

Making A Difference: The Ossining/Open Roads' Changemaker Program
An Evaluation of Program Outcomes



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*The Greeks had multiple words for love. I think that in that moment [on the river trip],
I discovered a new form of it.
They have a word for love for all, and love for nature: Agape Love . . . that's deep love.
So I felt like I sort of really understood what that was for the first time.*

—Susana, Changemaker

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An Evaluation of Program Outcomes

A research team affiliated with Manhattanville College conducted this interview study of outcomes of an innovative experiential program piloted in the Ossining School District for 6 months, from July through December 2023. The project was led by faculty member Dr. Joanne Marien in conjunction with four doctoral students - Rosa Amendola, Jeffrey Cole, Claire Comerford, and Ashley Cruz - as part of their coursework requirements for the EdD degree in educational leadership

Ossining Changemaker Program

The Ossining Changemaker program offered a cohort of 12 Latina high school students an immersive, experiential outdoor learning opportunity in one of the United States' most awe-inspiring wilderness areas. Led by Open Roads, an education-based provider of youth travel programs, participants embarked on a weeklong summer adventure into nature, including a 4-day river trip through the majestic Gates of Lodore Canyon on Utah's Green River. This journey delivered rare moments of peace and quiet through which participants could exhale, reflect on their lives through journal writing and intentional conversations, and discover new ways to become authors of their own life stories.

The summer trip set the stage for a school-sponsored, six-session after-school program (at Ossining High School) that offered participants an opportunity to reflect on the richness of

their summer experience while developing their own voice, sense of belonging, and empowerment to enact positive change within their community. This blend of large-scale experiential learning and school-centered coursework offered participants a unique opportunity to experience the wonders of nature while developing a deep-seated sense of self-understanding and confidence to generate aspirational goals for themselves and their communities. The program will culminate in early December with a public presentation of students' photo essays related to their experiences within the program. Students also will each share a "Declaration of Intent" toward the change they want to bring to their own lives or community. The program was offered at no cost to students: it was largely funded by Open Roads along with a contribution from the Ossining School District.

Purpose of Study

The aim of this research project was to explore the outcomes of the Changemaker program as seen through student participants' eyes. The study illuminated students' perceptions of program benefits and outcomes while pointing to suggested ways the program model might be modified. In particular, we explored how students might have self-reported growth in any of the following five positive, mutually reinforcing indicators of positive youth development as described in the five Cs: competence, confidence, connection, character, and caring (Phelps et al., 2009).

Associated Research

The Changemaker program is premised on the fundamental belief that immersion in the outdoors offers numerous benefits ranging from appreciation for nature to positive personal development. A brief summary of associated academic literature follows.

Benefits of the Outdoors

Evidence has suggested today's youth spend more time indoors than prior generations (Kellert et al., 2017) despite the benefits associated with being outdoors. By engaging with the outdoors, young people have been found to become more connected with nature (Rosa et al., 2018). Consequently, they tend to be happier (Zelenski & Nisbet, 2014) and derive other beneficial outcomes from being in nature, including an improved sense of emotional well-being and social relationships as well as a fuller sense of life purpose (Weinstein et al., 2009). As a result, community-based benefits such as environmental and social justice advocacy may become more prevalent (Martin et al., 2020; Pritchard et al., 2020).

Positive Youth Development: The Five Cs

This research study explored students' self-reporting of improved well-being attributed to participation in the Changemaker program. We framed our research and data analysis around the positive indicators of youth development as represented in the five Cs model (Phelps et al., 2009). Positive youth development (PYD) is an increasingly popular, assets-based approach to understanding and guiding program practice; it assumes a holistic perspective of youth well-being. The PYD perspective reflects that every adolescent has strengths, or at least the capacity to develop strengths, that will enable them to grow in a positive direction (R. M. Lerner, 2006). This approach also maintains youth are fully capable of learning and developing skills, exploring the world around them, and then making contributions to that world (Lewis, 2008).

