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The Value of a Community of Practice for Youth Development Professionals

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ABSTRACT

This study presents the various forms of value that 36 youth development professionals reported from participating in a community of practice (CoP). The CoP's collaborative nature expanded participant's social capital and network; they also valued the CoP as a safe space. Participants gained knowledge and skills through the CoP, became more intentional about building trusting and equitable relationships with youth, made relationship- and equity-centered changes in their practice, and reconceptualized success for their work accordingly. The CoP increased participants' confidence, fostered their growth mindset, made their work feel less stressful, and deepened their passion for the youth development field.

KEYWORDS

Youth development professionals; youth workers; community of practice; developmental relationships; racial equity

Out-of-school time (OST) youth development programs are critical for nurturing youth thriving and advancing equity (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2025; Smith et al., 2017). In fact, OST programs often serve as a safe haven or “second home” for young people to discover and become their best selves (Baldridge et al., 2017; Hirsch, 2005; Hersherberg et al., 2014; Kalish et al., 2010). However, the backbone of OST programs— youth development professionals¹ – often experience a range of structural hardships such as low pay, lack of opportunities for career advancement, high stress, workforce precarity, and underappreciation as a profession (Baldridge et al., 2024; Borden et al., 2020; Colvin et al., 2020; Noam & Bernstein-Yamashiro, 2013; Woodberry-Shaw et al., 2023; Yohalem, Pittman, & Moore, 2006). Such hardships often leave youth development professionals overlooked, calling for more research to understand their experiences, including the ways they collaborate and learn alongside each other to become masters of their craft (Larson et al., 2015). Specifically, many youth development professionals are skillful at building trusting relationships with youth, especially with youth from marginalized backgrounds, that nurture their positive development (Hwang et al., 2020;

Jones & Deutsch, 2011). Yet, how they gain and apply such relationship building skills remain understudied. The current study speaks to this need by documenting the experiences of youth development professionals, specifically what they found valuable from participating in a community of practice where they built their capacity alongside each other around developmental relationships, racial equity, and cultural humility.

Community of practice

Communities of practice (CoPs) are groups of professionals who share a concern or a passion for their aligned work and meet regularly to learn how to improve practices and procedures; in a sense, CoPs are social learning systems that unite people for the common purpose of improving their practice (Wenger, 2010). That is, CoPs provide a space for people to bring their problems of practice and ‘think together,’ leveraging each other’s experiences and tactics as assets (Pyrko, Dörfler, & Eden, 2017). With that, CoPs have the potential to cultivate professional identity, commitment, engagement and learning (Wenger, 1998).

Communities of practice are not new to the youth development field. In fact, the focus on continuous improvement and relationship building among CoP participants is fitting for youth development professionals (Davis-Manigaulte, 2012). The collaborative problem solving afforded by CoPs supports continuous improvement efforts that are often central to OST youth development professional’s work. In fact, youth development professionals are often committed to organizational changes for improvement yet lack the efficacy to make such changes happen (Spencer et al., 2023). This calls for training and support, for example as provided by a CoP, that empowers youth development professionals to actively apply their learnings to affect change within their organizations (Ross, Buglione, & Safford-Farquharson, 2011; Spencer et al., 2023; Wiedow, 2018). Emerging literature suggests that intentional, group-based professional development can empower youth development professionals to initiate organizational change (Rana et al., 2013).

In terms of relationship building, past studies on youth development CoPs consistently showed the social capital benefits of networking with colleagues in such a setting (Merritt et al., 2023; Ross, Buglione, & Safford-Farquharson, 2011). For example, a study with youth development professionals in Minnesota showed that networking with colleagues through a CoP contributed significantly to youth development professionals’ engagement at work, which is critical for a field that struggles with staff retention (Shanahan & Sheehan, 2020). In fact, “opportunities to learn, problem solve, and network with peers in the field” are key to the success of learning communities for youth development professionals (Vance et al., 2016). As CoPs provide participants the opportunity to *learn* alongside

each other, youth development CoPs tend to cover topics that are salient for the field, such as developmental relationships, racial equity, and cultural humility, as reviewed in the following sections.

Developmental relationships in OST programs

Building strong and trusting relationships with youth is integral to youth development professionals' and their programs' success (Borden et al., 2020; Jones & Deutsch, 2011; Kuperminc et al., 2019; National Afterschool Association, 2023). Many youth development professionals are skilled at navigating their roles as young people's mentor, educator, connector, confidant, advocate, and friend, to name a few (Hwang et al., 2020). Past studies consistently showed that youth who report stronger relationships with adults in their program also tend to demonstrate more positive outcomes in a variety of domains such as academic, social emotional, and behavioral (Anderson-Butcher et al., 2004; Kataoka & Vandell, 2013; Lewis et al., 2021; Wright et al., 2014).

For this study, we examine youth-adult relationships using the Developmental Relationships framework (Pekel et al., 2018), which defines Developmental Relationships as close connections through which young people discover who they are, cultivate abilities to shape their own lives, and learn how to engage with and contribute to the world around them (Scales, Hsieh, & Benson, 2022). The framework describes five essential elements of Developmental Relationships: express care, provide support, challenge growth, share power, and expand possibilities. Rooted in the Positive Youth Development (PYD) literature, which premised on the belief that all youth have strengths and capacities, and all youth need strong relationships to nurture these capacities and to foster positive growth, Developmental Relationship is a fitting framing for this study because theories and practices rooted in PYD are a foundational base of knowledge for youth development professionals (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2025; Vance, 2012). Past studies have shown that OST programs are crucial spaces for fostering developmental relationships (Houlberg, Scales, & Williams, 2023). Despite the centrality and malleability of developmental relationships in OST spaces, youth development professionals often are not provided with structured training or professional development in this aspect (Akiva et al., 2017; Astroth & Lindstrom, 2008; Noam & Bernstein-Yamashiro, 2013).

Racial equity and cultural humility in OST programs

As youth and communities served by OST programs become increasingly diverse in terms of identities and cultural backgrounds, relationship building should function in a manner that helps to reduce racial disparities

(e.g., in opportunities and outcomes) and should instead promote racially equitable and culturally responsive experiences (Hill & Vance, 2019; Simpkins et al., 2017). OST programs can be used to surveil and contain youth from marginalized communities, or the programs can be spaces that empower youth, celebrate their cultural diversity, and disrupt inequities (Baldrige et al, 2017, 2024; Williams & Deutsch, 2016). At a systemic level, youth development professionals are often embedded in systems that perpetuate racism and other forms of oppressions that label youth with deficits and risks (Baldrige et al, 2024). At the same time, youth development professionals are also uniquely positioned to disrupt such inequities by building culturally sustaining, healing-centered, and racially equitable relationships with their youth (Baldrige et al, 2024).

