

LEADERS OF TOMORROW

IMMIGRANT & REFUGEE YOUTH

**A GUIDEBOOK ON
LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT**

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Introduction

Leaders of Tomorrow is a leadership program developed by the Institute for Educational Leadership (IEL) with a curriculum co-created by immigrant and refugee youth. The goal of Leaders of Tomorrow is to support and mobilize immigrant and refugee youth through opportunities to expand their knowledge, strengthen their skills, access tools and resources, and improve their own circumstances and those of all children, youth, adults, and families in their communities. As part of the preparation and initial co-design process, IEL worked with four potential partner organizations (Liberty's Promise; the Clarkston Community Center; the United Farm Workers Foundation; and Lutheran Family Services, home of the Colorado Immigrant Rights Coalition) in several localities (Denver, CO; DC, Maryland, and Virginia; Clarkston, GA; and Bakersfield, CA).

IEL is a national expert in community-driven leadership development in the intersecting areas of education, health, and employment. The common thread in our work is supporting community and institutional leaders as they transform systems around racial equity, disability inclusion, and economic equity goals. Over our 57 years of work, we have developed approaches, tools, and practices that reflect the needs of leaders no matter where they sit in communities. Our authentic relationships with leaders at all levels provide the foundation for deeper impact as we address systemic challenges in the 400 plus communities that trust us as partners. This is especially critical during this unprecedented time in history as communities grapple with Covid-19, police brutality and institutional racism. Because every context is different, IEL works closely with local partners to co-create capacity building and learning experiences that support leaders at every level — including district leaders, school leaders, and educators from early childhood through to the university level, as well as youth, parent, and community-based leaders. Building on the lessons learned in leadership development and support, IEL developed Leaders of Tomorrow, in partnership with local youth-serving organizations, to support cohorts of immigrant and refugee youth. While the project was originally envisioned as an in-person experience managed by local partners, we shifted to a virtual experience facilitated by IEL staff due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The pandemic forced us to imagine new ways to reengage youth, build on our learning, and pivot in real time, while designing a process replicable for other immigrant and refugee communities across the country.

Importance of Youth Leadership

Youth development and leadership are well developed areas of study and research. There are established competencies, evidence-based standards of practice for youth-serving professionals, and youth development measurement and evaluation toolkits. In fact, the United Nations World Youth Report highlights the important role of youth development and leadership as part of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

Because much of IEL's work is systemic and/or community-wide — engaging leaders at all levels with a variety of entry points — we apply a broader capacity- and community-building lens with an eye toward transforming and strengthening ecosystems. In that sense, youth development and leadership are integral stages of a youth engagement continuum that includes varying degrees of engagement —intervention, development, collective empowerment, and systemic change.

Youth development and leadership opportunities enable young people to develop skills and competencies to build their identities and navigate the world around them. Youth development consists of the processes that prepare young people to “meet



the challenges of adolescence and adulthood through a coordinated, progressive series of activities and experiences which help them gain skills and competencies.”



Youth leadership is a component of youth development by which youth develop:

1. The ability to guide or direct others on a course of action, influence their opinion and behavior, and show the way by going in advance.
2. The ability to analyze one's own strengths and weakness and set academic, vocational, and personal goals with the drive to accomplish them.

All youth regardless of race, ethnicity, or socio-economic status benefit from thoughtful, intentional youth development and leadership opportunities. Leaders of Tomorrow's design and implementation incorporated IEL's two decades of work codifying the competencies all youth require. These are based on a set of principles that guide youth transition policies and practice for all young people, including those with disabilities. These principles are:

- High expectations for all youth, including youth with disabilities;
- Equality of opportunity for everyone, including nondiscrimination, individualization, inclusion, and integration;
- Full participation through self-determination, informed choice, and participation in decision-making;
- Independent living, including skills development and long-term supports and services;
- Competitive employment and economic self-sufficiency, which may include supports;
- Individualized, person-driven, and culturally and linguistically appropriate transition planning;
- Universal design of environments, programs, and services to enable all individuals to access and participate in opportunities.
- These principles facilitate smoother transitions for youth in areas that include school-based preparatory experience; career preparation and work-based learning; connecting activities; and youth development and leadership.

Immigrant and Refugee Youth

Over the last 25 years, the immigrant or foreign-born resident population of the U.S. has grown considerably, as has the number and share of the U.S. labor force that is foreign-born. Immigrants play a critical role in fueling labor force growth, which is a key driver of economic growth in the U.S. In fact, without immigrant workers, there would be no significant growth in the overall U.S. labor force. While their contributions to our economy are increasingly important, immigrant workers remain marginalized and under-resourced. Due to linguistic barriers, credential recognition obstacles, and institutional and policy credentialing restrictions and practices, a sizable number of immigrants are underemployed or mal-employed and fail to command wages that align

with the assets and training they bring with them from their native countries. Immigrants from Mexico and Central America tend to be employed in a narrow range of occupations with relatively low or minimal education, training, and experience requirements, while immigrant workers from the rest of the world tend to be employed in a broader range of occupations.

These opportunity and achievement gaps persist among children and youth.

Immigrant and refugee communities are not given the opportunities to engage politically and open more doors for their communities.

Current immigration policies and their enforcement mechanisms — namely deportations and ICE raids — have increased fear and trauma.



Yet only naturalized citizens are permitted to vote, disenfranchising tens of millions of immigrant and refugee voices. Structures and processes for civic and community engagement are also lacking — and youth are even less represented — excluding these communities from decision-making that directly impacts them. Where efforts are made, systems often lack capacity in providing linguistic, logistical, legal, and/or culturally responsive supports to make engagement effective.

Immigrant and refugee youth between the ages of 13 and 19 remain an important and growing part of society — they have a vital role in the future of the United States. These youth face unique challenges and opportunities, and their successes today will affect future generations. Given the economic and cultural context, there is a need to improve engagement and integration, and to leverage the ideas and energy of emerging youth leaders for more opportunities and better outcomes for our immigrant and refugee communities. Leaders of Tomorrow seeks to increase the participation of immigrant and refugee youth in decision-making processes and structures in their communities. Participating in and influencing the social, cultural, economic, and political life in their cities and towns is the core of Leaders of Tomorrow.