The five Cs is a prominent PYD model structured around five positive, mutually reinforcing indicators of youth development: competence, confidence, connection, character, and caring. Competence relates to one's positive outlook on their actions in any realm: academic, cognitive, social, and vocational (Phelps et al., 2009). Confidence refers to one's positive sense

of self-worth and demonstration of self-efficacy (Phelps et al., 2009). Connection is seen through constructive and supportive relationships with others in one's home, school, and community. Character relates to one's sense of right and wrong and respect for rules and the rights of others (Bowers et al., 2010). Caring refers to one's sense of concern for others: how they sympathize and empathize (Phelps et al., 2009). R. M. Lerner (2006) hypothesized combining the five Cs leads to the emergence of a sixth competence: contribution. Contribution may take many forms, ranging from bettering oneself to contributing positively to one's family, and to the local and global communities (J. V. Lerner et al., 2009).

Setting

This study was set at Ossining High School in Ossining, New York, 33 miles north of New York City. In the 2021–2022 school year, the high school enrolled 1,531 students in Grades 9–12. Of these, 63% were Hispanic or Latino, 20% were White, 8% were Black or African American, 5% were Asian or Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander, and 4% were other or multiracial. The New York State Education Department (n.d.) designates 58% of all students as economically disadvantaged.

Ossining High School's emphasis on offering extraordinary, leadership-focused experiences for high school Latina students gave rise to Open Roads' invitation to the district leaders to engage with the Changemaker program at the school. Consistent with his mission to empower Latina high school students and his interest in exploring innovative approaches to experiential learning, Ossining Superintendent Dr. Ray Sanchez readily embraced the opportunity to partner with Open Roads in the initial pilot of the Changemaker initiative. Sanchez also authorized this study of program outcomes.

The focus on Latinas rested on educators' observations and supporting research that has confirmed student-centered classrooms do not always feel like psychologically safe spaces for Latinas; they may be uncomfortable speaking up in a classroom (Ochoa & Pineda, 2008). Latinas often become accustomed to the banking style of teaching, which leaves little room for conversation, conflict, or dissent in the classroom. They are often socialized to be polite and respectful listeners (Ochoa & Pineda, 2008). With an exclusive focus on Latina students, the Changemaker program aimed to create a safe and comfortable environment free of cultural encumbrances.

Sample

Twelve upper level (i.e., rising junior and senior) Latina students participated in the program launch in Spring 2023; it is set to culminate in a student exhibition on December 5, 2023. Rising juniors or seniors – most under 18 - who demonstrated a sense of responsibility, exemplary character, and leadership potential were invited to participate in the Changemaker program via teacher nomination based on exemplary character and leadership potential. The goal was for nominated candidates to return home empowered to feel a greater sense of voice and belonging in their community, thereby setting an example for others.

The Changemaker program was initiated in Spring 2023 with two pre-trip seminars that prepared participants and their parents for the trip. Before offering consent for participation in the summer trip, students' parents were informed about the program (in Spanish and English) and assured about trip particulars via numerous personal conversations with teachers and administrators from Ossining High School. In July, participants embarked on the river trip with two teacher–advisors and three advisors from Open Roads.

Research Methodology

A semi structured interview protocol guided student interviews. The interview design solicited participants' experiences in the Changemaker program, views about the program design, and ways they believed the program had impacted them. Potential participants were primarily 16 or 17 years old, so parental permission was obtained, and several safeguards were employed to ensure students' comfort throughout the program and interviewing process. Program advisors, who traveled with the students last summer and had an established base of trust with participants, explained the purpose of the study and shared the invitation for the interview to be held at the students' option. Students were assured there would be no repercussions for nonparticipation, and they could withdraw from the process at any time. Of 12 possible students, 10 chose to participate in the interview process.

Interviews were scheduled at each student's convenience. Students had the option to participate with or without Zoom's video feature. Audio recording of the session was also optional; one student chose not to be recorded. Manhattanville's Institutional Review Board approved the design this study.

Research Questions

The purpose of this research study was to chronicle the experiences through the voices of the Latina high school students who participated in the Ossining Changemaker program. The following research questions (RQs) guided our exploration:

RQ1: How do students describe the Changemaker summer trip? What features stood out?

RQ2: How do students describe that they might have personally developed as related to the five Cs (competence, confidence, connection, character, and caring) as a result of their participation in the Changemaker program?

RQ3: How do students describe the purpose, design, and outcomes as related to the after-school sessions and final exhibition? What are their recommendations for the program's future?

Findings

In this section, we discuss each of the major themes that unfolded in the responses to each research question (e.g., summer trip impact, growth in the five Cs, post-trip meaning making in after-school sessions). Each theme is introduced briefly, followed by representative student quotes. Our priority in rendering this report was to fully represent students' voices.