At the interpersonal level, how youth developmental professionals build culturally sustaining, healing-centered, and racially equitable relationships with their youth is complex and ever evolving, which means an open mind and humble attitude is fundamentally important (Curtiss & Perry, 2024; Lee et al., 2024). How youth development professionals approach racial equity related professional development and training, though, vary. On one hand, some racial equity training and professional development showed promising outcomes, such as increase in youth development professional's cultural sensitivity and self-efficacy for disrupting racial inequities (Anderson et al., 2018). On the other hand, some racial equity training and professional development were met with resistance and disengagement (Watt, 2017). Taken together, more studies are needed to understand how youth development professionals learn about racial equity and connect those learnings back to their work (Richmond, Braughton, & Borden, 2018). In fact, a recent review of youth development competencies in OST suggested that one of the top areas that need more research on is how youth development professionals develop cultural responsiveness and humility (Christensen & Rubin, 2022).

Current study

The current study examines the experiences of OST youth development professionals who participated in a community of practice aimed at building their capacity around developmental relationships, racial equity, and cultural humility. Our central research question is: What value did the CoP create for OST youth development professionals?

Method

CoP context: excel academy

The CoP examined in this study, Excel Academy (EA), brings together OST youth development professionals in San Antonio, Texas (U.S.) to learn

about and develop improvement plans focused on developmental relationships and racial equity. Each year, about 15 youth development programs are represented in EA; each program is encouraged to send one direct service staff and an organizational leader to join EA (totaled to around 30 members in the CoP per year). The intermediary organization that hosts EA (i.e., UP Partnership) invites youth development programs to apply to EA. The application requires the youth development program CEO's sign off, as a form of getting organizational commitment and buy-in. Each participating youth development professional receives a \$550/year stipend for their participation, which is particularly important for hourly staff who do not otherwise get compensated for their participation. While some programs ask for volunteers among their staff to join EA, other programs "voluntell" certain staff to join.

All the EA meetings were held in person since its inception in 2019, except in 2020 when meetings were held virtually due to the COVID-19 pandemic. EA was conducted from September to June for three years. Many programs choose to send one staff member per cohort year, sometimes resulting in multiple staff members participating in various phases of the program (e.g., a year one participant and a year two participant from the same organization). This study focuses on participants' experiences in year 1, when they met on a monthly basis (each meeting was 7 hours, from 8 am to 3 pm). See [Table 1](#) for a sample program schedule. The learning of EA content was facilitated by expert professionals during CoP meetings. Specifically, the developmental relationships sessions were taught by trainers from a positive youth development organization and focused on learning and practicing strategies for building positive and trusting relationships with youth. The racial equity sessions were taught by a local psychologist and focused on introducing concepts such as

Table 1. Excel academy (EA) schedule.

Meeting time	Topic
August	(Optional) welcome social: an opportunity for EA participants to get to know each other and network
September day 1	EA orientation and developmental relationships session #1 (introduction to the developmental relationships framework)
September day 2	Racial equity session #1
October	Developmental relationships session #2 (inclusive and intentional relationship building, introduction to the developmental relationships survey)
November	Racial equity session #2
December	Improvement plan session #1 (introduction to the Results Count Framework)
January	Racial equity session #3 (racial journey map) and collaborative interpretation of the developmental relationships survey results
February	Improvement plan session #2 (understanding current condition and developing SMARTIE goals)
March	Breakfast with CEOs and improvement plan session #3 (analyzing factors and identifying strategies)
April	Racial equity session #4
May	Improvement plan session #4 (key driver)
June	Graduation ceremony and celebration

racism, proximity to Whiteness, generational trauma, as well as activities, such as the racial journey map, that encourages participants to reflect on their own upbringing and perspectives on equity. As such, although EA participants tend to describe what they are learning as simply “racial equity”, the content actually went beyond a focus on metrics and accountability to also include deeper and more personal growth in racial and cultural humility. Putting the learnings in developmental relationships and racial equity into practice, the CoP also included sessions on making improvement plans, which were taught by EA staff and focused on using the Results Count Framework (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2019) to develop and implement plans for making (survey) data-driven improvements to their program (e.g., increase youth of color’s enrollment by a certain percent).

Participants

Participants in this study were 36 youth development professionals in EA’s 3rd and 4th cohort (year 2023 and 2024 respectively), during their first year in the CoP. Most participants identified as female (72%; male 22%; non-binary 6%) and Hispanic/Latina/Latino/Latinx (53%; Black or African American 8%; Multiracial 8%; White 31%). There was about an even split between direct service staff (53%) and senior/leadership staff (47%). See [Table 2](#) for detailed participant information. To protect participant’s confidentiality, we intentionally do not report the exact youth development programs/organization that they represent, and we use pseudonyms that they picked for themselves.

Data collection

All study procedures were reviewed and approved by an independent IRB company (REF: #000125). Participants were recruited via an email invitation that described the purpose of the study, the nature of the interviews (one hour long in a one-on-one format, online via Zoom), and the compensation (\$50). All CoP members were invited but 8 people in the 3rd and 11 people in the 4th cohort did not respond to the interview invitation or dropped out from EA (for various personal and professional reasons) before the interview; 36 agreed to participate resulting in the final sample (i.e., overall response rate = 75%). Participants were interviewed in March 2024 and 2025 respectively regarding their first year experience in EA. Prior to the interviews, participants completed a brief sign-up form detailing their position in their program, what led them to their current position, how long they have been in their current position and the youth development field in general, their connection with the greater San Antonio

Table 2. Participant demographics.