Key Areas for Youth Leadership Programs

In IEL’s brief “Digging Deeper: The Five Areas of Youth Development/Leadership”^{vi} we identify key areas for youth leadership development initiatives based on a framework developed by the Forum for Youth Investment: “Learning, Connecting, Thriving, Working, and Leading.”^{vii} For the purposes of Leaders for Tomorrow, IEL added a sixth element: Innovating. All youth leadership programs should have activities built around these elements to ensure that participating youth develop the capacity to create positive change for themselves and their community.

Learning is an area of development characterized by applied attitudes, skills, and behaviors.

In the U.S. and around the world, disparities in access to quality learning opportunities and education are prevalent. Equity, diversity, and inclusion are core principles that drive IEL's youth work. To reduce inequities and disparities in learning and education, we equip leaders and learners with skills relevant to our ever-changing world, and use modern technologies and tools anchored in Universal Design for Learning (UDL)^{viii} principles and Design Thinking. IEL tailors solutions for individuals, organizations, and communities to meet the needs of different learning styles, inspire innovation, increase access, and build sustainability.



Thriving refers to the skills, behaviors, and attitudes required to optimize the relationship between the different dimensions of wellness

Increasingly, key areas of youth leadership and development are being re-imagined through the lens of belonging. As explored in the next chapter, it is incumbent on adults, whether they be parents, educators, practitioners in youth-serving organizations, etc., to intentionally create and sustain environments where youth feel supported, seen, respected and heard, just a few of the many words used to define a sense of belonging. This is often easier said than done as schools, districts, and other settings where youth can be found and rely on for stability struggle to rebound in the aftermath of the pandemic and an increasingly divisive and polarized climate.

The Importance of Belonging for Immigrant and Refugee Youth

Overview and Summary

A sense of belonging for any young person is core to the human experience— it encompasses how much a student feels accepted, respected, and included at school and in other contexts. For youth, adolescence is a time of exploration and one where they naturally wrestle with questions of belonging and sense of self as they transition to emerging adulthood. For immigrant and refugee youth, adolescence might also bring with it the experience of leaving their home country and learning a new language and culture. In today's world there are also new and unique stressors that cannot be ignored which are caused by heightened political discourse around immigration. Furthermore, the conversation surrounding belonging is urgently needed given the detrimental impact of COVID19 on the mental health and wellbeing of youth. In order to answer some of most pressing questions for how to best serve youth today, IEL staff went to the field in Fall of 2022 to gather information via surveys and focus group conversations with both youth-serving organizations in the IEL network and immigrant and refugee youth to answer the following key questions:

1. How do you define a sense of belonging?
2. What barriers and challenges exist in creating the conditions necessary for facilitating a sense of belonging for immigrant and refugee youth?
3. How can we promote belonging in schools and other settings that serve youth?

What we learned from speaking to youth and hearing from adults who serve them is that belonging— that sense of connection, comfort, acceptance, agency and safety— is important for and sought out by immigrant and refugee students. **Youth describe the dynamic nature of belonging— how it fluctuates in different contexts, at different times, with varying social dynamics and social structures. And also how it makes a difference to them to feel genuine connection.** We also hear the aspirations of adults who serve immigrant and refugee youth when they describe belonging as the moment when students have agency, and adults in positions of power turn to youth to hear from them on what matters most. The implications of this information gathering are both aspirational and tactical. In what follows, we detail key takeaways and include practical applications for youth-serving partners to embed and boost a sense of belonging in spaces for immigrant and refugee youth.

Key Takeaways

First, the urgency around discussing why a sense of belonging matters cannot be underscored enough. **A positive sense of belonging is shown in the literature to impact key life outcomes such as educational attainment and mental health.** Researchers have well documented that a sense of belonging is associated with positive education outcomes including higher grades, higher retention rates, increased academic motivation; as well as, positive mental and physical markers including less stress. In a recent study with youth, the biggest obstacle to learning was credited to feeling depressed, stressed, or anxious. Environments where youth feel welcome, supported, and like they belong can make a difference in supporting emotional wellness.

Further, youth and adults we heard from shared just how important a sense of belonging mattered and how policies, structures and practices play a role in instilling that feeling of belonging. In fact, educators, practitioners, and other adults play a key and active role in incorporating or excluding belonging for immigrant and refugee youth. Young people shared experiences they had in schools and other settings where they felt a sense of belonging in large part due to a caring, thoughtful adult, and vice versa. Some of the most heartbreaking stories came from students who felt turned away by adults in their lives.

But, an individual does not operate in a vacuum and instead needs to work within – or in some cases against– systems that surround them. **This information gathering found that proactive, inclusive classroom, school, and system-level policies can play profound roles in promoting and boosting a sense of belonging.** The anecdotes that follow will move and energize you to do the work and at other times leave you haunted. What we hope will be clear is that to do the work at an individual and systems level requires not only listening to youth but centering their voice and making changes based on what they are saying. It also importantly requires building the capacity of adults responsible for creating and maintaining environments that provide a sense of belonging. This chapter begins by diving into key insights into how immigrant and refugee youth today experience and define a sense of belonging. Afterwards, it addresses some of the barriers and challenges that prevent and hinder practitioners and network partners from actualizing a student’s sense of belonging. The chapter ends with recommendations moving forward.

Background on Research and Methodology

The Leaders of Tomorrow (LoT) program is anchored in a theory of change that builds on youth development and leadership opportunities to propel democratic change by empowering and supporting young people to advocate and make changes in their own communities and systems. The following discussion on belonging underscores key components of the LoT program design and implementation steps detailed throughout this toolkit. A sense of belonging builds on the six key areas for youth development described in the previous section (pages 8- 9). When youth feel they belong thanks to intentional, co-created, culturally-responsive learning and working settings, they are better equipped to thrive and lead in school, work, and life.

