skills Training and Employment
Today, youth also face multiple obstacles in their pursuit of careers in technology. NPower Canada recently invited their program graduates to join a focus group where youth could share their experiences and suggestions. Financial barriers were one of the primary obstacles identified by participants, some of which included the cost of Internet services, computer hardware and software that could be prohibitively expensive. It was also noted that educational institutions and guidance counsellors failed to emphasize the importance of digital skills and are not doing enough to make students aware of all the options available to them when it comes to careers in science, technology, engineering and math (STEM). This lack of information about the diversity of career options, coupled with a lack of female STEM representation and mentorship opportunities, are also contributing to the digital divide, and creating additional barriers for youth in their pursuit of training, education and employment.

Building trust and the importance of applying a youth-focused lens
Engaging with youth and empowering them to help design solutions, will continue to play a key role in bridging the digital divide. Their experiences, feedback and insights are vitally important which is why we also need to ensure that the organizations we engage with – and their leaders – are prepared to work with youth, and most importantly, learn from them.

In the Fall of 2020, Opportunity for All Youth introduced their first Youth Innovation Council, made up of 12 youth. Through a series of design jam sessions, the council focused on some key areas. The key findings: youth are the experts in the digital space; we must be prepared to learn from youth and be willing to integrate their ideas; and – if youth do not see themselves in a company's brand, they are less likely to engage with it.

Achieving Inclusive Growth through Skills and Competencies
It has become more apparent during the COVID-19 pandemic that youth in low-income communities struggle to meaningfully participate in remote learning and access resources online compared to their peers with affluent backgrounds. Bridging the digital divide goes beyond providing youth in low-income communities with access to technology and connectivity. Youth need access to resources and guidance to use technology to develop competencies, expand their social capital, and become lifelong learners. In the lead up to the preparation of their essay, Pathways to Education held focus groups with youth who graduated from the Pathways program. The youth shared how the Pathways Program helped them to develop competencies such as self-regulation, resilience and collaboration which they attribute to being instrumental in helping them remain engaged in their education.

A Case Study on Bridging the Digital Divide with Youth
Through Tamarack Institute's *"Communities Building Youth Futures*'' initiative, the case study titled "Prince Albert Bridges the Digital Divide with Local Youth" provides a view of how youth can be supported, connected and empowered. By using a holistic approach to supporting youth, Prince Albert is bridging the digital divide by meeting youth where they are at and adapting supports based on

individual needs; and sometimes that means providing youth with the professional, cultural and traditional supports they need for their well-being. With their particular approach to youth engagement, this community has provided access to technology for a youth through an unlikely venue.

Through these essays, you will hear about a number of strategies, supports and resources to help youth bridge Canada's complex digital divide, and support their successful transition to post-secondary education, training and the labour market.

We would like to thank all our supporters for helping our youth-focused organizations do the important work of helping youth reach their full potential, particularly during these very difficult times. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic will be felt for years to come and as such, we call on the public and private sectors to join us in working cooperatively to support programs dedicated to helping youth access the knowledge, skills and competencies they need to overcome barriers to education such as Canada's complex digital divide. Continued collaboration and investments in these proven successful programs will contribute to building a Canadian economy that is strong, resilient and growing.

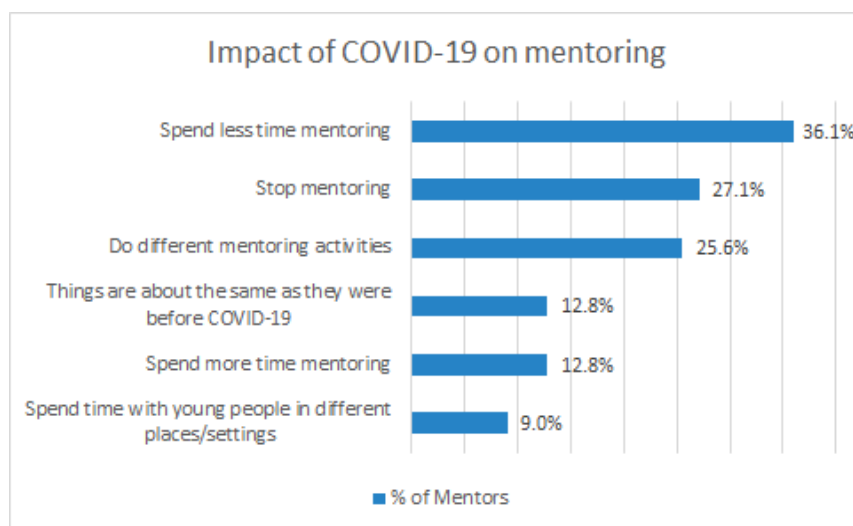# Overcoming Disconnection: Closing the Mentoring Gap Across Canada

MENTOR Canada is a coalition of organizations that expand and enhance youth mentoring by building sector capacity through research, technology, public education and development of regional networks. We work with the sector to develop the tools, technology and outreach strategies they need to connect more young people to mentoring opportunities. Working together, we are raising the profile and the awareness of the importance and need for mentoring.

We have heard from mentoring service providers that many of the vulnerabilities among youth, such as disconnection and isolation, that existed before the COVID-19 pandemic have been heightened and exacerbated. In January 2021, the Canadian Council for Youth Prosperity issued five recommendations after completing a literature review on the topic of the digital divide. The five recommendations – increase affordability, collaboration, access and affordability to hardware, better data collection, and skills training – have been echoed in the responses MENTOR Canada has received over the past year.

An estimated 15,000 young people across Canada are currently on wait lists for mentoring programs. A significant proportion of children and youth waiting for mentors have mental health needs, are living in poverty and are academically at-risk. Young people want mentors but a shortage of volunteers, as well as other factors, including the digital divide (the gap in the access and ability to use technology) impede participation.

Virtual mentoring programs have increased in popularity in recent years because they have the potential to reach young people who may face obstacles to participating in in-person mentoring programs. This may include youth with a disability or chronic illness, youth with social anxiety and young people living in rural and remote communities. Prior to the pandemic, only a few mentoring programs in Canada operated at least in part virtually. Mentoring Service Providers surveyed by MENTOR Canada indicated that approximately seven per cent of their mentoring programs operated at least partially online before COVID-19, and one per cent operated entirely online.

The pandemic has had a negative impact on young people's access to caring and supportive adults. Between September and November 2020, MENTOR Canada surveyed 3,500 adults across Canada and found that 36 per cent of respondents stopped volunteering and 30 per cent spent less time volunteering. The impact on mentoring has been even more pronounced, as 36 per cent of respondents who had been mentoring a young person spent less time mentoring as a result of the pandemic and 27 per cent stopped mentoring altogether.

Impact of COVID-19 on mentoring

Activity	% of Mentors
Spend less time mentoring	36.1%
Stop mentoring	27.1%
Do different mentoring activities	25.6%
Things are about the same as they were before COVID-19	12.8%
Spend more time mentoring	12.8%
Spend time with young people in different places/settings	9.0%

The pandemic has highlighted the fact that if we want to meet youth where they are – virtually – we need to increase our digital capacity. We have heard that it is increasingly challenging to reach youth because of a number of barriers, including privacy to engage at home, poor connection and

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outdated technology. Increasingly this is leading to disconnection, especially for those young people who need the connection the most.

We Know Mentoring is Needed More than Ever

Mentoring amplifies a young person's potential, one relationship at a time. For the first time, we have Canadian research to support the positive impact of mentoring on young peoples' lives. In early 2020, MENTOR Canada led Mapping the Mentoring Gap, a comprehensive survey of 2,838 young adults across the country, to understand the impact of mentoring on youth in Canada. Our research demonstrates clearly that youth who have access to the support of a mentor are more likely to report positive mental, education and career outcomes as young adults. Survey respondents who were mentored were:

- 53 per cent more likely to report good or excellent mental health
- Over twice as likely to report a very or somewhat strong sense of belonging to their community
- Over twice as likely to have completed high school
- 95 per cent more likely to have pursued further education after high school
- 59 per cent more likely to have an occupation (either employed and/or studying).