Participant pseudonym	CoP cohort	Program description	Position	How long have you been in your current position? In the youth development field?	Education level	Race/ethnicity	Gender
Leonardo	3	A non-profit that provides a wide array of programs addressing the social needs and cultural aspirations of the diverse indigenous communities in San Antonio.	L	1.5 years; 10 years		Black/African American	Male
Sally	4	Regional chapter of a national community-based mentoring program.	L	3 years; 20 years	Master's degree	White	Female
John Smith	4		L	5 years; 11 years	Some college credit, no degree	White	Male
Liz	4	Regional chapter of a national organization that provides voluntary after-school programs for young people	L	2.5 years	Master's degree	Hispanic, Latino/a/e, or Spanish origin - Mexican, Mexican American, Chicano	Female
Joseph	3		D	1 year		Latina/o/x	Male
Veronica	3		L	1 year; 10 years		Latina/o/x	Female
Caroline	3	Regional chapter of a national organization that combats chronic absenteeism through placing trained, caring adults in schools.	D	1.5 years; 20 years		White	Female
Mary	3		L	4 years; 15 years		White	Female
Kay	4	Neighborhood-specific non-profit in San Antonio that provides community health services and education, advocacy, and restorative justice youth programming.	D	1.5 years; 12 years	Some college credit, no degree	Multiracial: Hispanic, Latino/a/e, or Spanish origin	Female
Molly 2	4	A non-profit that provides wraparound services to families in San Antonio.	D	3 years	Bachelor's degree	White	Non-binary
Hypetune	3		D	2 years; 20+ years		Latina/o/x	Female
Sarah	3	Regional chapter of a national youth organization for girls.	D	1 month; 8.5 years		Latina/o/x, White	Female
Sue	3		L	7.5 years		Latina/o/x	Female
Bees	4		D	3 years; 4 years	Associate degree	Hispanic, Latino/a/e, or Spanish origin - Mexican, Mexican American, Chicano	Female
Purple20	4		D	6 years	Bachelor's degree	Hispanic, Latino/a/e, or Spanish origin - Mexican, Mexican American, Chicano	Female
Molly	4	Regional chapter of a national girl empowerment organization.	D	1.5 years; 8 years	Associate degree	Hispanic, Latino/a/e, or Spanish origin - Mexican, Mexican American, Chicano	Female
Julianne	4		L	8 months; 29 years	Master's degree	Hispanic, Latino/a/e, or Spanish origin - Mexican, Mexican American, Chicano	Female
Beatrice	3	A charitable entity that provides comprehensive services to families in Central and South Texas.	D	5 years; 10 years		Latina/o/x	Female
Joe	3		D	2.5 years; 8 years		Black/Latina/o/x	Male
Tina	3	A local museum	L	3 months		White	Female

(Continued)



Table 2. Continued.

Participant pseudonym	CoP cohort	Program description	Position	How long have you been in your current position? In the youth development field?	Education level	Race/ethnicity	Gender
Emily	3	A teen development and leadership program within the San Antonio health department	L	2 years; 8 years		White	Female
Luke	3		D	9 months		White	Male
Rosa	4		D	1.5 years; 12 years	Master's degree	Hispanic, Latino/a/e, or Spanish origin - Mexican, Mexican American, Chicano	Female
Raquel	4		L	5 months; 10+ years	Bachelor's degree	Hispanic, Latino/a/e, or Spanish origin - Mexican, Mexican American, Chicano	Female
Kristen	3	A San Antonio-based non-profit that provides high-risk youth and young adults quality educational programming during out of school time.	L	2 years; 10+ years		White	Female
Red Dragon	3		D	1 year; 10 years		Latina/o/x	Female
Alexander	4		L	1 year; 4.5 years	Some college credit, no degree	Hispanic, Latino/a/e, or Spanish origin - Mexican, Mexican American, Chicano	Non-binary
Bird	4	An intermediary organization that supports youth development programs in the greater San Antonio area.	D	1 year; 9 years	Bachelor's degree	White	Male
George	3	Regional chapter of an international youth organization.	L	2 years; 32 years		Latina/o/x	Male
Celeste	4		L	5 months; 12 years	Bachelor's degree	Hispanic, Latino/a/e, or Spanish origin - Mexican, Mexican American, Chicano	Female
Nicole	4	A San Antonio-based non-profit that provides coding experience that is fun, accessible, and engaging for all learners.	L	1 year; 5 years	Bachelor's degree	Hispanic, Latino/a/e, or Spanish origin - Mexican, Mexican American, Chicano	Female
Benny	4		D	2 years; 7 years	Some college credit, no degree	White	Male
Jane	4	Regional chapter of an international youth organization for girls.	D	1.5 years; 10+ years	Bachelor's degree	Black, African American, or African - African American	Female
Riley	4		D	4 months; 1.5 years	Bachelor's degree	Multiracial: Black, African American, or African and Native American or Alaska Native	Female
AJ	3		D	1.5 years; 10 years		Black/African American	Female
Jackie	3		L	1.5 years; 4 years		Latina/o/x	Female

Note. We present program descriptions instead of program names to ensure participant's confidentiality. D=direct service staff, L=senior staff / leadership role. Education level was only gathered for youth development professionals in the 4th cohort.

community, their education level (for the 3rd cohort only), and their gender and racial/ethnic identities. Four researchers, all of whom are also among this manuscript's authors, conducted the interviews. Researchers all had a background in positive youth development and qualitative research methods. Prior to data collection, the first and last authors of the manuscript briefed other researchers on the study procedures and interview protocol. The researchers also met to discuss the theoretical framework that guided the development of the interview protocol and each of our positionality in this study (Jacobson & Mustafa, 2019). The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. After each researcher completed their first interview, we listened to each other's interview recording and debriefed to calibrate.

The interview protocol was guided by the Value Creation Framework, which gets at “the value of learning enabled by community involvement and networking” (Wenger et al., 2011, p. 7). The Value Creation Framework takes a ground up approach by focusing on the participants' own voices and perceived value, assuming that validity lies in the perspective of the individuals experiencing and attributing the value (Dingyloudi et al., 2019); this approach fits the current study as we aim to center and elevate youth development professionals' voices and perspectives (Larson et al., 2015). Example questions in the protocol include “What have you gained from participating in Excel Academy?” and “How, if at all, has participating in Excel Academy impacted the way you show up in your job?”; see [Appendix 1](#) for the full list of interview questions.

