**PATHWAYS PROJECT LEAAP FINDINGS**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

# Project Overview

The Pathways Project is a study on positive youth development that intends to create knowledge that is useful to youth programs and their staff. The purpose is to understand how young people develop skills in youth programs, and how these skills transfer to other parts of their lives.

Members of our research team from the University of Illinois collected extensive data from youth, parents, and leaders at the LEAAP program from September 2012 to May 2013. Our findings show that LEAAP is a highly effective youth development program.

Students report that participation in LEAAP is a life-changing experience. Many said that it helped them “come out of their shell” or wake up to a wider world. As a result of their experiences, students become more aware of other people, including people who are different than them. They become more aware of their community; and they report feeling more responsible to others, their school, and the community. Along with this, youth describe becoming more able to act – to make a difference in the world. Working on projects in LEAAP helps them build the self-confidence, initiative, and resilience to pursue long term goals, including attending college. They develop vital skills for planning, teamwork, leadership, and working with adults and adult institutions. In sum, LEAAP changes young people’s life outlook; they gain a more outward, open, and inclusive view of the world. They gain an expanded awareness of future possibilities, and gain the skills, maturity, and self-direction to purse them. Many parents of LEAAP members confirm that that participation in LEAAP had positive influences on their children, making them more open, responsible, and mature.

## a. Program supports

We first examined the supports the program provides for students’ learning and growth. LEAAP has three core features that distinguish high quality youth development programs (Lerner et al., 2009; Hirsch et al., 2011).

**1. Positive relationships.** LEAAP provides the type of sustained and trusting relationships with adult staff that research finds are vital to effective learning (National Research Council, 2002, 2012). Youth in the program describe the program leaders as concerned, reliable adults who listen to them. It also provides positive collaborative relationships with peers, which are a valuable asset to learning (National Research Council, 2002, 2012).

**2. Skill building activities.** Students’ roles and responsibilities in LEAAP have the type of demanding challenges that help youth learn important life and career skills (National Research Council, 2002). Leaders provide support, assistance, and feedback that help youth learn these skills in ways consistent with best practices for supporting young people’s learning and development (National Research Council, 2012).

**3. Youth engagement**. Our research found that members of LEAAP experience active engagement in their work and have high levels of motivation. Research shows that this active, highly motivated engagement is associated with greater and deeper learning (National Research Council, 2005; Durlak et al. 2010).

## b. Program Outcomes: Life and career skills

A national panel of business and government leaders has stressed the vital importance of youth developing a set of four essential life and career skills, skills that are often less central in the classroom (Partnership for 21st Skills, 2009). We found that participants in LEAAP reported substantial development of skills in all four of these domains.

**1. Interpersonal skills.** Experiences in LEAAP help youth gain effective teamwork and communication skills. Youth also learn how to respect differences and express themselves with confidence in group settings.

**2. Responsibility and leadership.** Youth in LEAAP describe becoming more responsible to the people they work with and for the tasks at hand. Members also report that the program helped them develop and practice leadership skills. They report transferring this sense of responsibility and leadership to their lives at home and to the classroom.

**3. Initiative, productivity and self-direction.** Participation in LEAAP enhances students’ skills for organization, planning ahead, and taking initiative. Youth describe learning to think strategically and maintain a positive mindset.

**4. Flexibility and adaptability.** Participating in LEAAP enhances youth’s flexibility and resiliency, which are critical in modern life. Students learn skills for bouncing back from setbacks and dealing with complicated emotions.

**Parents’ perspectives on youth outcomes.** Parents in the study report that participation in LEAAP has increased their children’s maturity and sense of responsibility. Parents also observed positive impacts on leadership skills and self-confidence.

## c. Family dynamics

Research suggests that program benefits can be enhanced when parents support their child’s participation in it (National Research Council, 2002). Parents report having positive feelings about the program and staff. Both youth and parents report that parents support their child’s involvement in ways that contributed to students’ engagement in the program.

**1. Parents have positive feelings about the program and staff.** Parents feel LEAAP is a worthwhile use of their child’s time, approve of their child’s LEAAP peers, and appreciate the opportunities the program provides for their child’s personal and social development. Parents also view LEAAP adult staff positively, and believe that the program is an inclusive multicultural environment.

**2. Parents support youth’s participation.** Parents play a “behind the scenes” role in supporting their youth’s participation in LEAAP, by expressing verbal support, providing advice, and checking in about program tasks. This was evident in both youth and parent reports.