Young people who had access to formal mentors were even more likely to report positive outcomes compared to their non-mentored peers. They were:

- Almost three times more likely to report good or excellent mental health
- 78 per cent more likely to have an occupation (either employed and/or studying).

Finding a Mentor in 2021: Where Does a Young Person Find a Mentor?

Before the pandemic, many young people were referred to mentoring service providers by schools or parents, or they might have attended an event or open house. But with increasing isolation and physical program closures, those doors may be closed.

> *"So I think a big challenge is definitely being aware, especially if your parent, you know, don't necessarily speak English or they're not like from Canada. There's no way for them to even know certain things exist on what someone else tells them. And like, they're not proficient in English. They can't just Google it. They can't, you know, search it up or, you know, call the community centre and ask about something like that. So, definitely like figuring out ways to get messages across to first-generation immigrants. It's like a big way to help solve things."[1]*

Our research with young people and adults has indicated a general lack of awareness about mentoring. Awareness is an important barrier preventing children and youth from accessing the support of a mentor. The great majority of interview respondents were not aware of what mentoring was in their childhood, and most first became aware of it during their teen years. Some young people may not have a clear understanding of what mentoring is.

Digital Divide: Accessing Anytime, Anyplace Mentoring

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[1] *State of Mentoring Research, MENTOR Canada, Mapping the Gap study.*

While the pandemic has worsened this disconnection, pre-pandemic, young people already told us that they were looking for anytime, anyplace mentoring. Digital transformation of the sector needs to be resourced and supported, and MENTOR Canada has been leading these conversations.

In the *13 Ways to Modernize Youth Employment in Canada* report, released by Employment Social Development Canada in 2017, it was clearly articulated that mentoring was a priority for youth. The same was said during the 2018 Canada Service Corps (CSC) consultations, in which youth highlighted that mentoring takes place formally and informally, through family, friends, elders and educators.

During the CSC consultations, youth said that having a caring and supportive individual, whether an adult or a peer, was important to them – but often, they did not have access to someone to serve in this capacity. In the *13 Ways to Modernize Youth Employment in Canada* report, youth also identified navigating systems to identify the right support as being complex and often requiring a significant investment of time and expertise for all participants.

Youth-identified recommendations were outlined in both reports, including:

- Programming available in schools: Young Canadians expressed an interest in having access to a mentorship program in places and spaces where they are at, in order to help them get involved in service and provide them with support and guidance. This was reinforced in our *2020 Mapping the Gap* research.
- Connecting via digital platform: Young Canadians expressed an interest in having access to a database of mentors integrated in the Canada Service Corps digital platform, by which youth can select a match or multiple matches depending on their needs.
- Connect by telephone: Youth want flexible meeting arrangements, and may not have access to transportation, particularly in rural and remote areas. Numerous youth-serving agencies have requested help in reaching out to geographically isolated youth.

Access to Services

Interview participants in our youth survey[2] noted that even for those who recognized they could use or benefit from having a mentor, there were challenges in accessing a mentor. As two respondents shared:

"I think there is a big need for a portal that people can access to find a mentor, because I feel it's very hard to find a mentor nowadays. So, I think it's important to have a system or like a central hub where people can go to so that they can find their needs and stuff."

"One big problem for programs is a lack of visibility. It took me days to find this program and it was almost hidden on some website."

According to our *Mapping the Gap* study, more than half of young people faced barriers accessing mentors while they were growing up. 55 percent of young people facing barriers accessing a mentor did not know where or how to find a mentoring opportunity. Unlike searching online for consumer products, the search process to find a mentor, especially with a safe and reputable program that is accessible and welcoming new young people, is much more complicated than

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[2] *Mapping the Mentoring Gap*, March 2020

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shopping online. They want direct and clear pathways to identify and articulate their needs (such as career support) and be able to find a mentor. These challenges were further articulated in our "No Wrong Door" 2020 policy brief.

Digital solutions also have the potential to increase the number of adults who step up to mentor young people and help address recruitment challenges encountered by half of organizations offering mentoring programs across Canada. Indeed, 67 percent of adults who may be likely to mentor in the next five years would be incentivized to do so if they could conduct at least part or all of the mentoring relationship virtually. However, the digital divide must be closed to ensure that youth who need access to mentors the most can fully participate in virtual mentoring programs and virtual mentoring relationships.

Access to Devices and Connection

In 2018, eight per cent of Canadians did not have access to the internet at home. Barriers to access included:

- 28 per cent indicated that cost of internet service was a barrier
- 19 per cent indicated that equipment was a barrier
- Eight per cent indicated that unavailability of Internet service was a barrier

Four per cent of the 3,500 adults who participated in our *Raising the Profile of Mentoring* Survey reported that they did not have a reliable home internet connection.

Affordability of internet services and communication devices remains a top barrier for low-income households. Youth living in poverty are at high risk of social disconnection, which can lead to increased health disparities, risky behaviour and, ultimately, a widening of the opportunity gap. Children who are socially disconnected may have fewer natural supports and may need to rely on formal mentoring programs to build supportive relationships.

Participants in a virtual mentoring program may need access to high-speed internet to be able to fully engage. Online activities such as video calls, which have been used by many mentoring programs as a substitute for in-person meetings during the pandemic, require significant bandwidth and may be an obstacle in some rural and remote communities, as well as in households in which multiple users are sharing an internet connection or a device. For example, a family may have a computer in the home but a parent may be required to use it for work, and if one or two children are requiring the device for school or entertainment, there could be further challenges. Parents may not be available to assist or support children or share devices with them.

A recent survey conducted at the beginning of the pandemic[3] in late spring and early summer 2020 by MENTOR in the United States found that 69 per cent of mentees were estimated to have access to Wi-Fi and a device to communicate with their mentor, engage in schoolwork, etc. There are significant barriers for about one third of mentees in the programs that responded.

Digital literacy can also be a barrier to engagement. While young people are often more comfortable with emerging technology such as apps, video chats and instant messaging, adults who participated in our *Raising the Profile* survey reported lower levels of comfort with these technologies:

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[3] Weiler, Scafe, Spencer, Cavell (2019). Caregiver-Initiated Mentoring: Developing a Model to Mitigate Social Isolation. Clinical Social Work Journal.

- 45 per cent of adults reported being comfortable with apps
- 60 per of adults reported being comfortable with video calls
- 60 per cent of adults reported being comfortable with instant messaging.

Training is often necessary to ensure that mentors and mentees who participate in virtual mentoring programs are able to communicate online effectively.[4]

Call to Action

As Cory Doctorow noted at the March 16th, 2021 OpenMedia National Day of Action on Affordable Internet[5], Canada has long taken great pride in the construction, connection and establishment of the national railroad as a grand infrastructure project that connected Canadians coast to coast. This century also requires a grand investment – a new digital network to ensure all of us can meaningfully participate in society. From tax returns to health care service providers, many offerings from the government are now, and in some cases exclusively, provided online.

Many youth mentoring programs have recognized that a key barrier to participation used to be transportation, and focused on free bus passes, transportation or co-location of programs. Now, a digital isolation for the most vulnerable young people is just as important. In order to ensure equitable support and services are available to young people to prepare them for a life of dignity, fulfilment, education and the world of work, access to cyberspace must become a question of public good and infrastructure.