Data analysis

Transcripts were uploaded and analyzed into Dedoose (Dedoose, 2000). Both inductive and deductive methods were used; initial codes were generated to align with the value creation framework but we also encouraged development of new codes to emerge from the data. The coding team consisted of four researchers using an iterative (Cascio et al., 2019) and collaborative (Richards & Hemphill, 2018) process. Each transcript was randomly assigned and independently coded by two researchers on the team. They then met to examine consistency and divergence in terms of (1) sections of meaningful text, (2) codes assigned, and (3) new code development. Partner pairs would come to consensus on these three aspects during their meeting and then bring emerging new code ideas to the full coding team for deliberation. The full coding team met weekly to update and refine emerging codes to ensure that we were coding consistently. New codes were added to the codebook and definitions of codes were updated and refined throughout this reflexive thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2012; Braun, 2019). Once transcripts were initially coded

and the codebook finalized, one researcher reexamined all transcripts to ensure codes were consistently applied (e.g., ensuring codes that were developed later in the process were applied to transcripts that were coded earlier in the process). The final codebook was organized both in terms of value creation categories as well as content categories of the CoP (i.e., broad topics that participants learned about and experienced, including developmental relationships and racial equity).

For this manuscript, we focus on the content categories because they better reflect how the CoP operated from the perspective of the participants. Two researchers met weekly and used the codebook to develop narratives within each content category. Some codes (e.g., “feeling more confident”) were also developed outside of a specific content category if they spoke to the overall experiences of participating in the community of practice. Those final themes are reflected in the results section below.

Positionality

We the authors of this manuscript were involved in EA to different extents, which shape the lens each of us brings to writing this manuscript. As a group, we were brought together by a research-practice grant funded project between EA and a nonprofit research organization that five of us are/were employed at. The goal of that project was to support, scale, and document the successes of EA. In a sense, the five of us have a rather “outsider” perspective to EA in that the participants did not know any of us prior to this project. Through this project, participants know of us simply as researchers (as opposed to fellow youth development professionals or EA staff). Furthermore, all five of us have minimal connection to the San Antonio community. The five of us were responsible for data collection, data analysis and/or interpretation, as well as writing this manuscript.

In comparison, two of us are staff at the intermediary organization that hosts EA. In a sense, the two of us have the “insider” perspective to EA in that most of the participants know us personally and/or professionally prior to EA, for example through mutual youth development work in the San Antonio community. It was also very clear to the participants that the two of us are directly and heavily involved in the operations of EA. For this very reason, the two of us were not directly involved in data collection or analysis. The two of us reviewed this manuscript, particularly from the perspective of member checking to ensure that the findings align with the experiences of running EA.

Results

Participants shared various forms of value that they found from participating in the CoP (Figure 1). The first set of findings was related to the

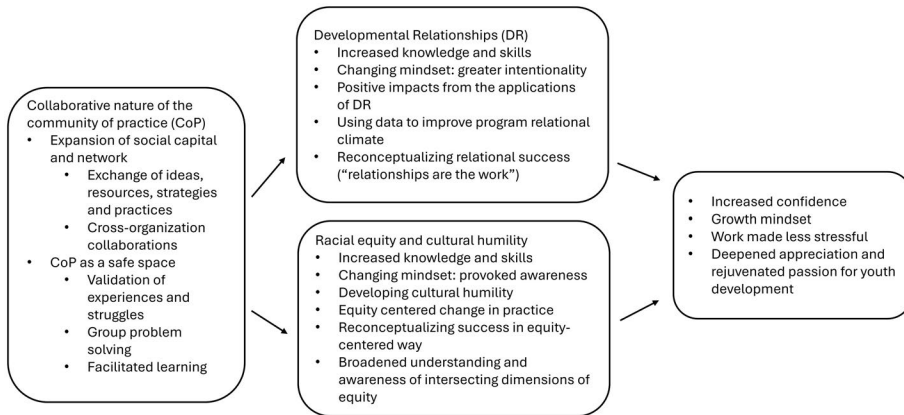


Figure 1. Main findings.

collaborative, cohort-based nature of the CoP: (1) expansion of social capital and network and (2) CoP as a safe space. The second set of findings included the knowledge, mindsets, and skills acquired through the primary content topics in the CoP: (1) developmental relationships and (2) racial equity and cultural humility. Finally, as a result of the collaboration and content, participants described four main learning outcomes which included (1) increased confidence, (2) growth mindset, (3) stress relief, and (4) deepened appreciation and passion for youth development work. These themes are presented in more detail next. Note that participant chosen pseudonyms are included with quotes, and some quotes were slightly edited for concision.

Value of the community of practice

To start with, the CoP yielded substantial value for participants in terms of networking and building their social capital (*expansion of social capital and network*). Participants found it valuable to exchange ideas with each other, such as sharing impactful practices and strategies from their respective programs (“there are things that I’ve heard other organizations do, and I’m like wow, that sounds really great. Maybe we should try that” [Jane]). For many participants, the connections built in EA led to building new, valuable, cross-organization collaborations outside of the CoP. For example, participants hosted joint events and supported each other’s programming by serving as guest speakers. The sharing of ideas, strategies, and resources positioned the participants and their programs to work *with* each other as opposed to as competitors.

I have made some pretty good connections as far as hearing programs that are asking for assistance on certain areas where maybe they feel that they’re not the strongest in, and I feel that maybe our program can help... It’s really developed and

bridged a lot of connections of supporting each other's program and not seeing our organizations as competition, but as a support network and for our communities and the youth that we serve. So, those connections definitely bring value to not just the work that we do here, but it also just enhances the collaborations and partnerships that we have with other ones. –Hypetune

Another important value that participants reported is the *CoP as a safe space*. Specifically, participants appreciated the CoP as a space for them to be vulnerable in sharing their own experiences and “really listen to what other people are doing and really be able to share ideas and collaborate” (Kristen). Being in such a safe space validates participants' experiences and struggles, helping them feel affirmed, reassured, and validated.

It gives us professionals the chance to talk about it with people who understand like, you know, every day is different. Some days with youth development, there are really good days and other days, it's not such a great day. Just kind of having a cohort of minded people who understand both the highs and the lows of it. –Liz

As Liz shared above, being in the CoP allowed participants to see that they are not alone in facing challenges at work, which seemed especially valuable for youth development professionals in small organizations who often do not have many colleagues of similar job responsibilities. Importantly, participants noted that the CoP is a safe space for like-minded professionals to get together *and problem solve*, as opposed to merely group venting without constructive next steps. Relatedly, the CoP as a safe space also facilitated learning, for example through understanding other people's perspectives. As Jackie shared below, the CoP as a safe space is integral to the *learnings* that happened, which we present next.