Program Impact

When asked how the trip impacted them, participants' initial responses focused on how they were moved by the majesty and serenity of the natural beauty in which they were immersed. This theme was prevalent throughout every interview.

“One Grain in a Big Giant World”

Each participant described being awe-struck by their immersion in such a profoundly beautiful natural environment. Bianca summed this up when she shared, “I was just, ‘Wow,’ especially the setting; being in Utah is so beautiful!” Several noted being in an environment for a sustained period was conducive to a sense of peacefulness:

Nora: We went up this mountain, and then when we got to the top, there's a place you can just stay in and relax, and really lay down and look at the sky. And it's, it's beautiful. And I think everybody should experience that at least one time. Because it's really soothing and relaxing. And not worry about taking pictures or what other people are gonna see because it's something that you'll have in your memory. And it's special to

you. I'm like one grain in a big giant world because the canyons really made you feel small.

Natalina: I do think the fact that we were out there in such a beautiful place really did bring some sort of peace within people; we didn't feel that anyone was really watching us. We felt at peace within ourselves; that let us be at peace with everyone else.

Gianna: [We were] more aware of our surroundings. Regular lives...can be peaceful and quiet.

Several respondents spoke about their enhanced appreciation for nature and how their perspective on their world was impacted by being immersed in the majesty of the Gates of Lodore Canyon on the Green River:

Nora: When you looked at all the things and also learning about, people that steward the land and also use the resources and kind of shape it, to live around it and not destroy it, was really great...It really impacted me when I got back because I started think about how the people...kind of destroyed [the land] and built on top of it. You know, we invented all of these inventions to help us but is it really what we need or what we want?

Natalia: I think it really does open doors to see how big the world is because when you're out there, you really do realize how big everything is and how you have it in the palm of your hand but also how minuscule you are. It just puts everything into perspective.

Katalina: There is also a visual perspective. I can see trees, yet someone can see the animals between the trees.

Susana: Soil is a very interesting thing that I think most people don't think about in their day-to-day life, but soil carries pretty much all the nutrients we need for life.

Giselle: [I am] more aware of [my] surroundings and how loud sometimes I am in regular lives and how peaceful and quiet it all is.

Susana summed up the overall feeling most participants expressed: “Honestly, I think it’s probably one of the most unique experiences that I’ve ever seen in my 17 years of life. I really loved it.”

“It’s Nice to Step Out of Your Comfort Zone”

Participants described how elements of the trip caused them to step out of their comfort zones. This theme was reflected in three different ways: (a) needing to adapt to the differences and occasional challenges of the physical environment, (b) needing to create new relationships because most other Changemakers were unknown to them, and, most of all, (c) not having access to their cell phones for most of the trip.

Consistently, the Changemakers referred to each of these comfort zone departures as positive experiences that prompted opportunities for self-reflection, personal growth, self-understanding, and interconnectedness.

Kristen: [At first}, I wasn’t sure about the trip. I was nervous. But I feel it’s sometimes nice to step out of your comfort zone. And just try new things because honestly, I’ve never been camping, and honestly, I probably wouldn’t have done it if it weren’t for this trip. So it’s really nice to just step out of your comfort zone; I liked it. I enjoyed it. It was definitely something new and something that I think I learned a lot from.

Bianca: After the trip I...feel more open to do stuff and not just be in my own comfort zone. If that makes sense. Like my confidence changed in, you know, being open to the experience and not just be in my own comfort zone.

Nora: I feel that had a lot to do with, you know, communicating with people more, getting out of your comfort zone. And I kind of figured out that I wanted to be a therapist . . . I had a lot of respect for everybody because I felt like everybody kind of came out of their own comfort zone in a way. And I like being able to make new friends now.

Jasmin: And something I did notice was before the trip, I am very much in my comfort zone. I didn't really like doing things out of it. But once I got there and saw people doing other things, I was, like, "I don't want to not try." This trip really made me go out of my comfort zone, and I'm really thankful for that because now I'm starting to do things I don't really normally do.

"Technology Isn't Everything"

Most participants referenced the discomfort they first experienced when they were asked to surrender their cell phones. Consistently, however, they each then referenced the positive impact of this departure from their norm.