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[4] MENTOR Canada (Canadian Mentoring Partnership) (2020). E-mentoring: Key Topic Overview.
[5] https://openmedia.org/press/item/national-day-of-action-demands-affordable-internet-for-everyone-in-canada

Launching Underserved Young Adults into Tech Careers

Recommendations from youth on improving access to digital skills training and employment

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Introduction

Given the continued automation and digitization of the Canadian economy and workforce, accelerated by the COVID pandemic, it has become more urgent than ever to equip youth with the digital skills required to secure meaningful employment in the present and future of work. In their report, The Digital-Led New Normal (Aug. 2020), the Information and Communications Technology Council (ICTC) reports that the Canadian digital sector will need to add 147,000 by 2022. However, not all Canadian youth have the same level of access and opportunity to pursue IT education and join the technology workforce.

The voices of young adults are vital to understanding the barriers that they face to pursuing a career in technology. Hearing about and learning from their lived experiences and ideas for change helps inform how youth can be better supported to pursue technology careers. NPower Canada provides underserved young adults with no-cost skills training, wraparound supports, direct job placement and alumni services to support youth in overcoming systemic challenges that had prevented them from pursuing digital careers. NPower Canada invited several of its program graduates to join a focus group to share their experiences and discuss their suggestions for creating greater access for underserved youth to launch digital careers. As noted below, the composition of the focus group, with 86% of members from BIPOC communities and 57% female-identified, reflects the diversity of youth whom NPower Canada serves.

Background

NPower Canada envisions a future where our technology workforce is diverse, and clear pathways exist for all people, regardless of ethnicity, gender, or socio-economic background, to succeed in our digital economy. The young adults whom NPower Canada serves face systemic barriers to finding meaningful work, including low-income youth and those in receipt of government income assistance, Black, Indigenous and other racialized youth, immigrants and refugees, LGBTQ2SIA+ youth and persons with disabilities. Moreover, to address the systemic underrepresentation of women, non-binary, and gender diverse persons in IT/STEM, NPower Canada strives to achieve gender parity in its tech workforce programs.

NPower Canada has scaled its programs nationally in response to significant youth unemployment challenges across Canada and to support workforce development in regions with growing industry demand for junior IT talent. Downtown Toronto was the first NPower Canada site, opening in 2014, and programs have since expanded regionally in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), and nationally, to serve Calgary and Halifax, along with a new Vancouver site launching in September 2021.

To date, more than 80% of NPower Canada alumni have secured employment and/or enrolled in postsecondary education within 12 months of program completion. In many cases, employed NPower Canada alumni more than double their prior household income, which benefits not only the young graduates themselves but their families and communities, helping to lift multiple generations out of poverty.

Focus Group Participant Profile

Aged 21 to 28 years, avg age 24

6 out of 7 unemployed prior to NPower enrollment

Avg before-tax annual household income: $36,264

Average household size: 4.3

**Education completed:
2 high school diploma
2 partial college completion
1 college certification
1 partial university completion
1 bachelor's degree**

Figure 1

Profile: Focus group participants

From their lived experience, NPower Canada graduates can provide an important contribution to understanding the barriers that prevent youth from pursuing training or education and a career in IT. As NPower Canada alumni, they have also gained knowledge of careers in technology, and valuable perspectives regarding what would help youth to see themselves employed in digital careers, to be able to access learning opportunities and build their skills, and advance to careers in technology.

To include graduates in the focus group whose experiences would best position them to contribute to the discussion and generate a variety of perspectives and ideas, several factors were considered when selecting participants. Alumni who were invited to join the focus group included NPower Canada program participants who had experienced barriers to careers in technology as youth in Canada, are currently employed post-program, and in most cases, had not completed a 3-4-year degree. Seven alumni participated in the focus group, including three (43%) who completed NPower Canada programs at one of the GTA sites and four (57%) at the Calgary site. A

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profile of the participant demographics is included in Figure 1. Invitees were also selected to include participants who were as representative as possible of the diverse NPower participant population and youth who face barriers to pursuing digital careers (see Figure 2). Two NPower Canada staff members co-facilitated the 90-minute focus group, hosted and recorded on Zoom, and utilized notes taken in addition to the recorded discussion to collect, verify and analyze findings shared by participants.
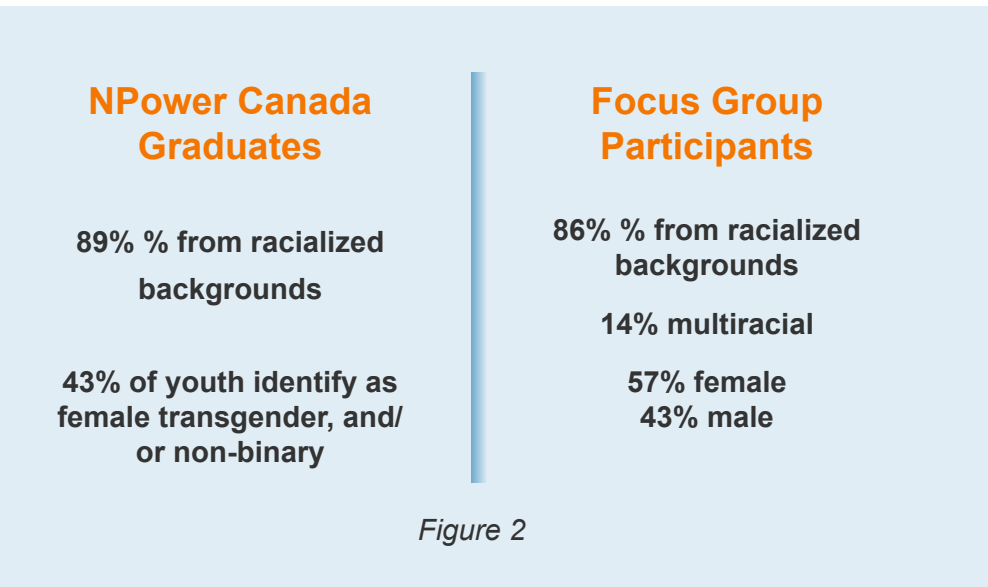

NPower Canada Graduates

89% % from racialized backgrounds

43% of youth identify as female transgender, and/ or non-binary

Focus Group Participants

86% % from racialized backgrounds

14% multiracial

57% female
43% male

Figure 2

Findings: Experiences and Ideas from NPower Canada Graduates
Overcoming Financial Barriers

Several primary themes emerged from the participants' engaged and thoughtful discussion. Financial barriers emerged as one of the primary challenges faced by participants. They provided examples of several types of financial barriers to building tech skills and accessing training or education. Youth expressed that gaining access to programs offered at no cost played an important role in their ability to pursue digital careers. For one participant, it was the reason why they became interested in technology and grew more confident in their ability to pursue a digital career.

However, even with access to education offered at no cost to the participant, such as high school courses, the participants identified the cost of internet; computer hardware, in particular computers which fit the specifications required to apply technical skills; and software; as prohibitively expensive. One suggestion included making expensive software programs more accessible, including longer trial periods to learn or test the product before purchasing a license. Participants also proposed the benefit of shorter training programs that do not require the commitment and cost of completing a four-year degree, and that provide an opportunity to gain some exposure to the field, build skills, and become increasingly inspired to pursue a technology career.

Increasing Knowledge about Digital Careers

Participants also identified overcoming a lack of awareness about digital skills and careers as a top priority. Youth described how the educational institutions they had attended, and the career guidance services they had received, usually did not emphasize the importance of digital skills, while also failing to provide students and their families with information about the diversity of IT career options available. Participants suggested that becoming more informed about the broad range of career options, including learning about the transferability of their current skills and strengths to IT roles, would allow more youth to see themselves as having the abilities and affinity for digital careers.