If it weren't for having a group where we can actually feel safe to talk about those things [content topics covered in EA], I think I would've still been challenging myself to just learn, but really not knowing how to talk about that with our youth and adults in general. –Jackie

Developmental relationships

Participants described the value of learning about Developmental Relationships as part of the CoP, which was captured in four themes. To begin with, participants reported *increased knowledge and skills* through understanding the Developmental Relationships framework, its relational strategies, and associated resources (e.g., activity guides) for building relationships with the youth they serve. Even though many participants came in with existing knowledge about relationship building, like Benny shared below, they reported that the CoP affirmed or reinforced their practices and gave vocabulary to concepts that they already were familiar with but did not necessarily have a name for.

With the developmental relationships framework, they were things that we were already doing a lot of, and it was nice to know that they have names and that they can be measured. So I think that's a cool part of just like confirming some things that you already know, with a more provable format. - Benny

Related but distinct from growing knowledge and skills is participants' changing mindset about Developmental Relationships. Specifically, participants talked about having *greater intentionality* about cultivating a relationally-rich environment for youth.

I think I'm taking my job more seriously, and understanding that there is an impact. Something I always think about is when you grow up, there's just certain things that stick with you from when you were a kid. For instance, you could have a really wonderful experience with a teacher all throughout second grade, but then they said one thing to you that was kind of negative or hurt your feelings, and it sticks with you. So just trying to make sure that my experiences with my students are positive, or at least aren't things that will stick with them in a negative way, has been really important to me. It's always been important to me, but it's something that I think I have focused on a lot more since being in Excel Academy. - Riley

Next, many participants found value in applying what they learned about Developmental Relationships into their practice with both youth and colleagues. For example, participants adapted some activities that they did in the CoP to be used in their program, integrated relationship building content into their program's orientation/training, revised their program curriculum to align with the Developmental Relationships framework, and implemented new initiatives (e.g., family engagement nights) designed to strengthen relationships with youths' families. The *impacts from the applications of Developmental Relationship* learnings were apparent when participants received positive feedback from their colleagues, managers, and external partners. For example, Jackie talked about how meaningful it was to be asked by educators (external partners of her work) to observe her session because they heard good things from the students she served. Receiving such positive feedback for applying their learnings on developmental relationships further reassures participants that they are "doing things right"; in Jackie's words, "this is the year where I'm like, oh, they actually do like me". This relates to how the CoP provides participants with a reinvigorated sense of purpose, joy, and passion as youth development professionals.

Many of the applications of learnings on developmental relationships were a result of a survey that participants collected and interpreted as part of the CoP. Participants valued how the survey provided an opportunity for them to better understand the quality of youth's experiences in their programs. For many, gathering and interpreting data on youth's reported level of developmental relationships helped them *identify priorities for program improvement*. For example, Riley noticed that the youth she

served reported a relatively low level of expanding possibilities, one element of developmental relationships, and thus decided to make it a priority to integrate more career exploration and emphasis on real-world opportunities into their programming. As another example, Luke wanted to ask youth directly about program improvement: “At some point we’re wanting to share that information with our teens so we can show them, ‘Hey, this is the feedback we got, and this is what we want to work on.’ And then asking them, ‘What are ways we can better provide support or share power or expand your possibilities (two elements of developmental relationships)?” Relatedly, Celeste was inspired to create a new survey to get feedback from families, including families who have not recently attended programming, about how their program can improve. These examples suggest that participants’ experiences in the CoP were beginning to change how they think about *improving their program’s relational climate in a data-driven way*. As Riley put it, “I feel like Excel Academy has helped me think about data more positively and see how we can use that to better enhance our program, and not just take it in a way that feels critical of ourselves.”

Finally, participants reported the value of learning developmental relationships content in terms of *reconceptualizing relational success*. Many participants reported that as a result of the CoP, they value person-centered, relationally-focused metrics of success such that they learned to prioritize the quality of relationships over the mere number of young people served, understanding that “*relationships are the work*”. For example, participants shared that while they previously placed the most emphasis on ‘hitting their numbers’ (number of young people showing up for programming), they now care more about the quality of the experiences they are providing to young people.

Before I would define my success as like, oh, how many students were like attending the program. And like if we had like a lot of students to me, that was success...But I feel like now, even on days where, you know, I have one student...To me, that’s success, because that’s one student who’s returning to a space where they feel safe, or they feel like oh, this is a safe adult that I can connect with or engage with, as a kind of mentor or something that’s like, supporting me. And I feel it’s really redefined my view of successes. It’s not the quantity like, how many students are in there, even though that’s great, and we want, you know, more and more students to be in the program, but making that connection with a young person and like, yeah, building that relationship with them, where they feel comfortable, and they feel safe, and they come to you and they like, you know, ask you for support, or you know, just the most basic thing of like, just having a conversation, like an honest and genuine conversation with someone that cares about you. That’s how I feel my idea of success has been redefined that I no longer see it in, like numbers, but it’s like, the connections I’m making with the kids. - Molly2

Racial equity and cultural humility

Participants reported a range of value in learning about racial equity and building cultural humility as part of the community of practice, which is summarized across five themes. Similar to learning about developmental relationships, participants found value in *gaining knowledge and skills*, such as understanding the definitions of some key concepts (e.g., dominant cultural norms, White supremacy, cultural belonging, redlining) and doing activities (e.g., racial journey map, identities reflection) that, as Bees described below, opened their eyes to how their past experiences and upbringing shaped the way they show up in their personal and professional life today.

My boss, not acknowledging me because...out of my team I'm one of the darkest ones, like...for a long time like I wouldn't get talked to. Nothing would go my way. ... And then growing up, too, is being very dark complexioned in certain places. It [CoP] just opened my eyes on how to cater more to children that look like me and help them understand, like, nothing's wrong with you. ...Like how to make them feel more comfortable in their own skin and like, don't worry... Don't listen to anybody else, just focus on you and thrive. –Bees

Going hand in hand with the increase in knowledge and skills, the CoP also changed participants' thinking, perspective, and mindset in that it *provoked awareness* about inequities. As Riley explained, the CoP made them realize how their program was falling short in terms of serving youth from all backgrounds, and that the CoP “presents it in such a way that doesn't make you feel guilty. It doesn't make you feel like you're at fault for any of those things. It's just telling you, you're human”. As Liz's quote below alluded to, participants also found learning about racial equity through the CoP valuable as they gain more awareness of the social issues affecting the youth they serve.