In the Fall of 2022, IEL staff administered a national survey with partner organizations and held five focus groups with 20 youth in order to learn how a sense of belonging was being defined, experienced, and realized by immigrant and refugee youth. Survey respondents represented 143 network partners and immigrant and refugee serving organizations across 30 states and the District of Columbia (DC). Immigrant and refugee youth that participated in the focus groups spanned communities in Arkansas, North Carolina, California, Dekalb County, GA, and Denver, CO and were all high school students. One focus group included Spanish-speaking students and was facilitated by a synchronous interpreter.

Key Takeaways

Key Question 1: How do you define a sense of belonging?

The findings from the survey and the focus groups confirmed how interwoven ‘belonging’ was for students in actualizing their dreams, accessing supports, and dreaming big. Immigrant and refugee youth defined belonging as feeling a sense of **connection, community, and comfort and**

safety.

Connection

Some youth defined belonging when you no longer feel alone, but instead feel a part of a group and are surrounded by connections—connections to people, places, or cultural assets such as food and language. Belonging is the feeling when you no longer feel like “an oddball”.

Naturally, many students felt they belonged when they were in environments that felt like home with their friends and family because it is where, as one young person stated, **they can be themselves and share their ideas**. They felt that they could show up as their authentic self when they were in the company of people with similar life experiences or identities. When students were connected to peers or adults with shared cultural backgrounds or language spoken, students felt more trusting and comfortable opening up about their needs and wants. At the same time, students noted that they felt connected to students from other different cultures because they learned from them. “Being around people who are from different cultures helps me learn about their different struggles, but also even though we're from different cultures, we have similar struggles.”

“Students and teachers make me feel comfortable because there are some classes that may be hard but the **way the teacher treats you is great**. If the teacher can help me out, everything will be okay. With students, when you're having conversation and helping each other, it feels good.” - *Student from FG 2*

Community

A sense of belonging was also deeply woven into **being a part of a trusted community**. One student shared that after arriving in the US, they were welcomed by volunteers who helped connect them with housing, food, and additional resources and supported them because they were refugees. Students felt they belonged from the onset of the relationship because they did not need to hide who they were but instead were welcomed precisely for who they were. “To be a refugee is [a] different [experience] from other people. But there are **kind hearts welcoming us** and asking how they can do more for others.” This was especially important when students shared moments when they felt like they belonged in school settings. The best thing to help students feel welcome was when teachers appreciated them for who they were and respected them for being different.

Comfort and Safety

The concept of feeling comfortable in your own skin and your environment came up repeatedly in the focus groups when discussing a sense of belonging. **Finding comfort was related to a sense of belonging in that it reinforces the feeling of being welcomed, included, and celebrated**. One student commented that, “it’s not people in specific scenarios. It’s people that I feel comfortable with and people that I don’t have to fake something that I am now. That made a difference in helping me feel like I belonged.” Environments filled with safety and belonging go hand in hand. Students feel a sense of belonging in places that make them feel physically and emotionally safe and where they can express themselves freely. **Feeling safe is a basic human need and for immigrant and refugee youth this point needs to be underscored**. Inherent within the concept of safety is acceptance. If one is accepted in a community, one is more likely to feel like one has social protection and safety.

How did this compare to network partners?

Almost all network partners had similar interpretations of the sense of belonging as youth. In order to feel a sense of belonging, survey respondents shared that youth need to feel comfortable at schools or in their communities, be themselves, be accepted, have sufficient support from caring adults, and relate to others. Where they differed in their definition was with respect to agency. Adults shared that immigrant and refugee youth need to be included in order to have a sense of belonging. Several network partners viewed belonging for students as the feeling and realization that students are valued by their community, have a voice and choice in decisions that impact them, and are actively being invited to join activities, conversations, and events. For network partners, this sense of ownership and advocacy were critical components of belonging.

“Advocacy is a very significant piece in building a sense of belonging for immigrant and refugee youth because it provides the opportunity for them to take action for what they believe in. Advocacy helps youth feel like they are a part of something meaningful. For immigrant and refugee youth, it is also an important piece in feeling like you're contributing and that you're actually a part of the community, rather than being an 'other' who isn't truly a member of the community.”

Belonging, as mentioned previously, is something some youth feel they experience only **once they are accepted and welcomed into their community but also a feeling that can go away**. While we may not feel it until it is gone, belonging as a concept and a goal is critical when considering how to best meet the needs of immigrant and refugee youth today.

“**Sometimes** I feel like I belong, and **sometimes** I feel like I don't. I think that's because I feel like **I've lived in different worlds**. Sometimes I compare myself to how people react to me. Sometimes I think I am so different here, I don't belong here. And sometimes I think, “Yes this is home.” We all belong here. It depends on **HOW** the day goes.” - *Student from FG 2*

Individuals responsible for creating welcoming cultures need to be intentional and understand the nuance involved in reinforcing and supporting this sense of belonging. One student shared the conundrum in feeling like they didn't belong in both ways – “ I don't fully belong in Mexico but I don't fully belong here either. I don't have the same experience my family back home has and I didn't go through the same thing they went through.” Immigrant and refugee youth straddle communities, cultures, and generations with their unique lived experiences. One student noted that she had things there she no longer has here and things that she doesn't have there.

Why is this important? Students who do not feel a sense of belonging may struggle to devote their full cognitive abilities to tasks and experience issues with emotional and mental wellbeing. As Associate Professor Deleon Gray of NC State contends, “these feelings could manifest in frequent visits to the nurse's office or even truancy, **as students look for a way to avoid environments where they feel as though they don't belong.** ”

In all focus groups we heard stories about ways and moments youth felt like they did not

belong. First, immigrant and refugee students spoke about their peers judging them and “thinking that because [we are] African, we can’t do anything... and because we are different and we are black and wear a headscarf, they think they can’t do anything for people like us.” Students went on further to describe how some of their peers are not interested in learning more about them and their struggles or stories and how peers being judgmental towards them and others made them feel uncomfortable. “If you don’t know someone, you don’t know what they’re going through.”