Ultimately, participants shared that lack of information about digital careers can fuel misperceptions that often deter youth from pursuing careers in tech. Examples of misperceptions that discouraged participants from being interested in technology included that IT careers are limited to either "coding or building computers". Also, that one must be good in math or have a computer science background, and that learning technology is difficult and requires highly advanced skills. Participants shared that a lack of confidence in these areas prevented them from considering these courses or directions for their education, and that courses such as math are not always developed and taught in an accessible manner, particularly for youth with learning and other disabilities. Similarly, focus group participants noted that the course descriptions themselves gave the impression that these IT classes and career pathways were out of reach for those not confident in those areas. From their experience in NPower Canada's programs, however, focus group participants found that with customizable curriculum and training, including accommodations for diverse learning needs and styles, tech training and jobs could actually be accessible and attainable.

Misperceptions of the "type" of person who is interested in technology were also discussed. For example, among youth in school, the stereotype of the "nerdy" student can affect who sees themselves as smart enough or, alternately, can prompt youth to avoid ridicule from peers by staying away from "nerdy" activities related to technology. Youth also cited the lack of diverse representation in the IT field as a deterrent from pursuing tech careers. For a participant who identified as female, her father's employment in IT influenced her interest in technology, but she did not have access or exposure to female mentors in tech. Female participants also commented that the over-representation of men in tech careers and courses can be unwelcoming and exclusionary. Participants identified that being able to connect with a mentor, even if for a brief, one-time meeting to learn about and ask questions about their experiences, can provide a valuable opportunity to understand more about, and be encouraged to pursue, IT careers.

Strengthening the Education System's Role in Preparing Youth for Digital Careers

Building on their prior insights about lack of awareness and misperceptions of tech careers, participants called for educators and the education system to play a greater role in encouraging and preparing youth to pursue careers in technology, especially those youth belonging to communities underrepresented in the IT field. In school, participants felt that exposure to technology prior to high school would have helped them to begin learning digital skills and building their confidence earlier. Participants also suggested that guidance regarding course choices, higher education and career pathways would have been more helpful at an earlier grade, instead of during the later grades of high school, which allows them less time to plan their course trajectory to be able to attain the requirements for post-secondary programs or employment. This was also compounded by the later years of high school being a time when they are busier with course work and extracurricular activities, leaving them with limited time to research and make informed decisions regarding the career options they would like to pursue.

In combination with earlier exposure to technology and knowledge of the wide-ranging potential for career opportunities, participants recommended that guidance counsellors play a proactive role in advising youth to consider and prepare for careers in IT. It was suggested that improving guidance counsellors' knowledge of the different types of technology careers and roles, the skills and strengths required, along with growing demand for talent in the technology sector, will better position counsellors to recommend courses, training and career options to a greater number of youth. This would include female, BIPOC, newcomers and other youth who have not seen themselves represented in the IT field.

Discussion: Young Adults' Recommendations

Overall, the primary recommendations that participants put forward to ensure that youth have the opportunity to pursue digital careers included 1) reducing financial barriers for low-income youth and 2) education system improvements to increase access to digital skills development, facilitating early career exploration in the tech sector and providing informed guidance to pursue IT careers.

The participants clearly identified the importance of overcoming costs that are barriers to having access to technology, and the tools required to build and apply skills. As one participant expressed, financial barriers "play a big role in your decisions in life", and an example was shared of countries where post-secondary education is paid for by the public sector, and the opportunity that provides for greater access to education, leading to more inclusive workforce development and talent retention. The participants expressed that being able to access the free-of-cost NPower Canada program encouraged and made it possible for them to pursue careers in technology.

Their experiences in the NPower Canada program also provided participants with an understanding of the range of career opportunities in IT, and they described the effectiveness of the curriculum for learning the required knowledge and skills needed to earn industry certifications and secure employment. Among the other supportive features of the NPower Canada program, participants highlighted the importance of diversity among learners, maintaining a respectful and inclusive environment, and creating a culture of accountability. The importance of these aspects of the NPower Canada model for participants' success underscores the value of other educational institutions adopting a similar focus on creating a diverse and inclusive learning environment to better support youth in gaining the skills and motivation required to pursue careers in technology and to prevent youth who could become future IT professionals from falling through the cracks.

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Conclusions

NPower Canada participants recommended a combined effort to address financial barriers to accessing technology and higher education, along with strengthening the capacity of educational institutions to provide inclusive and informed digital skills training, as instrumental in supporting underserved youth to pursue digital skills training and launch tech careers.

Their suggestions identify the value of investing in curriculum development and increasing educators' knowledge, in particular, amongst guidance counsellors, to be better informed to introduce youth earlier to the range of opportunities in IT and to introduce skills development across IT disciplines. To achieve this, engaging with employers will be vital for educators to learn about careers in the technology sector, adapt programs to meet labour market demand for IT skills, and access diverse mentors for youth. For youth and their families who face financial challenges, options could include integrating funding for, or access to, the tools needed to learn and practice digital skills training into the education system, as well as financially accessible training available in the community. Canada' *Connectivity Strategy* (Government of Canada, 2019), led by the Ministry of Rural and Economic Development, is an important step towards providing affordable, high-speed internet across Canada, and reducing the digital divide for youth for whom access to, or the cost of, high-speed internet, is a barrier to developing digital skills or being employed in IT.

Youth would also benefit from mentorship from female, BIPOC, LGBTQ2S+ and other diverse tech professionals who would be open to sharing their own lived experiences and strategies for navigating the systemic barriers that persist in IT/STEM. Educators must also provide the accommodations, customized learning plans and tutoring needed to remove barriers for youth with disabilities and specialized learning needs.

Promising strategies like these have the potential for cultivating a diverse and inclusive tech workforce across Canada, creating brighter futures for underserved young adults while providing Canadian employers with a growing pipeline of skilled tech talent.

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Title: Bridging the behavioural digital divide in the youth employment system starts with youth-led solutions.

Introduction

Building back a better youth employment system requires acknowledging the behavioural digital divide between how youth-serving employment organizations run their programs and how youth engage with their digital world. If digital programs and interventions are to be effective and meaningful, youth must guide its creation and implementation.

The digital divide is the uneven distribution of access to information and communication technology and is often rooted in income inequality. According to Statistics Canada, 62 per cent of Canadians in the lowest income quartile are connected, vs. 95 per cent of those in the highest quartile.

While connectedness and infrastructure are integral to understanding and solving the digital divide, the ability to provide services and supports that are relevant to youth is also a key issue. Opportunity For All Youth is currently designing solutions to close the gap between how youth-serving organizations deliver digital programming and how youth engage with it—this is what we call a behavioural digital divide.

In the past four months, our inaugural Youth Innovation Council has led dozens of digital engagement activities with youth across Canada, with the objective of using their lived experiences to design solutions with them. Through data gathered by surveys interviews and research, they found that if we are to reach more youth facing

employment barriers and create a digital job-readiness program that youth will use and recommend to their friends, we must implement a youth-focused lens to all creation and delivery of youth-focussed digital employment programming. And who better to serve as our youth-focused lens than actual youth?

Youth are uniquely positioned to teach us how to better reach their peers and mentor senior leaders on increased effectiveness in the digital space and help identify programming needs in the sector. Engaging them in this way will help us learn from youth and support job creation by creating meaningful roles for them in our plans to build back a better Canadian youth employment system.

The behavioural digital divide and youth employment

Currently, youth across Canada face enormous uncertainty due to the health crisis, economic crisis and digital divide exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic has radically altered our lives to protect public health with many measures disproportionately impacting marginalized and vulnerable communities, including people without homes, Indigenous communities, Black communities, racialized communities, people with disabilities, LGBTQ+ communities, newcomers, refugees, immigrants and migrants[1].

From February to April 2020, the youth employment rate doubled from 12 per cent to 24 per cent, reaching a 20-year high. The economic effects of the pandemic have further impacted racialized youth, with the majority of youth facing unemployment identifying as being racialized. Before the pandemic, there was over 860,000 youth not in employment, education or training (NEET). Today, that number has almost doubled due to youth-centric employment industries, like food and accommodation and retail, shutting their doors due to public health guidelines.