The saying that keeps sticking with me is, “Don't change the flower, change the garden.” With how our education system is and how it treats the kids we work with, that our brains are kind of trained to think, “Oh, let's problem solve this way, and problem solve the kid.” But instead, we should be problem solving the school and like the education system that puts them in that position in the first place. It's really changed my perspective on it, and kind of just helped me look at our kids' academic struggles a little differently. –Liz

As such, for many participants, the CoP cultivates their *cultural humility*, “I'm...still connecting to the community and learning about what's going on. I still think that's a everlasting journey. You cannot ever be culturally competent” (AJ). With the changes in thinking, perspective, and mindset, many participants reported becoming more intentional about racial equity and a desire to make changes. For example, participants reported becoming more intentional about creating inclusive spaces, listening to youth (e.g.,

through empathy interviews) and noticing their needs (“you don’t know what they’re going through in their lives”), unlearning unhealthy norms, and using welcoming languages.

Putting the growing knowledge, skills, and mindsets into action, participants reported ample examples of how they made *equity-centered changes in practice* at work, such as advocating for recruiting more diverse colleagues, having brave conversations (on issues like race, discrimination, power dynamics) with their youth and colleagues, adding a social justice component to their program curriculum, and bringing training on unconscious biases to their staff orientation. Relatedly and importantly, participants also described equity-centered changes in practice in their personal lives, including becoming more open to diverse perspectives (e.g., having tools to “interact with people that I don’t see eye to eye” [Benny]), having racial equity related conversation with their children, becoming more vocal about their perspectives, and relating racial equity to broader social contexts outside of work.

At a high level, some participants found the learnings on racial equity and cultural humility valuable as it made them *conceptualize success for their work in more equity-centered ways*.

At the end of the day, how the higher ups see success is if the grant numbers are met. For me, at the end of the day is do you feel confident in speaking up for yourself? Do you feel confident in going to college or going to trade school or doing an apprenticeship? Do you have the tools necessary to manage situations that aren’t fair to you because of how you look or how you present yourself? That’s my success. If students are able to leave feeling like they were seen, they were heard and they can navigate spaces a little bit more easily, just a little bit. –AJ

Finally, it is important to note that many participant’s learning pertains to the *intersecting dimensions of (in)equity*, such as reflecting on how they can better serve LGBTQ+ youth, neurodivergent youth, and youth with traumatic backgrounds, etc.

It has helped me improve our procedures for certain things. Making sure that I’m taking the time to provide information, surveys, whatever it is in Spanish as well as English, because that’s the majority of the population that we serve. There’s a lot of Spanish speakers. It also made me really think critically about our registration and application process for our program. Are the questions that I’m asking, are they being asked in an equitable light? For example, when we’re asking someone to identify their gender, we only have male and female as an option. What other checkboxes can we put to make it more inclusive? Instead of using the word parent, parent, parent, in the communication that we’re giving or providing to people, using the word guardian or circle of care or whatnot, because we do have a lot of students that are not being raised by a parent. They’re being raised by a grandparent or an aunt or a brother or sister. So really just looking at the procedural stuff and figuring out how I can make it more equitable and inclusive. –Kristen

Overall value

Overall, participants reported several additional forms of value that pertain to their experiences from the CoP holistically. To start with, participants found being a part of the CoP valuable because it made them *more confident*.

I've been in my role as a facilitator since 2019. I think that sometimes there's an impostor syndrome. You know, I don't have a college degree, and that's kind a source of, like, man, "everyone else is highly educated all these people around me, and here I am... Am I equipped to do these things?" And I think that just being in a room with a bunch of people that's inviting, and you know, don't make anybody feel less than, I think I'm just feeling more confident within my role as someone who can work with and hopefully empathize and be someone that they can trust for the volunteers that come through for the parents that come through, for the kids that come through. So I'm just becoming a better version of myself, and, and being someone that they can count on. –JohnSmith

Relatedly, participants found being a part of the CoP valuable because it made them more *open to growth/learning*, which looks like taking other people's ideas and advice to better serve youth, and "being more open and not shut to other viewpoints" (Purple20). This overall mindset shift to be more open to growth also relates to giving oneself grace in valuing improvement over perfection; as Kristen put it, "it's helping me realize that as long as I am trying and doing my best, that is success. It doesn't have to be perfect."

Taken together, the increased confidence and growth mindset both contributed to participants feeling *work becoming less stressful* (in Purple20's words, "I'm not, like gritting my teeth every time"). Feeling less stressed at work further benefited participant's personal lives as well, for example by not carrying so much emotional burden and tension back to their families. Relatedly, participants also reported an increased awareness of the needs for self care as a result of participating in the CoP ("to take care of myself, like mentally, emotionally, physically so that I can show up better when I'm trying to create these relationships [Alexander]).

Finally, tying many of the findings together, participants found the CoP valuable as it *deepened their appreciation and rejuvenated their passion for their work* and the youth development field at large. Kay shared that, through the CoP, she got reminded and gained clarity on why she chose to be in the youth development field to start with, which was particularly valuable at times when she felt like she was not making an impact. Tina shared a similar sentiment and added that she found it valuable "seeing that other people are out there doing the work and also that everyone's contributing, that the world's just not necessarily falling on my shoulders, that it's a shared experience and we're all out here doing what we can to help serve San Antonio's youth and community", which speaks to the affordances of CoP in bringing people together with a shared purpose and bringing a sense of reassurance to participant's professional identities.