Sofia: My most important takeaway is probably that technology isn't everything, like a big importance in life, because we spent almost a whole week without our phones for days, but we're usually always on our phone. So that's probably, the biggest takeaway [was] how to survive without being on tech, technology, or not speaking with your relatives or anything.

Jasmin: They took our phones away because they wanted us to be talking to each other. But, actually, I'm super grateful that they took it because I guess I really got close together. I think also about my habits with technology: coming back, I was like, "okay, there are changes you have to make." I deleted a lot of apps coming back from the trip. It was a really good experience for me. I think my priorities have changed a lot. I think I

learned so much about being out there and having such a bones' deep love of nature. I have changed my perspective of a lot of how I view my education, and how I view myself, and what I want to be in the future.

Natalia: I think it was really lovely to just have that whole entire time away from social media and away from any distractions or anyone else that you could be distracted by just genuinely sit and have a genuine conversation with these people.

Bianca: At first, I'm like, "Oh, they're gonna take my phone away." But then I was happy that they did take my phone away because you really start to think about how, what, what great impact and influence technology, you know, on today's society.

Giselle: I've become more aware when I use my phone.

Susana: So you know, the time when I had not had access to technology had been so long that I didn't really remember what it was like anymore, and it was a good experience. It also made me a lot more conscious of just how bad my habits were. I think my generation as a whole has cell phone addiction. I personally suffer from it; I know I do. And, me coming back from the trip, it's been a lot easier to cut down on habits. I deleted a lot of apps coming back from the trip like it was a really good experience for me; 100% , I have a habit of mixing both things.

Nora: [For me], the purpose of the trip was to help you get out of a world filled with technology and all that and open your eyes to all of the outdoors and to build a community with people you would have never ever met.

“Mentors, the People Guiding Us . . . Really Supported Us”

Although some participants referenced the nervousness they felt in advance of the trip, all had high praise for the program mentors and advisors: they made the Changemakers feel at ease.

Nora: I really love the adults that were with us because they really didn't act like supervisors; they just acted how when you're with your friend or a family member, and I felt that was great. It was more like you're just on a family trip.

Kristen: The teacher, she's a really nice person, and she helps us all. Like, she supports us a lot, and she's very understanding; I feel like she just creates a nice environment for us.

Bianca: [The teacher] keeps telling us to drink water; drink water and I need to use the bathroom, right? But now, I'm like, grateful that I did drink water. And I did listen to Sam and how much she cared for us and our health because now I look back, and well, I was never dehydrated, and I actually got to have a good time.

Natalia: I think I would call [out] the mentors, the people who are guiding us through this. They really supported us, and if you need any help, [they said to] just let us know, and I think it's great. I'm really thankful for them; they're amazing.

Jasmin: I was able to create bonds with my classmates and also teachers. We could obviously go up to her and ask: Can you help me with a college essay, and stuff like that. We all created our own bond with her.

Growth in Each Five C

The five Cs is a prominent PYD model structured around five positive, mutually reinforcing indicators of youth development: competence, confidence, connection, character, and caring. One aim of our research was to explore how, if at all, each of these indicators might have been evidenced or enhanced via students' participation in the Changemaker program. Students' reflections on their experiences evidenced numerous examples of their personal development related to each of the five Cs. Although these indicators of youth development tend to overlap, we represent examples from each category next.

Competence: “I’m More Capable”

Competence relates to one’s positive outlook on their own actions in any realm: academic, cognitive, social, and vocational (Phelps et al., 2009). We found ample evidence of students’ self-described growth in three main categories: social competence, physical competence, and environmental awareness. Participants’ social competence increased as they formed newfound relationships in a unique environment. Natalia spoke about this in detail:

I think a lot of the conversations we have are very much superficial just because they’re just easier to have. And it’s easier to just talk about what you did today instead of going deeper into how a person is. But I think throughout the trip, there weren’t any superficial things to talk about because we were all doing the same things every single day. So you’re really forced to dig deeper.

So, I think in terms of my relationships, when I came back from the trip, I really wanted to sit down and have those conversations with the people that I love the most and get to know them a lot deeper. Just because if I was able to do that with strangers, why couldn’t I do that with the people that I’ve known for years? I thought that was really nice.

Many noted growth in their physical competence; the acquisition of new skills, such as swimming and boat steering, contributed to their sense of empowerment.