The second reason students felt unwelcome was because of how they were treated by teachers and other professionals and this impacted how far they felt they could achieve academically. “They made it feel impossible for me instead of thinking I could do it.” This same student shared that it made him feel like giving up when what he wanted was to have someone believing in him—“no matter how far behind we are, I have high expectations and want to have confidence.” More worrisome, several youth shared how clear it became to them that there was favoritism when certain students never got in trouble if they said racist things or were unkind to other students. In these cases, youth felt that those teachers did not want to connect with them and were uninterested in getting to know their story. And finally, language was the most common barrier and impediment for students in feeling a connection and like they had a place in their new environment.

“We act so differently at school. We like to talk in our language and people look at us while we’re talking and that makes us feel uncomfortable when other people don’t understand. It’s like making blame and not knowing how they’re feeling. They’re looking at us like what is going on here. That is uncomfortable.” - *Student from FG 2*

Feeling like one belongs is so critical for youth and adults precisely because it is the result of intentional, proactive policies and structures and practices that enable future success in life, school, and beyond. **Belonging is an important outcome of inclusion efforts and actions.**

Example of How One School

Promoted a Sense of Belonging

“[The school] gave me a student that took me all over the place and who was bilingual in English and Spanish and who helped me with the entire thing. I am very thankful to her and now I try to do the same thing with new students that arrive. I try to escort them all over the school and guide them and tell them what's going on and how it's done. It's great that the school [told] us at the beginning [of the school year] which teachers speak Spanish and [also] had someone that [would] take us all around the school so that way we knew what to do and where to go.”

Supporting immigrant and refugee youth in navigating the education system is one impactful way that adults and schools can work together to boost a sense of belonging. In the quote above, we see how a student was given resources to adjust and learn how the school works, where they could get more help from a teacher who spoke their home language, and connected them to a peer.

The network survey also asked about activities to create and sustain a sense of belonging for immigrant and refugee youth. In general, there are three categories of activities, including staff professional development, activities to support immigrant and refugee youth, and community activities. The goals of these activities are to increase staff capacity to serve the immigrant and refugee youth and families, to directly provide needed services to youth and their families, and to collaborate with network partners to create a safe and sound place for all.

Key Question 2: What barriers and challenges exist in creating the conditions necessary for facilitating a sense of belonging for immigrant and refugee youth?

The survey respondents addressed the challenges they face in supporting and facilitating a sense of belonging. The most frequently mentioned challenges are communication barriers, lack of resources, and lack of cultural sensitivity. To create a sense of belonging, one needs to understand students' needs and culture via communication. When communicating with immigration and refugee youth and families, people always encounter language and cultural barriers. The COVID-19 Pandemic created extra challenges to communication as people always find that in-person collaboration is better than virtual communication. In addition to communication barriers, some mentioned not having sufficient funding and time to conduct activities that create a sense of belonging. Qualified staff, especially bilingual staff, are always needed to efficiently communicate with immigrant and refugee families and youth, to create a trusting relationship, and to provide the services they need immediately. Moreover, people who work directly with immigrant and refugee families are not included in the decision-making group, which might lead to underfunded or under-staffing situations as well.

All of these barriers are magnified in the current political climate. Recent national headlines demonstrate the ways in which immigrants and refugees continue to be dehumanized and marginalized. Migrants have been dropped off in freezing weather in front of the White House to make political statements. There are widespread cultural wars across the country where some are fighting to ban books, censor conversations about race and equity, and demonize LGBTQIA + people. Not to mention the uncertainties associated with the COVID19 pandemic and the emotional and economic uncertainty it brought with it. All of these factors contribute to a tense and fragile moment in time where we need to do more for our youth. There was a resounding call from network partners in the survey for more training on empathy, cultural proficiency, and self-awareness towards others at this moment. "Some have forgotten empathy, fairness, and why we chose to be in the education field."

Recommendations for Professionals Serving Immigrant and Refugee Youth

Key Question 3: How can we promote belonging in schools and other settings that serve youth? While there is no one-size fits all approach to solving the various impediments that currently exist for youth, there are key principles that can help promote belonging in schools.

- Principle 1: Center Immigrant and Refugee Youth Voice

When making any changes or proposals that impact immigrant and refugee youth, make sure you are engaging them in the process and including their perspective in the final outcome. To do this intentionally requires language access and space that is appropriate for youth. It also requires building the cultural competence of staff who work with youth and having an

environment that is conducive to authentic engagement.

- Principle 2: Engage Immigrant and Refugee Youth and Their Families in Intentional and Culturally Appropriate Ways

Be explicit in engaging and including families of immigrant and refugee youth. Families are very close-knit and the cultural and linguistic abilities and assets of family units should be welcomed and celebrated. For immigrant and refugee youth, their families mean everything to them and serve as the motivators for doing well in school and working hard. They view it as their responsibility not to let their families down after the sacrifices they made to bring them to the states.

- Principle 3: Consider Intersectionality When Working with Immigrant and Refugee Youth

The intersectionality of identities for immigrant and refugee youth also impacts how they experience and relate to a sense of belonging. Intersectionality refers to the various identities that an individual can have and how those differences impact the way they view themselves, their surroundings, and also how they are received and welcomed. For example an African-born immigrant who identifies as LGBTQIA+ has a different life experience than a youth that was born in the United States but is a part of an African family. A Black Refugee Muslim Student with a disability faces different needs compared to a Hispanic Native American. There are layers in the various identities that youth own and practitioners becoming aware of this is critical.

Together with these principles, we include the following recommendations at a systems, process, and individual level that we hope you will consider in establishing systems that support immigrant and refugee youth

Recommendation for Policies that establish systems for promoting belonging include:

- Explicit hiring and retention policies that increase representation in the classroom and in schools.
- Cultural sensitivity needs to be prioritized and supported through professional development and school-level policymaking
- Budgeting and planning for year-round interpretation services for students and families and correspondence via various mediums (phone, email, letters, and in person)
- Create policies that ensure there is youth-engagement in decision making process

Recommendation for Structures that foster safety and belonging include:

- Mentorship and buddy programs for new students based on shared language or culture
- Language access for all students and their families
- Communication mechanisms and learning opportunities for students and their families around important issues such as work opportunities, higher education financing, and community resources.