Youth have emphasized how the pandemic has heightened their fears around not accessing opportunities necessary for their overall life goals. They fear that lack of skills growth opportunities will delay progression into their future careers.

From job-search resources and job-readiness training to hiring and networking events, programs to support youth in their employment journeys have dramatically shifted from in-person to digital through the pandemic. This digital shift has created a growing rift between youth facing barriers to employment and the access points and supports to meaningful employment. We are now facing brand-new challenges brought on by the pandemic. In the face of a new digital revolution, how might we reach and engage with youth most distant from employment in a digital landscape?

Positioning youth as User Experience (UX) experts

Youth are uniquely positioned to support building back a better youth employment system in the digital space. While agencies and workplaces struggled to adapt to an online world, young people with access to technology and who have grown up utilizing digital spaces in all aspects of their lives leveraged tools they knew inside and out to bridge the social gap. At the same time the world stood still, Clubhouse emerged as a space for youth to get together and socialize. Pockets of Tik Tok served as a platform for youth to share their mental health journeys and organize various social movements that spawned social reckonings that have been years in the making.

Youth-serving organizations must apply a youth-focused lens to creating and delivering messaging and programming in the digital space. The examples above prove that they are more than equipped to support our sector in bridging the digital infrastructure needs' behavioural divide.

"*Youth provided a needed perspective on the priorities of young people entering the workforce, the view on leadership development, understanding how communications and priorities make their way through an organization.*" **Chris Delledonne, Director, Human Resources - Mobility & Retail, Bell**

In the summer of 2020, Opportunity For All Youth connected with over 1,080 youth through a youth summit, webinars, career chats, youth design jams and hiring events. Through these engagements, we better understood youth experience with COVID-19 and employment in Canada. We identified a need for a *"for youth, by youth"* program that would allow us to co-create solutions, digital products and provide ongoing

feedback and validation for tools that ultimately benefit youth workforce development and bridge the behavioural digital divide.

In the fall of 2020, we welcomed our first Youth Innovation Council at MaRS Discovery District. Our Council is a diverse group made up of 12 youth who are part-time employees. Among many activities, the Council applied a youth-focused lens to improve the youth development workforce system and advance our solutions for reaching youth in a digital-first world. Individually, the 12 youth provided an incredible array of skills and talents, and collectively they have been a sounding board and in-house focus group, offering invaluable learnings. It has also been a whole lot of fun working with the refreshing honesty, optimism and joy they bring to the workforce.

Through a working-group model, our Youth Innovation Council focused on the following critical intervention questions:

1. **How might we reach youth most distant from early employment?**
2. **How might we create digital tools youth will use and recommend to their friends?**
3. **How do we reach as many youth as possible?**
4. **How do we build the work-ready skills employers are looking for?**

Our Youth Innovation Council members set out to answer these questions through our signature design jam process and engaged their respective communities. Four working groups, alongside a data-focused member of our council, were first trained in delivering design jams and principles of Human Centred Design (https://www.designkit.org/). Equipped with this training, they facilitated design jams with youth across Canada to ideate solutions to the critical intervention questions. An additional component to the workplace was a reverse-mentoring program with members of CILAR (Coalition of Innovation Leaders Against Racism). This program created a unique opportunity for our council leaders to share experiences and ideas with senior leaders in the innovation ecosystem.

Findings and contributions:

"Working with Opportunity For All Youth allowed me to realize that you don't need to be well-known or have great influence to contribute to positive change. They taught me that the quietest people are the loudest when contributing to change," [Thania Padillo](#), Youth Innovation Council member.

Reaching hard-to-reach youth. The Youth Innovation Council gave us the critical resources and reach needed to connect with youth from marginalized communities. These new avenues opened up peer-to-peer dialogues not accessible to our program managers and senior leaders.

An improved digital skills ladder. A skills ladder is a tool that youth can use to increase their employability and acquire the foundational building-block skills to pursue the career direction they choose. Building on work previously done by our employer coalition, the Council led a post-covid redesign of the skills ladder to better suit the needs of youth looking for support in a digital landscape. Their work was informed by engagement sessions with our network of employers and community service providers.

The skills that youth, employers and job developers found significantly important in this increasingly digital world are soft skills, particularly communication and relationship-building skills. Skills like networking, confidence, leadership, professionalism, problem-solving, creativity, self-improvement, growth, teamwork, collaboration, operational skills, technical skills, and email, telephone and zoom etiquette are also valuable. From there, they defined a framework for how this ladder can be shared within youth networks and are currently in the test phase of delivering the revamped skills-ladder workshop to young people across Canada.

Building a personal brand online. Youth have a clear idea of their individual digital needs, how to engage their peers digitally and a good sense of gauging value on what they've learned. For example, during the design jams, the youth identified a need to improve their personal branding skills. The Council then tested a pilot workshop that focused on personal branding and later collected data to measure the digital learning session's success. The post-workshop survey highlighted the need to learn the skills to

present oneself professionally to prospective employers and mentors. They also found that they were more confident in identifying their skills and strengths in a virtual setting.

Applying a youth-lens to marketing efforts. "Out of touch" messaging and images are common pain points in the employment sector. We've learned that if youth do not see themselves in an organization's brand, they are less likely to engage with it. We also learned that if youth can engage with our content, it is more likely to be shared within their networks. For this reason, we brought a youth-focused lens to the creation of our new brand to reach and engage with more youth from diverse backgrounds and communities across Canada. Throughout this process, they have informed critical pivot points in the creation process, including our name, the design, the images and the messaging. We look forward to leaning on them as we begin implementing our new brand and strategy in the coming months.

"*After over three decades working in the corporate world, it is very easy to rely too heavily on past experience and personal knowledge. What I love about all of my conversations with those who are at the early stages of their career is just how critically important it is to be open to ideas, expertise and perspectives that would not otherwise be in my line of sight. I appreciate that each and every interaction I have with young people reminds me of the value of approaching life with the intent (and expectation!) to learn new things. For someone in my tenured position, having an "always learning" approach that is fuelled by our workplace's emerging talent is the key to continuing to bring an informed and valued perspective to the table.*" **Sheila Murray - Senior Corporate Marketing Executive**

Conclusion and Recommendations

"*The Youth Innovation Council and the extended network of youth they engaged have been critical to our planning and design of programming. They have provided ideas, feedback, and a critical assessment of what will work and what will not. Whatever we thought we were going to do at the start has been radically transformed by the work*

completed by our council." **Sarah Vickery, Senior Manager Youth and Program Services at Opportunity For All Youth- MaRS Discovery District**

While we saw a measurable and ongoing benefit to including youth in our design processes, to do so effectively, there are readiness pieces that must be in place:

- Acknowledgement of the strengths youth represent in the digital space—they are the experts!
- Leaders with decision-making authority must be prepared to learn from youth and positioned to integrate their ideas. It is easy to lean towards tokenism in this space.
- A committed supervisor/manager to support bridging the gap between the different generations and authority levels in the organization to keep the work and dialogues moving.
- Creating intentionally designed jobs with critical projects that are integrated into the broader work of the organization.

Our inaugural Youth Innovation Council shows the value that youth bring to the workforce development sector in bridging the behavioural digital divide. A strong bridge between youth digital needs and programming supports cannot be created without the direct input and creation of solutions by youth experiencing barriers. Including youth in our work to build back a better employment system is critical to our efforts in bridging the digital divide.

Youth-led digital solutions will support an honest, intersectional, and equitable response to the behavioural digital divide. While we may not have the ability in our organization to meet the infrastructure needs presented by the digital divide, we can certainly look at our own interventions and services to youth and ask a critical question: "Are we meeting youth where they are?" It's clear that the digital engagement expertise that youth inherently possess is needed for our sector to better serve youth. Our sector, and all

youth-serving sectors, can benefit from youth's expertise in designing, implementing and communications related to programming. Leaders like Sheila, who are eager to learn from new generations in the workforce, are also key. These, along with an open mindset to "build back better," will create a strong, sustainable bridge to the behavioural digital divide between youth facing employment barriers, employers that need them, and youth-serving organizations.