Beatriz: When I was there, I didn’t know how to swim and I had to do it because the waves were just going in one direction. So it was really hard to learn how to swim but I feel now, I think I’m more capable of swimming now than I was before because I was scared [at first].

Kristen: Going on the trip made me feel much braver, like doing something new. It just helped make me feel much stronger. And I feel that now it has helped a lot.

Nora: I think what surprised me was when one of the guides asked, “Do you guys want to steer the boat?” and everybody was like, “Sure.” We did that, and it was a really cool building exercise for us because one girl took one row, and I took the other one, and we were just steering it. And it was really fun.

Some participants spoke of their increased environmental consciousness; they conveyed a deepened understanding of the critical role the environment plays in meeting our fundamental needs, such as the provision of essential resources like water. This heightened awareness led to a significant realization among students that their immersion in technology had inadvertently led them to take nature for granted

Bianca: In Open Roads, the river guides taught us about the river and how important water is. It’s kind of funny to say, oh yeah, we have water to drink, water to shower, and all that stuff, but water is so much more important. They taught us about the other states and how they depend on the Yampa River. And so, that was big.

Susana: Our issues with water have been more about pollution of water and the ecosystem that exists inside the water, rather than who’s getting how much water and how. So hearing our guides, especially Claude, talk about, you know, the impacts of having to partition off this water to different states and what a toll that takes on the ecosystem and on the wildlife was super impactful.

Participants’ newfound respect for the natural world served as a pivotal catalyst that influenced their subsequent community projects when they returned from the trip. Their increased competence from challenging the outdoors was closely aligned with an increased sense of self-confidence.

Confidence: “I Am More Confident Than Ever”

Confidence refers to one’s positive sense of self-worth and demonstration of self-efficacy (Phelps et al., 2009). This indicator often intersects with the others. For example, as presented previously in this report, being forced out of their comfort zones offered students the opportunity to become confident in new ways. In another example, as one’s competence increases, so does their confidence. A few students spoke of confidence directly.

Nora: I think I would describe it as having a very positive impact on who I am today because it boosted up some of my confidence just in general, because I was meeting new people that I probably wouldn’t have met if I hadn’t gone there.

Katalina: I am more confident than ever. Before, I was a bit nervous, but now I know asking for help is what you need to do. I have also changed my perspective. Before, I would stick to one. Now I have to look at more than one perspective.

Sofia: But now I have more confidence in myself to say what I’m feeling or I could lead some people if they’re having difficulties in something or pretty much, you know, they need help.

Jasmin: You know and feel, you know, you’re more confident to do things and try different things. But now, after the trip, I’m super thankful, and I guess I became more confident in myself, because like I said, I was open to more opportunities, and I was finally having the courage to take them.

Kristen: Going on the trip made me feel much braver, like doing something new. It just helped make me feel much stronger. And I feel like that now has helped a lot.

Kristen: Overall, I’ve been talking about stepping out of my comfort zone because that’s what most impacted me. Before, I just wouldn’t try new stuff, and now doing the trip, I

definitely feel much more confident in doing new stuff and just trying something completely new.

Participants' increased sense of competence-based confidence seemed to open them up to increased feelings of connection with one another. This is explored in the next section.

Connection: "It Was Nice to Build That Bond"

Connection is seen through constructive and supportive relationships with others in one's home, school, and community. Throughout their interviews, all participants referred to connections with nature and to one another. Again and again, they spoke of the special family-like closeness they developed with their trip-mates and mentors in such a unique environment. Students described their newfound relationships as open and honest.

Gianna: I thought the purpose was to make new connections and meet new people and try to be more aware of our surroundings. I made a new best friend from the trip; we still talk a lot.

Susana: When you're with people for an extended period of time, you start picking up their little mannerisms and their habits, and you're forming a relationship in an isolated context, which is really cool... I got to talk to people that I never really talked to, and I got to connect with people and become closer with people that I saw all the time and didn't have that much of a strong connection with before. Coming back from this trip and being on this trip completely changed that for me. I started being very honest with myself and being very honest with other people. I think it very much separated me from that fear that you have been judged.

Beatriz: It was nice to go with a lot of girls that were just like me to make new friends and to live in the wildlife.