Recommendation for Practices that build caring and welcoming learning communities include:

- Intentionally building connections between classroom and community
- Having high expectations for all students
- Building trust and respectful bi-directional relationships with communities
- Having an asset-based framework for working with immigrant and refugee students
- Establishing a culture in the classroom of co-creation and intentional engagement

In sum, there is so much possibility in adhering to the call to action at this moment. We heard from youth that belonging is a sense of connection, community, safety and comfort and that youth benefit from proactive, holistic, culturally- responsive programming where they have agency in its creation. We also heard from network partners that belonging to youth is when they are a part of something larger than themselves, where they feel valued, and have a voice and choice in decisions. The work today is to build the capacity of adults responsible for creating and maintaining environments that provide a sense of belonging for youth.

A heartfelt thank you to each anonymous youth voice represented here.

ⁱ For ease of reading, we synthesize the questions asked in the online survey and in the focus groups. For any questions, please contact the authors.

ⁱⁱ Walton, G. M., & Cohen, G. L. (2011). A brief social-belonging intervention improves academic and health outcomes of minority students. *Science*, 331(6023), 1447–1451 and Laura D. Pittman & Micah Ioffe (2016) School Belonging, Ethnic Identity, and Psychological Adjustment Among Ethnic Minority College Students, *The Journal of Experimental Education*, 84:2, 289-306

ⁱⁱⁱ Youth Truth. (2022). Insights from the Student Experience, Part 1: Emotional and Mental Health.

^{iv} Bowen, J. (2021, October 21). Why Is It Important For Students to Feel a Sense of Belonging at School? ‘Students Choose to be in Environments That Make Them Feel a Sense of Fit,’ Says Associate Professor DeLeon Gray”. NC State College of Education News.

Leaders of Tomorrow Implementation Steps

IEL utilized four implementation steps in developing Leaders of Tomorrow that we recommend thinking through and planning for before launching your initiative:

- 
- Participatory Curriculum Development
 - Partner Selection and Youth Recruitment
 - Data Collection and Evaluation
 - Anticipate Challenges and Embrace Opportunities

Each implementation step is detailed below.

STEP 1: Participatory Curriculum Development

All components use a participatory approach to education and curriculum based on experiential learning, problem-posing, and other approaches to popular education. This approach creates opportunities for participants to be actively involved in decision-making and in shaping what they learn, how, and why.

What is Participatory Curriculum Development?

Participatory Curriculum Development (PCD) is based on centering the needs and expertise of partners, participants, and subject matter experts. PCD approaches curriculum development by establishing a process that requires the participation of all main participants and partners throughout the creation, evaluation, and development of a curriculum.

Why Participatory Curriculum Development?

In order to create a course that is addressing the needs of the target audience, it was important for IEL to directly engage with its audience in co-design workshops and brainstorming sessions to identify and verify the purpose, reasons, needs, and objectives of the course as well as the evaluation process. “Rather than belonging to a small select group of experts, PCD involves a wide range of stakeholders in a meaningful way, drawing upon their experience and insights in a structured approach to curriculum planning, implementation, and evaluation.

What Facilitation Approach?

“Without a voice, you do not have power. If you are oppressed, you do not have a voice. I had forgotten how powerful education is when it works... People only feel powerful when they are able to be partners in the process and are able to see change. This is a participatory process.”^{xii}

IEL made sure to hear, elevate, authentically engage, and value the voices of youth leaders during four regional ideation and co-design workshops at local immigrant- and refugee-serving organizations. Facilitated by IEL, in collaboration with adult allies from potential partner organizations, each of the regional sessions included eight hours of design work where youth explored program purpose and goals, objectives and outcomes, content and design, and delivery options. The sessions also identified the required range of knowledge, skills, and attitudes. Youth across the board had a similar understanding of leadership and their desired areas for growth. They confirmed the need for this kind of support and facilitated learning as an important part of their development journey. Design sessions were held in Washington D.C.; Bakersfield, CA; Clarkston, GA; and Denver, CO.

Key Design Session Topics and Feedback

Each of the regional ideation and co-design sessions generated a great deal of feedback based on a range of prompts, for example: 'How do you define leadership?' or 'What skills are important for leaders to have?' Responses to the prompts are summarized below. When you host a ideation session in your community, these prompts may generate different responses and/or you may use different prompts more relevant to your local context.

Defining Leadership



- Leading
- Motivates and encourages
- Inspires others
- Protects/defends others
- People that others look up to/respect
- Helps/supports/cares for others
- Stands up for what they believe in
- Selflessness

Feedback from the ideation and co-design sessions (summarized below) helped inform key program components, finalize the curriculum's four units, and refine learning objectives for the overall program.

Desired Skill-sets

- Communication
- Listening
- Conflict resolution
- Taking initiative
- Networking
- Confidence
- Adaptability
- Respect
- Public speaking
- Motivated
- Passionate
- Language
- Cultural competency
- Patience
- Marketing
- Identifying and solving problems
- Standing up for oneself
- Advocacy
- Responsibility
- Bravery
- Helping others

Program Features

- Field trips
- Cultural food
- Mentors from different cultures
- Community service hours
- Transportation
- Games
- No cost participation
- Stipends
- Team bonding
- Guest speakers
- Interactive
- Flexible schedule
- Knowledge about
- Scholarships
- Translation

Program essentials

- Food everyone can eat/cultural food
- Stipends
- Transportation
- Community service hours
- Honesty
- Translation/English language skills
- Respect
- School support
- Flexible schedule
- Information about jobs

Dislikes/things to avoid

- Lies
- Disrespect
- Sitting all day/long talks
- Unenthusiastic speakers
- Food some participants can't eat
- Lack of inclusion
- Participation costs
- Long hours/not enough breaks
- Racial separation
- Lack of publicity
- Disorganization
- Being bullied/judged
- Being serious all the time (no humor)

Potential barriers

- Time
- Family obligations
- Personal problems
- Transportation
- Scheduling conflicts
- Language
- Money
- School requirements/
homework