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Towards Inclusive Growth

Addressing the Digital Divide Through Skills and Training

Contributors: Federico Vargas, Ashley Rakoff, Marsha Josephs, Konrad Glogowski

Introduction

About Pathways to Education Canada

Founded in 2001, Pathways to Education is a national, charitable organization breaking the cycle of poverty through education. The Pathways to Education Program provides youth living in low-income communities across Canada with a holistic combination of academic, financial, social, and one-on-one supports to overcome barriers to education and successfully transition to post-secondary education, training or the labour market. For youth in low-income communities, Pathways to Education provides the resources and network of support to graduate from high school and build the foundation for a successful future. Introduction

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated a complex digital divide for youth in low-income communities that could prevent them from reaching their full potential and contributing to Canada's economic recovery. One aspect of this digital divide that has received considerable attention from government and community organizations during the pandemic is the lack of access to hardware devices and connectivity among young people. There is also a second aspect, related to skills and competencies, that has not received as much attention. Canada's complex digital divide is increasingly a skills and competencies gap that hampers the ability of youth in low-income communities to effectively leverage the benefits of digital technologies to achieve academic and professional success. To address this challenge, targeted efforts are needed to help young people develop foundational competencies, expand their social capital, and become lifelong learners.

Pathways to Education is well-positioned to address the needs of youth that lack access to competencies development. The Pathways Program is designed to prepare youth for life beyond high school, helping them to develop crucial employability skills through career education programming and competencies development. The future labour market will demand skills and competencies that grow from social capital, proficient technology use, and mentoring that connects young people to resources and individuals beyond their immediate networks, providing them with access to education and employment. By investing in young people today, Canada can ensure a prosperous economy for all Canadians, now and in the future.

Canada's Digital and Skills Divide

Canada's Digital and Skills Divide

The digital divide in education has traditionally referred to the gap in access to information and computer technology (ICT) among students that negatively impacts the learning outcomes of those who lack access to computers and digital tools. Recently, the definition of 'digital divide' has been expanded to include gaps in digital skills and the ability to effectively use technology to support richer forms of learning and working that contribute to future success. This second dimension of the digital divide related to skills and competency development has become more apparent during the pandemic as many youth in low-income communities have struggled to meaningfully participate in remote learning and access resources online (Alphonso, 2020).

Students from affluent backgrounds have an easier time adapting to online learning and have access to a wider range of supports for academic success compared to their less affluent peers (Graham et al, 2020). In more affluent households, young people can learn from those in their immediate network how to access the internet to acquire career-related information; research personally meaningful information; tap into networks of like-minded professionals; or research health, personal well-being, or financial information. In low-income households where one's ability is affected by limited exposure to competent technology and internet users, young people may struggle to use technology to expand their academic and professional networks and acquire information for their skills and competency development. A recent survey of Canadian youth conducted for the National Youth-Serving Agencies has revealed that 68 per cent of youth aged 15 to 17 who live in low-income households were among the most pessimistic about their future (Kishchuk, 2020). Failing to address these barriers risks leaving youth in low-income communities without the skills and competencies to be successful in post-secondary education and the labour market.
 success.

The Role of Lifelong Competencies

Evidence suggests that youth living in contexts of disadvantage have lower levels of competencies than their more affluent peers. Investing in and further developing these competencies can reduce poverty by increasing labour market prospects and improving social outcomes (Pellegrino et al, 2012). Programs based on positive youth development, like the Pathways to Education Program, support youth in building positive identities and developing resilience and self-regulation, which increase their chance of success after high school.

Developing these new skills and competencies are essential for young people as they transition to a changing labour market. According to a recent survey of 86 leading Canadian organizations, employers across sectors are increasingly demanding employees that can work dynamically in teams and continuously learn and relearn new knowledge and technology (BCC, 2020). According to the same survey, 60 per cent of employers expressed concerns about a gap in competencies among younger workers (BCC, 2020). The top five competencies that employers look for in entry-level hires are collaboration, communication, problem-solving, resiliency, and analytical capabilities (BCC, 2020).

Skills and competencies that enable young people to navigate the labour market post-pandemic are even more important for youth from disadvantaged communities. These young people often lack the social capital that advantages youth from affluent backgrounds when transitioning into the workforce. Social capital is a concept that describes networks of relationships and refers to an individual's social and professional ties, which may not be easily available to underserved young people when making important life decisions (Statistics Canada, 2019). Also, young Canadians who can clearly articulate how their competencies transfer from one experience to another will be best poised for success (BCC, 2020). Addressing the skills gap dimension of the digital divide will also be important, as technological change will require modern workers to cope with changes and learn new skills and competencies to stay competitive in the labour market (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2016). In short, a breadth of competencies, in addition to lifelong learning, will enable young people to be adaptable to the evolving labour market.

Competency Development in the Pathways Program

The Pathways to Education Program aligns with key positive youth development frameworks, such as the Stepping Up Framework; the Five Cs of Positive Youth Development; and the Achieve, Connect, Thrive (ACT) skills framework. This program offers a holistic, strengths-based, and personalized approach that helps youth develop the necessary competencies to support their educational attainment, career readiness, and personal development. This is critical for youth in low-income communities who lack access to networks and guidance from mentors about navigating their transition to post-secondary education or the workplace. Competencies such as self-regulation, resilience, and collaboration are inherent in the Pathways Program. These competencies are particularly important for youth coming from contexts of disadvantage and can help them overcome barriers to education and compete in a continually evolving labour market. Pathways has a history of leveraging innovative technologies to engage with youth virtually and has been providing a blend of in-person and virtual delivery of the Program throughout the pandemic.

Activities offered through the Pathways Program (e.g., physical activities, leadership training, career exploration, mentoring, cultural workshops) allow students to make decisions, work in groups, and manage themselves. Evidence-based activities and programming lead to exploration and skill-building, including decision making, open-mindedness, self-advocacy, goal setting, and perseverance. As youth participate in these activities and progress through high school, they develop skills and competencies such as agency, the growth mindset, and intentional self-regulation. These competencies lead to the development of in-demand, employable skills that support young people to succeed in the workforce.

In this changing labour market, Canadian employers already look for specific competencies that allow young people to easily adapt and collaborate on complex projects (BCC, 2020). Pathways to Education is helping to prepare youth for jobs that may not currently exist by thinking critically and adopting skills and competencies to be successful in new and unknown environments.

"Programs like mentoring, tutoring and events at Pathways gets you ready to network cause you're dealing with different people every day. When you go into the workplace or after post-secondary, it's all about making those connections, branching out and being able to communicate effectively with people. Having that foundation in high school really translated well into post-secondary and now the workplace."

Pathways Alum

4

Pathways Program Alumni Spotlight

Pathways to Education has been helping youth develop career readiness competencies for twenty years. Through consistent engagement with youth, Pathways to Education is deeply aware of what they need to succeed. One Pathways Program alum told us that "…mentoring, tutoring, and events at Pathways gets you ready to network because you're dealing with different people every day. When you go into the workplace or after post-secondary, it's all about making those connections, branching out, and being able to communicate effectively with people."

As Pathways Program alumni continue to gain opportunities to practice relationship building and networking within their programs, they begin to feel "more comfortable reaching out to people that are not in [their] network." They are also appreciative of the growth mindset and self-accountability gained through the program, saying, "If you have a job where you need to wake up early, it's up to you to wake up at that time. It's up to you to hold yourself accountable…"

Pathways Program alumni also recognize that remote work will increasingly become more commonplace after COVID-19 and describe essential competencies such as "…time management, being able to manage yourself, also being a part of a team is very important."