Nora: It was really challenging [to] open myself up because...I kind of like to be by myself and do my own thing. So really going at other people's paces and learning to open myself up and just communicate with other people...was really great for me. I learned that just listening to people and also giving them feedback and just that space to communicate and be comfortable is really nice. I like it.

Jasmin: I was able to create bonds with my classmates and teachers.

Natalia: I thought it was just going to be like me alone by myself, not really interacting with many people and just being out in nature alone. But it was pleasantly not that. I think there were times where I was alone, but I never felt lonely.

The unique bonds experienced by participants was supported by their immersion in nature without the distraction of technology. This gave rise to the next of the five C's: caring.

Caring: "I Learned to Think of Others More Than Myself"

Caring refers to one's sense of concern for others: how they sympathize and empathize (Phelps et al., 2009). The closeness of the interpersonal connections forged during the trip aligned with a strong sense of caring among the Changemakers.

Nora: I had a lot of respect for everybody because I felt like everybody kind of came out of their own comfort zone. I learned [the importance of] just listening to people and also giving them feedback. That space to communicate and be comfortable was really nice. I liked it.

Kristen: We all definitely connected; I learned to care for almost everyone there. We just connected a lot, and we were with each other all those days, and we helped each other out. . . . It was nice to build that bond.

Beatriz: The connection everyone had, even the people that were from high school. They were super caring, I got to know a lot of them just for 2 weeks. I felt like I knew them for a long time, but it was a short time period.

Jasmin: I learned to think of others more than myself. If we were in a group, I was making sure everybody was comfortable and stuff like that.

Bianca: I feel I am caring and just being there for the person; also everyone was supportive.

Natalia: The friendships I formed have really become deeper and I really care for these people a lot. There wasn't any awkwardness or tension because we all understand each other in that we are all girls and care for one another.

The strong interpersonal connections formed during the trip gave rise to a deep sense of caring for one another. Caring, in turn, has the power to shape character by instilling qualities such as empathy, altruism, responsibility, emotional intelligence, resilience, and a commitment to personal growth.

Character: "I Am More of a Leader"

Character relates to one's sense of right and wrong and respect for rules and the rights of others (Bowers et al., 2010). In discussing how the trip changed them, several students described how it impacted their ways of being:

Susana: I started being very honest with myself and being very honest with other people . . . speaking about my experiences and about my life.

Katalina: Before, I was wild and carefree and would try different things. Now, I am a lot more mature.

Jasmin: There was a moment where we had to switch camp buddies...and I didn't really want to do that. But then I was like, "Let's actually try it." Obviously, there's a point behind, to be closer with other people. I feel like it made me want to follow rules way more.

Sofia: I am more of a leader.

Gianna: This trip helped me become more patient, especially under stressful situations.

Natalia: I think, throughout the trip, you really did have that time to think and be like, "Okay: do I want to stay in this stagnant place? Or do I want to evolve and grow?"

The students' reflections on their transformative trip reveal changes in their character. The trip had a profound impact on their ethical orientation, resilience, and leadership skills.

Contribution: "Helping to Better People"

R. M. Lerner (2006) asserts that the combination of the five Cs leads to the emergence of a sixth competence: contribution. Contribution may take many forms, ranging from contributing to or bettering oneself to contribute positively to one's family, local, or global community (J. V. Lerner et al., 2009). As affirmed throughout this report, students repeatedly pointed to ways they personally bettered themselves, ranging from their increased confidence and competence in numerous areas to their deepened relationships and sense of caring for one another to an enhanced sense of self-understanding and resolve to improve certain of their ways of being.

Despite describing herself as shy, Sofia spoke of this in terms of newfound leadership skills, "I think [my gain from the trip was] mostly enjoying nature more and I guess kind of being more of a leader to [help] to better people." Upon their return from their trip, the Changemakers were primed to consider how they might translate their newest ideas and strengths into some form of contribution to their community.

Making Meaning, Making a Difference: After-School Sessions

When students returned to school in the fall, they attended six after-school sessions led by the program advisors who had been with them on the trip. The sessions offered participants the opportunity to reflect on their experiences, cultivate their roles as leaders, and, through self-reflection, consider how they might leverage the gains from their summer trip toward practical contributions to their respective communities.