It just made me more passionate about the work that you do. Especially being in a room of people very like-minded, and are doing the same work that you do, and willing to take this with such an open mind, and really take back what you're learning in these sessions. I think it definitely helps grow and kind of guide that what you're doing is needed and relevant. –Veronica

Discussion

The goal of this study is to understand the value that OST youth development professionals report from participating in a CoP aimed at building their capacity around developmental relationships, racial equity, and cultural humility. Findings demonstrate that participants found a wide array of value including (1) building a collaborative network of youth serving professionals and organizations within the same community, (2) building their own skills, competencies, and mindsets through a shared and applied learning spaces, and (3) developing their self-efficacy and renewed sense of purpose in their role in the field. To start with, the collaborative CoP design encouraged participants to exchange ideas and impactful strategies and practices, as well as to establish cross-organizational collaborations. This finding aligns with the literature on CoP's benefit for expanding participant's social capital and networks (Merritt et al., 2023; Ross, Buglione, & Safford-Farquharson, 2011; Shanahan & Sheehan, 2020). In addition to the tangible exchanges of resource and cross-organizational collaborations, our findings also showed that the expanded social network and capital cultivate a collaborative (as opposed to competitive) *mindset* among youth developmental professionals. This change in mindset is crucial, for example at times when youth development funding is scarce. Importantly, youth development is ecological– it takes a village to support a youth's thriving (Akiva et al., 2023). As such, CoP might be a valuable avenue for activating and mobilizing community-level changes for youth thriving by broadening youth development professionals' reach beyond their respective programs. That is, CoP provides opportunities for youth development professionals to exchange resources and collaborate, in doing so expanding their reach and impact beyond their own programs. This more holistic and coordinated way of serving youth could be particularly helpful in contexts where youth-serving systems are fragmented (Ignatowski et al., 2021)

In terms of the content topics that participants learned through the CoP (i.e., developmental relationships, racial equity and cultural humility), participants took away knowledge, skills, competencies, as well as awareness and new ways of thinking that they can apply to both their professional and personal lives. Specifically, there were many parallels and crossovers in the way that participants talked about what they took away from the CoP in terms of developmental relationships and racial equity, highlighting the centrality of relationships in advancing equity and PYD in OST programs.

This growth aligns well with the main categories of knowledge for youth development professionals, including foundational knowledge in PYD, knowledge of youth (including their culture), knowledge of group facilitation, and knowledge of organizational systems (Vance, 2012). Past research showed that professional development in such knowledge and competencies is centrally important, for example being more strongly associated with youth development professionals' retention than background factors such as their education level (Hartje et al., 2008). In fact, our findings showed that even for youth development professionals who already possess strong knowledge in the content topics, they still found the CoP valuable as it deepened their skills, offered new perspectives in understanding the topics, and gave vocabulary to concepts that they were already familiar with. Taken together, CoP could be a valuable avenue for youth development professionals to learn new skills, deepen their understanding, and engage in deep self work on topics that are relevant to their day to day, effectively functioning as a viable form of professional development for youth development professionals from a diversity of backgrounds (Garst et al., 2014).

Overall, the value that youth development professionals reported from being a part of the CoP ranged in great depth. For example, our findings speak to every category of the value creation framework (Wenger et al., 2011), which contributed to the design of this study to start with. At the immediate value level, participants reported interactions (e.g., the CoP as a safe space) and activities (e.g., relationship building and self reflection activities) that they find valuable in of itself. At the potential value level, participants reported new learnings, skills, and ways of thinking that they acquired from the CoP. Taking those potentials to the applied value level, participants shared various examples of changes in practice, both professionally and personally. Some of those changes in practice resulted in improvements or achievements (e.g., colleagues and collaborators praising their new approach), which get at the realized value level. Finally, at the transformative value level, participants talked about re-conceptualizing success for their work in a more relationally- ("relationships are the work") and equity-centered way. Taken together, our findings illustrate the range of value, from tangible to philosophical, that CoP offers for youth development professionals.

Implications for practice

Our findings can offer several implications for practice. For example, participants talked about how, at the end of the day, what matters most is building trusting relationships with young people so that they can be the best version of themselves and navigate the inequities around them. This can be seen as direct resistance and rebellion against the increasing top-down accountability demands in the OST field (e.g., pressure to meet

attendance requirements, to demonstrate increases in academic outcomes; Fusco et al., 2013). More broadly, our findings highlight the centrality of developmental relationships, racial equity, and cultural humility in how youth developmental professionals define success for themselves, suggesting that assessment and evaluation efforts perhaps should be aligned accordingly.

Another major finding from this study that has practical implications is the CoP's value in expanding participant's social capital and network. As mentioned in the introduction, youth development professionals often lack opportunities for career advancement and face workforce precarity (Baldrige et al, 2024; Yohalem, Pittman, & Moore, 2006). In this context, the social capital and network that participants gain through the CoP could support their social mobility by introducing them to people and organizations that could help advance their careers. In essence, CoP helps build youth development professionals' connections and webs of support. Relatedly, our finding that participants developed deeper appreciation and/or rejuvenated passion for the OST field is very promising considering that increasing occupational self-identification might be a critical lever to create a sustainable, committed, and growing youth worker workforce and culture (Borden et al., 2020). Finally, the reduced stress and greater awareness for self care that participants reported are promising signs as youth development professionals need to fill their tanks in order to best serve their youth. Taken together, our findings suggest that CoP can offer critical value in terms of supporting and retaining the youth development workforce. As such, to leverage the values that CoP offers, we urge program leaders to advocate for their staff and their own participation in CoP like the one examined in this study (e.g., count time spent in CoP as valid professional development hours, check in regularly about learning from the CoP).

To create and sustain a CoP that offers tremendous value as described in this study, the role of intermediary organizations cannot be understated. Excel Academy is built with so much intention and love, as well as a continuous improvement mindset that adapts to the needs of the participants who join to learn, grow, and improve themselves and their work. The recent consensus report on OST youth development programs from the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (2025) in fact calls for more support for intermediary organizations to strengthen system-level coordination of OST programs.

Strength and limitations

A strength of this study is centering participants' own voice, as opposed to using externally prescribed expectations or standards to understand the community of practice (Dingyloudi et al., 2019). Another strength is the diversity within the youth development professionals who participated in

this study, both in terms of their personal background (e.g., race/ethnicity, educational backgrounds) and the programs they represent. Taken together, this study contributes to the literature on youth development professionals by uplifting the voices of those who are at the center of the field yet often underrepresented in the research literature. Relatedly, it should be noted that our participants and their experiences were grounded in the San Antonio, Texas (U.S.) context, which carries its own unique histories, and community strengths and needs. Future studies are encouraged to examine CoP of youth development professionals in other contexts. For example, it would be fruitful to understand how CoPs might similarly or differently facilitate growth in collaboration, self-efficacy, and professional identification in contexts where the youth development field is more professionalized and unified (Mann-Feder et al., 2017; Rannala et al., 2024).