Session time/length

- Weekends
- Summer
- Twice a week
- Twice a month
- Once a week
- Two hours
- After school
- Four hours
- Spring/fall sessions

Who

- High school students
- 7th-12th graders
- College students as well
- Immigrant students only
- Designed for immigrants
but everyone welcomed
- Anyone
- Youth over 12
- 15-20 students
- All languages
- Students with a disability
- English speakers

What

- Problem-solving
- Event planning
- Speech writing
- Our culture
- How to represent yourself
- Our rights — how to utilize and
achieve them
- How to volunteer/help our
communities
- Job applications
- Language
- How to apply what we learn in school
to the real world
- Scholarship opportunities
- College applications
- Program promotion
- Social skills
- Law/policy/rights
- Communication skills
- Conflict resolution
- How to help others
- Gender equality
- How to make impact
- Public speaking

How

- Guest speakers
- Leadership-related activities
- Hands-on/interactive activities
- Ice breakers
- Community projects
- College applications to help immigrants
- Games requiring leadership skills
- Small social events
- Trips
- Team-building
- Community service
- Job preparation
- Teamwork activities
- Learn from leaders in the community

Where

- School
- Easily accessible by public transportation
- Office space
- Near where you live
- Cafeteria
- Outdoors
- Community center
- Library
- Park
- Open space
- Café
- Gym

Why

- Life skills
- Help each other
- Get to know each other
- Build relationships
- Help refugees & immigrants
- Make change
- Increase communication skills/
reduce fear of speaking up
- Build confidence/courage/strength
- Become better leaders
- Help our communities
- Help prepare people for future jobs
that require leadership skills
- Build immigrants' network
- Learn about different cultures

Anything else

- Want to learn about scholarships
- Want to get to know the
community more
- Want more fun
- Want more reflection on skills
we learned
- Want guidance on who should run
our program (us or the adults?)
- Want info about sponsorships
- Where to get funding for our
programs
- Want to create a website to
promote/publicize our program
- Want more empowerment and
encouragement to achieve our goals
- Fundraiser
- More one-on-one conversations
- Want to create a program for
everyone

Potential Challenges

- Bullying
- Stereotypes
- Lack of funding
- Lack of support for immigrants and refugees
- Lack of scholarships
- Lack of unity
- Religious intolerance
- Not enough time to do all programs
- Not knowing which college you can go to
- Not advocating for yourself
- Not enough jobs for undocumented people
- Not speaking English/ language barriers
- Citizenship/lack of green card
- Not having support in school
- Drugs
- School threats
- Money
- Racism
- Discrimination
- College
- Job searching
- Unequal pay
- School conditions

Possible solutions

- Translation/ESL
- Better classes
- Defend your rights
- Education
- College counseling
- Communication
- Self-expression
- Better programs
- Stand up to bullies

Leaders of Tomorrow Program Components

1. Group Learning

Participants are led through each of the curriculum units in local cohorts by a facilitator familiar with the content and often joined by guest presenters specializing in a particular skill or able to relate to the cohorts because of their unique personal experience. Each unit is comprised of multiple sessions using different approaches to keep the youth engaged as active participants in their own learning while contributing to the learning of others in their cohort.

2. Mentoring

Being connected to a peer mentor and/or a mentor from the local community partner is one of the ways participants can practice what they are learning during sessions and/or enhance their learning through additional experiences.

3. Virtual National Community of Practice

The inaugural launch of this initiative involved cohorts of 10 youth from 3 different communities. Having regular opportunities to connect with peers from around the country, whether they be part of Leaders of Tomorrow or peers from other IEL initiatives adds another dimension to the learning opportunity.

4. Community Leadership Action Project

As the name makes obvious, an important goal of Leaders of Tomorrow is to help develop the next generation of leaders and inspire them to take action to improve their communities. The action project is an explicit expectation, providing an opportunity to apply learning in real-world contexts while offering support from their peers and the local partner organization.

Leaders of Tomorrow Curriculum

IEL developed a four-unit curriculum for the group learning component. Together the units total over 30 hours of facilitation and learning. The curriculum is designed to prepare and support participants for the other three components of the program: peer mentoring and relationship building; facilitation of a virtual peer network with participants from different regions; and completing a final project in their respective communities, which requires them to use skills learned in the program and put them into action.

Unit 1. Leading with Intentionality

This unit focuses on understanding oneself and realizing one's own values, beliefs, and emotional intelligence. Participants learn how to tell their story and own their narrative.

Unit 2. Leading to Collaborate

This unit focuses on conflict resolution, relationship building, and cultural competence. Participants learn to explore similarities and differences in their cultural experiences, define cross-cultural collaboration and skills, identify different types of relationships and differentiate between positive and negative ones, and identify problems and negotiate solutions.

Unit 3. Planning for Postsecondary Education Career, Life, and Leadership

This unit discusses the various available pathways and how to play an active role in creating their own futures. It helps them develop career and life awareness skills, identify their skills, talents, and interests, and helps them develop a possible life and career plan.

Unit 4. Leading for a Better World

This is an important unit as it teaches youth to see beyond themselves or small circles of family and friends to incorporate their entire communities as well as connections and potential collaborations with others into their world view. It helps them understand how immigration works in the United States and how civil rights as well as immigrants' and refugees' rights are protected. It encourages them to create alternatives to the current conditions and develop the means and skills to achieve them — such as organizing groups, collaborative structures and processes, grassroots and advocacy techniques, public speech skills and confidence, negotiation and conflict resolution skills, and many others.