When reflecting on the fall component of the program, students highlighted the significance of maintaining and nurturing the connections established during the trip. These connections were especially appreciated because constraints on their busy schedules limit their opportunities for interaction during the regular school day. This emphasis on continued connection was a prominent theme in their responses:

Nora: I would describe the after-school meetings we go to as really fun because that's the only time I really get to see the other people from the program.

Kristen: We share with each other and just tell each other stuff. That's really nice because we learn more about what one person is doing, how they feel; it's just nice.

Sophia: It's very nice to be back with the same people because we all experienced the same thing since we went on the trip. We know stuff that other people don't because we actually lived through it.

Because the interviews occurred early in the school year, students had not yet had the full benefit of the after-school sessions; they were in the initial stages of this phase of the program.

Nonetheless, some spoke of the after-school program's purpose with understanding, favorability, and appreciation:

Giselle: I think it's a good opportunity to try to instill what the main goals of the actual trip are. It's getting us to try to foster some change in the community or to start becoming more aware of issues we see around us and the part we could probably have in changing them.

Jasmin: It's basically about my community and how we want to be involved in a certain community we choose and how it would affect them and affect us. It's [the program is] good; I like it very much because we get to hear about each other's community.

As a culminating project, participants each were to develop a Declaration of Intent to reflect how they intend positively impact their community. We recommend a follow-up study to explore how each these unfold.

Deliberate Learning: "Every Piece of Learning Was Fantastically Chosen"

Students' responses highlighted the importance of the opportunities the program offered for self-reflection; it played a pivotal role in empowering them to assume leadership positions within their communities. Their reflections were seen as instrumental in guiding their proactive involvement and contributions:

Kristen: I mostly did journaling. I did take some pictures but I feel like journaling was just better for me. I liked writing down what I was feeling, what I was seeing – just everything. It really helped a lot.

Sofia: There's going to be an exhibit of us choosing a photo from what they took of us and we technically tell a story behind the picture of what it shows, what we did, and then, from the activity we're doing, how the community we're picking impacts us or changes us in any way.

Briana: Each one gets to pick where they feel most in the community, whether that's a sport's team, an after-school club, in their own home with their family. For me, it's the church because we have a youth group. I would like for my community to be more open and go out more in nature, whether that's hiking or going on a walk in the afternoon.

Natalia: In terms of our community, I think it's nice to share the experiences that we have learned with them and to share with people who I may have not talked to. I really wanted to hone in on [all being Latina women who were chosen for this trip and leaders] because a large portion of the community is our Latinos and Hispanics. So, I wanted to find a way to kind of integrate them into the school in a broader sense and give them the same opportunities that I've been fortunate enough to receive.

Programs as impactful as the Changemaker initiative are not the result of chance. The students' reflections on their program experience highlight the transformative power of self-reflection and its role in cultivating leadership qualities.

Participants' Recommendations

Participants were invited to offer suggestions for shaping the design of the program going forward. The sole suggested change referred to "the bathroom situation" as students referred to it. Bianca summed it up best, and said, "All the girls including myself are like this, but I think they called it the baño (bathroom) because it's not something that we're used to, you know. But when we're out there, we have no other choice." Bathrooms aside, most students asserted the program design and format should remain as they are. Students were especially pleased with the opportunities to be immersed in nature and unplugged with ample time for self-reflection and thoughtful conversations.

“Give Them the Same Opportunities I’ve Been Fortunate Enough to Receive”

When asked about the selection process going forward, participants had much to say. All were pleased that the focus of the trip was exclusively Latina students because it promoted a level of comfort and community:

Natalia: I think the biggest thing of our trip was that we’re all Latina women who are being chosen for this trip and the leaders, too. That was cool.

Kristen: [As Latinas] we’re just similar in many ways, and we share like different parts of our lives. And we just connect much more because we’re similar in that we’re Latinos and by girls just feel more comfortable with one another. Because we share that. I feel that helps us bond more in a way.

Susana: [I agreed with] the purpose of the trip [which] was to help young Latina women become more into their identity. I think the purpose of it was really leadership, but what ultimately ended up happening was you put these young Latin women in a space with two strong Latin advisors. And you get these really beautiful conversations about family and expectations and the roles because everyone in that space is able to relate. And so, because you have 12 Latin American girls in a space, there are some great conversations happening there. If you have heterogeneous groups, perhaps that’s not something that will result.

Beatriz: I hope they choose more Latina women like me to go on this trip as well as [to have] other amazing experiences.