An important limitation to note is that we only examined participant's first year experiences in the CoP. This is an intentional scope as the CoP's design is most intensive in the first year, and examining the impacts or yielded value at the end of the first year was an important benchmark for program improvement purposes. Nonetheless, future studies should examine how participant's experiences and learnings evolve from a longitudinal perspective. For example, how might participants realize the social capital and network that they accumulate over time through the CoP? How might participants' understanding and change in practice of racial equity crystallize over time? As participant AJ put it, "you cannot ever be culturally competent", it would be fruitful for future studies to examine youth development professional's journey in demonstrating cultural humility in their work overtime.

Finally, another limitation to note is that those who agreed to be interviewed for this study might have had a more positive experience than those who dropped out or chose not to participate. Given our involvement in the CoP, we know that most of the reasons for participants dropping out have nothing to do with this study (e.g., family medical emergency, moving out of state), yet the self-selective nature of our study is still a valid concern and could have positively biased the findings. Future research could strive to understand the experiences of those who are less engaged in a CoP or intentionally drop out; of course, it will be important to do so without being an additional burden for professionals who might be already feeling burned out and overwhelmed.

Conclusion

Centering the voices and lived experiences of youth development professionals, this study shows the wide array of value and successes of a community of practice (CoP). The collaborative nature of the CoP expanded

participant's social capital and network, for example as evident in the cross-organization collaborations that came out as a result of participants making connections in the CoP. The collaborative nature of the CoP also is core to facilitating participants' learning, in this case on topics of developmental relationships, racial equity, and cultural humility, which yielded increase in knowledge and skills, as well as more intentional way of thinking. Participants applied those learnings into work, making relationship- and equity-centered changes in practice and ways of defining success. Overall, the youth development professionals in this study found the CoP, which they described as a safe space, to be valuable so much so that it increased their confidence and deepened their appreciation and passion for the youth development field at large. Our findings have implications for CoP as a viable form of professional development in support of strengthening and retaining the youth development workforce.

Note

1. We follow the Forum for Youth Investment (Yohalem, Pittman, & Moore, 2006) in defining *youth development professionals*, often also called youth workers, as those who work, primarily in informal (out-of-school time) settings across a variety of systems, with or on behalf of youth to facilitate their personal, social, and educational development and support them in navigating their voices, influence, and place in society.

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Data availability statement

Data that informed this study available upon request from the corresponding author.

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Appendix 1. Interview questions

- Why did you join Excel Academy?
 - (probe for those who were told/asked to sign up) Once you know you'd be participating in Excel Academy, what were you hoping to get out of your experience?
- (if not answered in question 1): What did you hope to gain from participating in Excel Academy?
 - (back up question) What were your goals or motivations for joining Excel Academy? What value did you expect to get out of participating in Excel Academy?
- From your perspective, please describe what happens in Excel Academy.
- What is your experience of what happens in Excel Academy?
 - (back up question) What would you say was the most fun or inspiring aspect of Excel Academy? Why?
 - (back up question) With whom did you interact or make connections with? How are the connections influential to you?
 - (back up question) How relevant to you were the activities/interactions in Excel Academy?
- What have you gained from participating in Excel Academy?
 - (probe if not covered already) What specific skills, knowledge, connections, or ways of thinking have you gained from participating in Excel Academy?
 - (back up question) Do you feel more inspired or confident after participating in Excel Academy? Why or why not?
 - (back up question) Has Excel Academy introduced you to an important connection or resource? How would you describe the quality or level of those new connections?
- What changes have you made to your practice as a result of your participation in Excel Academy this year?
- In what ways, if any, have applied your learnings from Excel Academy this year to your work?
 - (back up question) Where, when and how have you used a practice, resource, learning, or way of thinking that came out of Excel Academy? Was that successful or not? At what level (individual, team/unit, program/organization)?
 - (back up question) Are there any other ways that you've applied what you've learned from Excel Academy in your practice?
- How, if at all, has participating in Excel Academy impacted the way you show up in your job?
 - (probe) Has participating in Excel Academy had an impact on your ability to achieve what matters to you or other key people in your organization?
- What changes have you been able to implement within your organization as a result of your participation in Excel Academy?

- What changes have you made professionally as a result of participating in Excel Academy?
- What changes have you made personally as a result of participating in Excel Academy?
 - (back up question) What aspects of your performance has Excel Academy affected? How did you become aware of this?
 - (back up question) What has your organization been able to achieve because of your participation in Excel Academy?
 - (back up question) How, if at all, has participating in EA impacted the kinds of metrics/evidence you or your organization is using to evaluate performance?
- How, if at all, has your participation in Excel Academy caused you to reconsider what matters most to you in your work?
- Relatedly, how, if at all, has what you've learned from Excel Academy impacted the way you define success for yourself in your role?
- How, if at all, has what you've learned in Excel Academy and implemented in your organization impacted what your organization values?
 - (probe) Or, How has what you've learned impacted how you or your organization defines success?
 - (back up question) Has a new framework or system evolved or been created as a result of the new understandings that came out of Excel Academy this year?
- We've talked a lot about Excel Academy already, now I want to tie everything together and hear your thoughts about all the topics that are covered in Excel Academy: what do you see as the main skills and topics taught in Excel Academy?
 - (probe) What are some connections that you see between the major content areas (i.e., *insert participant response*), if any?
 - (probe) What about racial equity?
 - What about Results Counts?
 - What about Developmental Relationships?
 - What about Learning about your Developmental Relationships data?
 - What about the networking aspect of Excel Academy?
 - How do you see [Whichever topic you are focused on] being related to the other content areas that you talked about already, if at all?
- Thank you for everything you shared already! I'd like to continue to learn from your experience and gather your insights, and just to change up the modality a bit. To do that, I'd like to go through an activity with you. Up until this point, we've been talking about your experiences more broadly within Excel Academy. Now you'll have a chance to really dial in and share about one specific meaningful activity that you participated in through Excel Academy. Once you

have that activity in mind, we'll walk through some reflection questions:

- What did you get out of that meaningful experience? Describe the valuable knowledge, skill, resource, or connection that the experience produced for you.
- How have you used what you got out of that meaningful experience (i.e., response to the previous question) in your practice? How has it helped you in your work?
- How has the meaningful experience affected your performance? How has it contributed to your program's success?
- Sometimes, a meaningful experience can change how someone defines success or what they find valuable in their program. How does or doesn't this ring true in this example?
- Is there anything else you'd like to share with me about your experience participating in Excel Academy before we wrap up?