Learning Objectives

Learning objectives in four broad areas framed activities and formed the basis of evaluation and data collection activities: Policy, Leadership, Networking, Personal Growth and Development

Category	Competencies	Learning Objectives
Policy	Knowledge of immigration policy in the U.S.	Understand immigration policy and practice
		Understand the impact of policies on immigrants' and refugees' lives
	Knowledge of civil rights protection in the U.S	Understand immigrant and refugee rights and how those rights are protected
		Understand the roles of federal, state, and local policymakers in immigration, refugee, and civil rights policymaking
	Understanding the difference between activism, advocacy, and organizing	Knowledge of actions to influence immigration and refugee policymaking, including voting and community mapping
Identifying and understanding the three branches of government in the U.S.	Understand how to hold policymakers accountable	
	Leadership	Understand the importance of leading self vs. leading others
Understanding of types of leadership and characteristics of effective leaders		Identify personal values and beliefs and how they inform actions and decision-making
		Understand leadership, personality, and emotional intelligence preferences
Knowledge of ethical and effective leadership practices		Develop a working definition of emotional intelligence
		Increase awareness and express cultural identities, assets, and biases
	Recognize explicit and implicit biases and how they show up everyday	

Leadership

Understanding of their own leadership style, strengths, and areas for further development

Ability to understand the power of storytelling and to develop skills to tell stories that make impact

Understand the difference between being apathetic and empathetic

Learn how to actively listen and approach conflict and situations with empathy

Learn how to identify problems, resolve conflict, and negotiate solutions in the interests of both parties

Understand why previous group or community organizing experiences were successful or unsuccessful

Understand different techniques (including community organizing/advocacy) and structures for bringing people together, coalition building, and grassroots organizing around common goals

Understand techniques for building relationships and trust and improving understanding, inclusion, and effectiveness in interactions with others who have different styles and preference

Develop positive images of their communities based on data and research

Identify key assets and challenges they and their immigrant/refugee communities face

Identify the root causes, alternative scenarios, and conditions that foster/sustain assets and challenges

Understand the power of storytelling through personal narratives

Develop personal narratives and skills to use their narratives to make impact

Understand communication style and preferences

	<p>Ability to understand the power of storytelling and to develop skills to tell stories that make impact</p>	<p>Understand the implications of different communication styles and preferences and how they impact others</p> <p>Craft compelling messages and use media platforms to influence action</p> <p>Solicit, receive, and incorporate feedback to strengthen public speaking confidence and skills</p> <p>Understand emotional intelligence and increase self-awareness of emotions and their impact on interpersonal relationships</p> <p>Understand cultural identities, assets, and biases</p> <p>Identify past successful experience in organizing a group or a community</p> <p>Understand conflict resolution and negotiation techniques</p>
	<p>Ability to engage community members to take action to address needs of their communities</p>	<p>Understand alternatives to current situations and strategies and the skills that are needed to implement those alternatives</p> <p>Understand effective organizing skills to bring people together and organize them around an issue</p> <p>Understand grassroots and advocacy techniques</p> <p>Understand how to use data and research to inform advocacy</p> <p>Understand how to incorporate understanding, equity, inclusion, and effectiveness in interactions with others who have different styles and preferences</p>

Networking	Understanding of cross-cultural knowledge, skills, and assets in the community	Understand similarities and differences in cultural experiences to facilitate cross-cultural collaboration
		Understand cross-cultural collaboration
		Increase cross-cultural knowledge, skills, and abilities and apply them in the community
		Understand challenges you and your immigrant/refugee community face
	Ability to develop and maintain social connections	Understand the differences between positive and negative relationships and the different types of relationships formed over time
		Understand the implications of different communication styles and preferences and how they impact others
Personal Growth and Development	Understanding of their strengths and their impact on career and life goals	Develop life and career skills
		Understand the effects of playing an active role in life and career
		Identify strengths and opportunities for growth and understand how individual skills, talents, interests, and networks position them for leadership and/or achieving career and life goals
		Understand goal setting and identify which skills and experiences can facilitate their development
	Understanding of multiple pathways to work and post-secondary success	Understand the multiple pathways that exist with their associated requirements and earnings prospects
		Understand the application process for four-year colleges and other post-secondary education and training options — and how they differ

Explore multiple pathways based on their interests as well as actual skills/talents

Develop a possible life and career plan, including a pathway to leadership

STEP 2. Partner Selection and Youth Recruitment

The success of Leaders of Tomorrow is largely dependent on local partners and the quality of their community connections, trust, and social capital. During the co-creation and design step of this initiative, the active participation of local partners not only in recruiting youth but in sharing staff experience and perspective helped maintain local relevance, ensuring a more community-centered program design.

There are several factors to consider in selecting local partners:

- Relationships and history in the community
- Youth development and leadership program experience
- Sufficient access and connections to target youth population
- Staff capacity and flexibility
- Supplemental resources to support and strengthen program delivery
- Working relationship and credibility with the local school district
- Complementary fit with Leaders of Tomorrow's program goal

Once partners are fully vetted and a commitment to move forward has been established, both parties should sign a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) to document expectations, timelines, and agreed-upon objectives. The MOA should outline specific points of understanding, describe the project, define the scope of work, and detail each party's roles and responsibilities.

The active involvement of local partners is key to being able to recruit youth in each cohort, keep them engaged, and trouble-shoot when obstacles to participation emerge. As a result of Covid-19, taking appropriate health and safety measures required the transition to a totally virtual program, facilitated by the IEL team. Under different circumstances where in-person activity is possible, staff from each local partner organization would facilitate learning, with IEL playing more of a support role.

STEP 3. Data Collection and Evaluation

All projects, organizations, and even communities are best served by a clear plan and road map for change. Without a theory of action, projects, organizations, and communities may engage in random unconnected activities, waste important resources, or otherwise be in danger of wandering aimlessly. A theory of action is a practical and essential part of a successful transformation effort.

Logic models are a visual representation of a program's design — summarizing key elements, the rationale behind the approach, and intended outcomes and how they will be measured. A logic model displays the cause and effect relationship between your program and its intended outcomes.^{xiv} Ultimately, the logic model, consistent with your theory of action, provides the basic framework for an evaluation plan.