Giselle: Having the Latinx community was very powerful.

Many participants expressed the value of being on an all-Latina trip, perhaps with other opportunities offered to boys:

Nora: I feel it should be boys and girls so they can have like an equal experience; if you do a girls' trip one year and then a girls and boys trip, you could kind of mix it up and have different people go through the experience and everything.

Beatriz: I hope they choose more Latina women like me to go on this trip as well.

Kristen: Honestly, I feel like everyone being Latinos and girls... that just makes them much more comfortable. I feel like we discussed that on the trip that created a really comfortable environment. And I feel like you should kind of stay like that. [It should be] just all girls, because it was really comfortable to be with them. And we all like that.

That's great.

Natalia: I thought it was really nice and sweet to just have a baseline with...all females. We go through the same things, and we are oppressed in the same way, some more than others. We just kind of understand each other at the ground level and can only work up from there. It was really lovely to just have a group of girls to be around the whole time.

Most Changemakers asserted the selection process should be more inclusive. Although grades were not part of the nomination criteria, several participants noted that criteria should extend beyond academic grades; they emphasized that leadership potential is not reflected solely through grades:

Nora: Try to reach different schools and do more programs; I think that [would be] great.

Kristen: I feel the program is just too hidden. If they got more attention, it would be better.

Katalina: There were a lot of girls who deserved to go even if they were not chosen.

Bianca: I feel everyone should be selected to go, no matter what. Let's say someone was a troubled kid or something like that; that troubled kid should still have a chance because it could change them as a person. Especially being open to those experiences and interacting with people because you don't know what someone is going through. That trip can be a life-changing experience for them.

Natalia: I think it should be based on your character rather than whether you get straight A's or whether you actively make an effort, because I don't think everyone is really given the same opportunity to really excel in school academically. And I think people who don't really get the chance to leave their town often would really appreciate that, and their world has a different outlook on their life and how they want to proceed moving forward. Underrepresented groups should be the main focus.

Participants overwhelmingly endorsed the program as it had been offered and expressed gratitude for its thoughtful design. They specifically commended the inclusion of Latina women in the program, highlighting this aspect as particularly favorable.

Closing Thoughts

I am super thankful for the opportunity I was given. I loved it so much. It's gonna be one of those moments: a core memory.

—Jasmin

A fundamental intent of the Changemaker program was to offer this extraordinary experience solely to a cohort of high school women who identified as Latina. The premise was that this program would provide a safe and affirming environment where participants could comfortably flourish. Our findings confirmed this goal was well placed, and it was met. The

exclusive inclusion of Latinas set the stage for the remarkable personal growth that resulted from program participation. Notably, student participants received academic credit for participating in the Changemaker program. This program model offered an innovative example of how the best student learning can occur outside traditional classroom walls.

Our study found ample evidence in support of Weinstein et al.'s (2009) assertion that, in addition to the direct, extraordinary benefits of being immersed in the outdoors, being in nature results in an improved sense of emotional well-being and social relationships and a fuller sense of life purpose. Growth in each of the five Cs—mutually reinforcing indicators of youth development—was repeatedly and convincingly reflected in the stories of the 10 Ossining Changemakers who participated in the study.

This growth was facilitated by Open Roads' purposeful approach to every aspect of the river trip; they offered the Changemakers time for self-reflection and facilitated thoughtful conversations on the meaning of community and one's personal responsibility to contribute. The in-school follow-up sessions, led by capable, trusted advisors who had shared in the summer trip, were vital to solidifying students' thinking and deepening their thoughts on how they might answer their responsibility as community leaders and contributors to the greater good. Our study offered evidence in support R. M. Lerner's (2006) assertion that the combination of the five Cs leads to the emergence of a sixth competence: contribution. We anticipate evidence of further growth in this indicator as the Changemakers put their Declarations of Intent into action. A follow-up study is highly recommended.

We close with one final, important point: The success of such an intricately designed and ambitious program rests upon the commitment and talents of those who plan and deliver such programs. Repeatedly, participants referred to the thoughtful intent of every detail of the

program design. Most of all, as is true in education, the mentors and advisors who were side-by-side with students on the trip and then back at school made all the difference to participants, and to the striking, heartwarming success of this uniquely innovative program. We commend them for blazing this unique and promising trail.

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