The COVID-19 pandemic has necessitated the need for employees to work virtually where possible and young people recognize that "social skills are very different online versus in-person when you were in school, you learn about reading body language or like eye contact and stuff like that. This is sort of different."

Overall, Pathways to Education alumni validate the effectiveness of the program in helping them to gain the skills and competencies they need to succeed in post-secondary education, training, and the workplace.

"Going into the labour market and the digital realm, [important skills are] time management, being able to manage yourself, also being a part of a team is very important"

Pathways Alum

"If you make a mistake, it's up to you to fix it. If you have a job where you need to wake up early, it's up to you to wake up at that time. Nobody's going to hold your hand. It's up to you to hold yourself accountable and just really fix your mistakes. Be your leader.""

Pathways Alum

Supporting Youth Skills Development for a More Inclusive and Growing Economy

As Canada looks to achieve sustained recovery post-pandemic, young people will inevitably play a significant role in building the foundations of a stronger, more resilient Canadian economy. To help young people succeed, efforts to address the digital divide must go beyond providing access to technology. Young people living in low-income communities in particular need access to resources and guidance to use technology to expand their academic and professional networks and to develop the right skills and competencies if they wish to be successful in a rapidly changing economy. These supports will be increasingly intertwined, as they will depend on youth being able to easily adapt, learn, and relearn new skills, competencies, and technology.

To this end, the public sector, private sector, and civil society must continue to support programs that help young people in low-income communities overcome barriers to education, address the skills gap, and develop competencies to access post-secondary education and professional opportunities. These investments are crucial to ensure the competitiveness of Canada's economy. Due to young people's unique learning and innovation capabilities as the result of heightened brain capacity from adolescence to age 25, investments can also offer a much higher social and economic return (Doughterty, 2018). For instance, 2006 and 2011 Social Return on Investment analyses by the Boston Consulting Group determined that the Pathways to Education Program delivers a social return of $24 on every dollar invested (Boston Consulting Group, 2011).

Programs like Pathways to Education aim to prepare youth for life beyond high school by engaging them in a range of activities that strengthen resilience, confidence, and employability skills to help them successfully manage the transition to post-secondary education, training, or the labour market. By collectively investing in the skills and competency development of youth living in low-income communities, Canada will create a dynamic and adaptable workforce that will contribute to robust economic recovery and long-term growth.
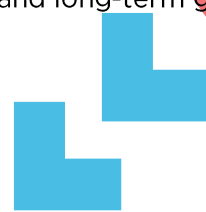
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CASE STUDY | Prince Albert Bridges the Digital Divide with Local Youth

by Alex Powalinsky and Nathalie Blanchet

OVERVIEW

The Communities Building Youth Futures initiative leverages the core tenets of the Collective Impact framework to build both community driven and national strategies for supporting youth to successfully navigate transitions from high school through graduation, post-secondary, training, and employment.

Thirteen CBYF communities launched their initiatives in June 2020 in the middle of social distancing due to the pandemic. From the beginning of the initiative, access to technology, internet and the ability to use technology were thus prominent barriers for all communities to grapple with. The digital divide experienced by many youth in these and other communities in Canada had significant impact on youths' ability to participate and succeed in school, to connect with their peers, and to access opportunities and supports.

CBYF Prince Albert, one of the 13 CBYF communities across Canada, is a city in the centre of Saskatchewan. It has a population of 36,000 with approximately 7,500 youth between the ages of 15-30. There are four high schools in Prince Albert:

- Ecole St. Mary High School
- Prince Albert Collegiate Institute (PACI)
- Wesmor High School
- Carlton Comprehensive High School which has a satellite campus called Wonska Cultural School that provides an alternative approach to education with a self-guided program.

This case study will tell you the story of CBYF Prince Albert's community innovation project and how, through a youth engagement approach, access to technology was provided for a youth through an unlikely venue. Equipping youth with the necessary technology to enroll in their educational program helps them continue on their paths to success by bridging the

> **Prince Albert's Community Innovation Project - Connecting, Supporting, and Empowering Prince Albert's Youth**
>
> A primary aspiration of the vision of Prince Albert's CBYF Initiative is to provide youth with access to important services and technology to help keep them safe, supported and connected – and to help them find themselves in light of a pandemic.
>
> The main areas of activity were:
> 1. Provide access to digital devices
> 2. Provide access to various personal resources and supports
> 3. Provide professional, cultural and traditional supports focused on youth wellbeing
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>
> *** The CBYF Community Innovation Fund is available to the 13 CBYF communities and is funded through Tamarack Institute's partnership with Employment and Social Development Canada.**

digital divide and overcoming the barrier to accessing Adult Literacy Education.

This case study also shows how using a holistic approach to working with youth helps provide wraparound supports that also contributes to bridging the digital divide. Lastly, a fulsome understanding of challenges and barriers for youth can help identify system and policy barriers that can also be addressed.

The community innovation project originated after youth in Prince Albert provided input that limited access to digital devices and a lack of flexible support options created significant barriers for them to reaching their goals. The design of the community innovation project included flexibility to respond to the changing needs of youth, but the three main types of activities were:

- To provide access to technology
- To offer wraparound supports that enabled youth to be engaged in their community and in education
- To offer programming and connection to services that supports wellbeing

Our approach to the innovation project was to provide holistic, wraparound support that addresses the mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual needs of youth and supported the development of their strengths. Our innovation project was developed in response to the requests from youth, including their feedback about what they felt was missing from the community. Youth shared that they often encounter barriers to accessing supports in the community based on strict eligibility requirements and were looking for supports that were more flexible and focused on the holistic view of the youth's wellbeing.

Three youth have been provided with technology that has allowed them to either enroll in or continue in an Adult Literacy Education program, with 4 more youth scheduled to receive laptops for fall enrollment. Approximately 20 youth have been able to access support for their wellbeing such as food hampers, bus passes, cab rides, counselling services, and access to cultural teachings. We have also pre-booked a Mental Health First Aide Course that will be delivered to 10 additional youth once the public health measures allow for in-person training.

UNRELENTING YOUTH ENGAGEMENT

An important consideration before going further into CBYF Prince Albert's work is to explore the approach to youth engagement which has been described fondly as *unrelenting youth engagement*. This iterative approach involves many similar principles as are found in Tamarack's [Guide - Meaningfully Engaging Youth EN.pdf (tamarackcommunity.ca)](#) , including:

- Affirm the work and contribution of youth as equals
- Meet youth where they are at
- Use continuous feedback loops
- Develop trust
- Be accountable
- Recognize the value of lived experience
- Communicate on the same level

In addition to these, CBYF Prince Albert has been developing our own brand of engagement. In all interactions with youth, there is intentional engagement with youth stories to seek to understand their gifts, strengths, and needs and to see where supports can be provided.

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I N S T I T U T E

HOW CBYF PRINCE ALBERT IS PROVIDING RESPONSIVE PROGRAMMING

How did the idea for the beading circle come about?

Beading was identified as a strong interest among youth in our survey, with youth expressing a desire to learn how to bead, and youth expressing their desire to share the skill of beading with other youth. Many youth had also shared that cultural engagement opportunities were important to them and beading is a traditional art form among many Indigenous groups.

Indigenous approaches to counselling and research suggest that building relationships through activities that allow for natural conversations to develop. Beading is a tool that we have been able to use to initiate conversations about topics ranging from feedback about our program delivery to challenges to education and employment during COVID-19.

The Beading Circle was designed by our youth Project Coordinator but was further developed and adjusted based on the feedback from the youth participants. The beading circle is now facilitated by the CBYF youth intern with Beading Circle participants having the opportunity to co-facilitate as well.