The evaluation plan is based on the questions that require answers in this initiative and the decisions that need to be made based on the data. The evaluation plan identifies data sources and methods and key stakeholders with a vested interest in the outcomes and learning from the data. The Leaders for Tomorrow logic model describes the inputs, participants, activities, outputs, and outcomes. Using a combination of pre-and post-surveys, written reflections after activities, and video stories, IEL's data collection methods are designed to measure individual outcome areas including:

- Changes in attitudes (perceptions and beliefs)
- Changes in knowledge
- Changes in awareness
- Changes in skills
- Changes in behavior

STEP 4. Anticipate Challenges and Embrace Opportunities

In her debut memoir, *I know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Maya Angelou reflects on her upbringing, the legacy of racism, and her own struggle to find her voice:

“Hoping for the best, prepared for the worst, and unsurprised by anything in between.”

To be fully immersed in community building, youth leadership and development — and any activity designed to improve outcomes for vulnerable children, youth, and families — is to fully embrace flexibility and convert Maya Angelou’s observation into an operating principle.

In all change work, contexts — which are multi-layered — are always shifting. All of the inputs required for a successful initiative are potential launchpads or stumbling blocks. The best case scenario, where things go as planned with few if any hiccups, rarely occurs. Most programs and initiatives operate in the “unsurprised by anything in between” realm, while trying desperately to avoid slipping into a worst case scenario.



During implementation, it’s important to constantly monitor inputs and activities during every phase and remain prepared to tweak the game plan. The goal of Leaders of Tomorrow is to support and mobilize immigrant and refugee youth through opportunities to expand their knowledge, strengthen their skills, and access the tools and resources necessary to engage actively in their communities. The logic model is a useful tool during each phase of the initiative. Assuming your initiative’s direction (strategic priority) and objectives (focus) haven’t changed significantly, challenges can become opportunities with a little creativity and persistence. Using the Leaders of [Tomorrow Logic Model](#) as a guide, the table below offers an example of how we responded to challenges in real time, providing a framework for thinking about ways to respond under similar circumstances.

Original Plan of Action

What Actually Happened

Inputs

- Funding secured
- Partners identified
- Facilities secured
- Curriculum co-created
- Youth targeted
- Stipends available

- Funding secured
- 1 of 3 partners had to be replaced
- Unable to use partner facilities due to Covid-19
- Co-created curriculum tweaked for virtual delivery
- Youth targeted
- Stipends provided

Participants

- Partners committed
- Youth recruited
- Facilitators trained and ready

- New partner worked out well and other partners remained committed
- 30 youth recruited
- Local facilitation unavailable due to Covid-19

Activities

- Group learning sessions occurred as planned
- Community leadership action projects started

- Group learning sessions, as tweaked for virtual platforms, were successfully administered
- IEL staff stepped into facilitation role for all 3 cohorts and managed technology needs for remote learning sessions

<p>Outputs</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 3 cohorts of youth convened regularly and engaged in planned activities • Community action projects finished 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 3 cohorts of youth convened weekly based on each cohort's time and day preferences • Youth acclimated well to the change in plans and used Google Classroom to manage their assignments • Guest presenters engaged to deliver key segments of the curriculum • Community action projects were postponed due to Covid-19
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<p>Outcomes</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Program completed by high percentage of students • Increased awareness, knowledge, and skills shown by high percentage of students • Community action projects produce positive results 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 26 of 30 participants completed the full program (4 youth dropped out midway due to changes in family circumstances) • All youth had increased awareness, knowledge, and skills in key areas • All youth reported finding value in their participation and interest in continuing with a similar initiative in the future • Partners were excited by outcomes and want to be involved in the future with current cohorts and cultivating new cohorts of youth • Community action projects were postponed due to Covid-19
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Covid-19 was an unavoidable crisis affecting the entire planet and leaving no community untouched. The pandemic disrupted education nationwide and turned a spotlight on a range of racial and economic disparities — particularly for students and families in historically under-served and vulnerable communities. Immigrant and refugee youth, along with Black, Indigenous and other peoples of color, were already facing inequality across the board. Covid-19 increased vulnerabilities, added new layers of uncertainty and marginalization, and disrupted systems that normally serve as part of the pathway to successful transitions into adulthood.

KEY TAKE-AWAYS

Contexts constantly shift
—anticipate this

Flexibility and creativity are key to
turning challenges into opportunities

Be realistic about what’s possible,
both for staff and participants

Be willing to take extra measures to
accommodate the needs of youth

Constantly monitor implementation
and progress, and tweak as necessary

Celebrate small victories

The outbreak of nationwide protests in response to the murder of George Floyd heightened awareness of police brutality and systemic racism, which disproportionately affects many of these same communities with sizable numbers of immigrant and refugee youth. Youth from these communities turned their outrage into action, fueling these protests. This left them hungry for knowledge and committed to working for change. This frustration with the status quo and a strong desire for change makes initiatives like Leaders of Tomorrow more relevant.

Leaders of Tomorrow was implemented amid challenges that affected us all personally and organizationally. Staff capacity, flexibility, and creativity enabled us to avoid a worst-case scenario and still provide a meaningful experience for the youth. We also benefited from the good fortune that almost all of the recruited youth had sufficient digital access, relative stability in the midst of the pandemic, and a hunger to be connected in this way. That, and staff willingness to accommodate each cohort’s needs regarding session schedules (including evenings, weekends), put us in position to build on the energy of the moment and incorporate current events into the curriculum. What could easily have been a catastrophe from the standpoint of program implementation instead became an anchoring event for youth, partners, and staff.

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About IEL

Since 1964, the Institute for Educational Leadership (IEL) has equipped leaders to work together across boundaries to build effective systems that foster successful transitions from cradle to career, preparing children and youth for postsecondary education, careers, and citizenship. We envision a society that uses all of its resources effectively to provide an equal opportunity for all children and youth to learn, develop, and become contributing citizens of our democracy. As a community-driven, equity-focused organization dedicated to catalyzing and building capacity at the intersection of leadership, education, and workforce development, IEL partners with under-resourced communities through initiatives strategically situated at grassroots, regional, and national levels.

IEL's mission is to disrupt generational poverty at the intersections of class, race and disability. We have a "census-changing" goal of transforming 100 communities by 2030 into equitable ecosystems of collaboration that impact health, education and employment. We do this by cultivating and activating leadership across ages, stages, and context.

Authors

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