Can you describe how you engage youth in this project, and in particular how you got to know Hannah*, her strengths and her barriers? * (A pseudonym has been used to protect the privacy of the youth)

Hannah first became involved with CBYF near the end of December by responding to a Facebook post inviting youth to join our virtual beading circles. Hannah then filled out our intake survey to receive her free beading kit. Her survey responses were thorough and gave a very clear explanation of the barriers she was facing and highlighted the strengths she possessed, such as her strong motivation to break generational cycles of trauma, poverty, and addiction for her children.

Hannah reached out to us after joining our beading circle, needing sage for smudging. She shared that she was going through a tough time and that smudging was helping. We were able to deliver her a smudge kit as well as a food hamper in partnership with WFCC to address her food insecurity at Christmas time, which was identified on her intake survey.

Hannah would often log off from our circles if her children were making background noise and would always apologize. We continued to let her know that her attendance was appreciated and that we love seeing her online with her kids and she has nothing to worry about. We invited her to join the beading circles if even just to show us what she has worked on, and that is how her online engagement started. Now, she works through longer zoom calls and stays online even when her kids are making background noise. We have built a trusting relationship with her through positive reinforcement and feedback, encouragement, and reassurance, and meeting her where she is at by providing the beading instruction videos as a way for her to participate when unable to log on.

IDENTIFICATION/IDENTITY

We noticed on Jan 19 that Hannah responded to a post about getting your Metis card, a piece of identification that identifies members of the Metis Nation of Saskatchewan. Being a member of the MNS is important for cultural identity formation as it is the formal acknowledgement of your membership to the Metis Nation of Saskatchewan. Membership qualifies individuals for a range of supports, available only to registered members of the MNS such as university funding, financial support through COVID, housing supports, grants, and funding for technology. The Coordinator reached out to Hannah to explore the barriers she faced to receiving this important piece of identification.

Hannah shared negative experiences dealing with the local membership offices and was told she could not apply without the birth certificate of her grandfather. Hannah shared that her family struggles with addictions and that she is unable to get her grandfather to get his birth certificate. We called the Director of the Western Region 11 MNS office and was referred to one of their staff, to support Hannah through the process. We shared the frustration that Hannah has felt through the process and explained that this young person needs someone to walk alongside them through this process. The staff agreed and came up with practical solutions for how to overcome this barrier and is now working with Hannah directly on completing her application for her Metis Nation of Saskatchewan membership card.

EDUCATION AND THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

Hannah applied to an Adult Upgrading program. A prerequisite for the program is to have a laptop and reliable internet connection as the entire program is online. In order to apply for the provincial training allowance, you must also already have a computer and internet connection in place. Hannah messaged us and asked for assistance in overcoming this barrier.

This barrier was a great fit for our 2019-2020 CIF project, to equip her with the necessary technology to be able to pursue her higher learning. Her application to the program was confirmed by Sask Polytech and Hannah has now been equipped with a laptop.
Equipping Hannah with the required technology has allowed her to proceed with her application and fulfill the eligibility requirements of the program.

PERSONAL WELLBEING

Hannah reached out to gain access to a counsellor. We have a strong partnership with PA Outreach who has a resident Elder who does group and one to one counselling, Liz Settee, who is also a member of our Leadership Team. Hannah and Liz have had one counselling session over the phone and we have received approval to facilitate an in-person counselling session here at the office for Hannah and she continues contact with Liz over the phone.

Hannah has engaged in almost every event and program that we have offered, including attending 5 beading circles, watching our online tutorials and completing 5 beading projects, our virtual cultural programming which began on Mar 3, our poetry contest, and is a member of the YLC and has provided valuable insight into what makes a safe space for youth.

Can you describe your approach to providing supports to Hannah and other youth and the impact this has had?

After reading Hannah's survey responses, we realized that she was needing support. Hannah's determination, motivation, and perseverance inspired the team to look at how we can best support youth in similar situations. The team continued building a relationship with Hannah, sharing opportunities with her, asking for her feedback, and checking in regularly about the steps she was taking to reach her goals. Hannah has taken the supports/opportunities and conversations we have shared and used them in a manner that works best for her – she is fiercely independent and values the fact that we see her as competent and able to make her own decisions once she has the best information.

PERSONAL STATEMENT

Hannah has expressed her gratitude to us for our support on multiple occasions, sharing that she often feels lost, alone, and unsupported, but that now she has somewhere she can go to get support in figuring out what her next steps are. Hannah says that being involved with CBYF has "changed my life after becoming a single mom it is difficult, but they help me feel support when I don't get it anywhere else. They filled my life with positive change! By helping me with stress by dropping off sage and food around Christmas time. Helped me get back into beading which made me feel like I belonged and helped me with my patience. They also helped me get accepted into school by supplying me with a laptop for my courses. They are awesome…! Thanks so much CBYF"

Photo of Hannah with her laptop. *(Submitted photo)*

ABOUT THE INNOVATION FUND PROJECT AS A WHOLE

Could you describe how working with Hannah has impacted the rest of your work

When Hannah approached CBYF about her barrier of not having access to technology, we were able to identify an opportunity to support many more youth in overcoming this barrier. CBYF contacted the post-secondary institutions that provide the Adult Literacy Education programs to further explore this barrier. Through these conversations, CBYF learned that there are limited financial supports for students in Adult Literacy Education programs and that not having a laptop is a common reason that students are denied entry into the program.

Some institutions can provide students with necessary technology, but in some cases, students' only options, if all the laptops have been loaned out, is to get a $300 loan to purchase a computer that must be repaid within 2 weeks. Many students are on financial assistance and are unable to repay these loans and it is difficult to find a computer for that price, creating additional barriers for students.

Based on this information, CBYF Prince Albert will be partnering with at least one of these institutions through our innovation fund to address this significant gap in our community.

What other supports have been leveraged because of your work with Hannah and because of the innovation project as a whole?

- Partnership with Sask Polytechnic, SIIT and GDI post-secondary institutions will provide many open doors to other youth in the future as each institute provides many entry level educational and vocational opportunities.
- Partnership with local cab companies and with the City of PA community services Dept (Bus passes) has opened doors to further access to transportation options.
- Dealing with local merchants in purchasing technology products and services has made them more aware of the needs of youth and has motivated them to accommodate CBYF if any good discounts are available.

What would you say are important lessons that you have learned that others may be able to implement in their communities?

The most important lesson we have learned that we would like others to takeaway is the importance of establishing a trusting, supportive relationship when working with youth, with a special focus on Indigenous youth. This requires service providers to have a strong understanding of intergenerational trauma, the history of colonization and the resulting systemic barriers that many urban Indigenous youth face, such as Hannah not being able to register with the Metis Nation of Saskatchewan. Another common barrier is Indigenous youth not trusting organizations, businesses, and agencies, because of the history of colonization. For example, merchants may not be aware that many indigenous youth are fearful of exploring what is available for technology or even coming to their business to ask questions as they have been followed and watched when they enter a merchants place of business – we have discovered this as a huge barrier for youth, preventing them from feeling like they are a valued/trusted part of the community.

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To overcome this, service providers must be prepared to meet youth where they are at and to be gentle and supportive in their approaches. For example, if a youth's attendance in a program decreases or they do not attend something they signed up for, instead of removing them from the program, service providers should see this as an identifier that the youth may be experiencing a barrier and use their relationship with the youth to explore the issue and come up with possible solutions. Service providers must be patient in establishing a trusting, professional relationship. Many youth have a lifetime of experiences that have contributed to their mistrust of the systems and it will take time (and follow through) to overcome this. Youth need to feel heard and be given the opportunity to share their feedback; this makes them feel valued and builds trust while receiving feedback that may help improve service delivery.

CONCLUSION

This case study has been about one youth, but through this youth's involvement and through what we have learned, we have been able to support other youth address similar barriers. We hope that what we have shared will assist you in your path to supporting opportunities for youth.

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