

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



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

—Susana, Changemaker

Making A Difference: The Ossining/Open Roads' Changemaker Program

An Evaluation of Program Outcomes

A research team affiliated with Manhattanville College conducted this interview study of outcomes of an innovative experiential program piloted in the Ossining School District for 6 months, from July through December 2023. The project was led by faculty member Dr. Joanne Marien in conjunction with four doctoral students - Rosa Amendola, Jeffrey Cole, Claire Comerford, and Ashley Cruz - as part of their coursework requirements for the EdD degree in educational leadership. The research project was then continued in fall, 2024 by six Manhattanville doctoral students who interviewed Changemakers '24 as well as a sample of alumnae from the original cohort of Changemaker's '23.

Ossining Changemaker Program – Summer, 2023

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

their lives through journal writing and intentional conversations, and discover new ways to become authors of their own life stories.

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

The Changemaker program as described above was repeated in 2024. However, this time the cohort was comprised of four students from each of three neighboring districts: Peekskill, Ossining, and Tarrytown. Findings from second study are situated as an addendum to the initial (Changemaker '23) report that follows.

Purpose of Study

The aim of this research project was to explore the outcomes of the Changemaker program as seen through student participants' eyes. The study illuminated students' perceptions of program benefits and outcomes while pointing to suggested ways the program model might be

modified. In particular, we explored how students might have self-reported growth in any of the following five positive, mutually reinforcing indicators of positive youth development as described in the five Cs: competence, confidence, connection, character, and caring (Phelps et al., 2009).

Associated Research

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

Benefits of the Outdoors

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

Positive Youth Development: The Five Cs

This research study explored students' self-reporting of improved well-being attributed to participation in the Changemaker program. We framed our research and data analysis around the positive indicators of youth development as represented in the five Cs model (Phelps et al., 2009). Positive youth development (PYD) is an increasingly popular, assets-based approach to understanding and guiding program practice; it assumes a holistic perspective of youth well-

being. The PYD perspective reflects that every adolescent has strengths, or at least the capacity to develop strengths, that will enable them to grow in a positive direction (R. M. Lerner, 2006). This approach also maintains youth are fully capable of learning and developing skills, exploring the world around them, and then making contributions to that world (Lewis, 2008).

The five Cs is a prominent PYD model structured around five positive, mutually reinforcing indicators of youth development: competence, confidence, connection, character, and caring. Competence relates to one's positive outlook on their actions in any realm: academic, cognitive, social, and vocational (Phelps et al., 2009). Confidence refers to one's positive sense of self-worth and demonstration of self-efficacy (Phelps et al., 2009). Connection is seen through constructive and supportive relationships with others in one's home, school, and community. Character relates to one's sense of right and wrong and respect for rules and the rights of others (Bowers et al., 2010). Caring refers to one's sense of concern for others: how they sympathize and empathize (Phelps et al., 2009). R. M. Lerner (2006) hypothesized combining the five Cs leads to the emergence of a sixth competence: contribution. Contribution may take many forms, ranging from bettering oneself to contributing positively to one's family, and to the local and global communities (J. V. Lerner et al., 2009).

Setting

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

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

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

Sample

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

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

Research Methodology

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

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

Research Questions

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

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

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

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

Findings: Changemakers '23

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

Program Impact

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

“One Grain in a Big Giant World”

Each participant described being awe-struck by their immersion in such a profoundly beautiful natural environment. Bianca summed this up when she shared, “I was just, ‘Wow,’

especially the setting; being in Utah is so beautiful!” Several noted being in an environment for a sustained period was conducive to a sense of peacefulness:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"It's Nice to Step Out of Your Comfort Zone"

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

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

Kristen: [At first}, I wasn't sure about the trip. I was nervous. But I feel it's sometimes nice to step out of your comfort zone. And just try new things because honestly, I've

never been camping, and honestly, I probably wouldn't have done it if it weren't for this trip. So it's really nice to just step out of your comfort zone; I liked it. I enjoyed it. It was definitely something new and something that I think I learned a lot from.

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

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

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

"Technology Isn't Everything"

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

Sofia: My most important takeaway is probably that technology isn't everything, like a big importance in life, because we spent almost a whole week without our phones for days, but we're usually always on our phone. So that's probably, the biggest takeaway

[was] how to survive without being on tech, technology, or not speaking with your relatives or anything.

Jasmin: They took our phones away because they wanted us to be talking to each other.

But, actually, I'm super grateful that they took it because I guess I really got close together. I think also about my habits with technology: coming back, I was like, "okay, there are changes you have to make." I deleted a lot of apps coming back from the trip. It was a really good experience for me. I think my priorities have changed a lot. I think I learned so much about being out there and having such a bones' deep love of nature. I have changed my perspective of a lot of how I view my education, and how I view myself, and what I want to be in the future.

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

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

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

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

apps coming back from the trip like it was a really good experience for me; 100% , I have a habit of mixing both things.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Growth in Each Five C

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

Competence: "I'm More Capable"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Susana: Our issues with water have been more about pollution of water and the ecosystem that exists inside the water, rather than who's getting how much water and

how. So hearing our guides, especially Claude, talk about, you know, the impacts of having to partition off this water to different states and what a toll that takes on the ecosystem and on the wildlife was super impactful.

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

Confidence: "I Am More Confident Than Ever"

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

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

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

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

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

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

Kristen: Overall, I've been talking about stepping out of my comfort zone because that's what most impacted me. Before, I just wouldn't try new stuff, and now doing the trip, I definitely feel much more confident in doing new stuff and just trying something completely new.

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

Connection: "It Was Nice to Build That Bond"

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

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

Susana: When you're with people for an extended period of time, you start picking up their little mannerisms and their habits, and you're forming a relationship in an isolated

context, which is really cool... I got to talk to people that I never really talked to, and I got to connect with people and become closer with people that I saw all the time and didn't have that much of a strong connection with before. Coming back from this trip and being on this trip completely changed that for me. I started being very honest with myself and being very honest with other people. I think it very much separated me from that fear that you have been judged.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Character: "I Am More of a Leader"

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

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

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

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

Sofia: I am more of a leader.

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

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

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

Contribution: "Helping to Better People"

R. M. Lerner (2006) asserts that the combination of the five Cs leads to the emergence of a sixth competence: contribution. Contribution may take many forms, ranging from contributing to or bettering oneself to contribute positively to one's family, local, or global community (J. V. Lerner et al., 2009). As affirmed throughout this report, students repeatedly pointed to ways they personally bettered themselves, ranging from their increased confidence and competence in

numerous areas to their deepened relationships and sense of caring for one another to an enhanced sense of self-understanding and resolve to improve certain of their ways of being.

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

Making Meaning, Making a Difference: After-School Sessions

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Participants' Recommendations

Participants were invited to offer suggestions for shaping the design of the program going forward. The sole suggested change referred to “the bathroom situation” as students referred to

it. Bianca summed it up best, and said, “All the girls including myself are like this, but I think they called it the baño (bathroom) because it’s not something that we’re used to, you know. But when we’re out there, we have no other choice.” Bathrooms aside, most students asserted the program design and format should remain as they are. Students were especially pleased with the opportunities to be immersed in nature and unplugged with ample time for self-reflection and thoughtful conversations.

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

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

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

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

Susana: [I agreed with] the purpose of the trip [which] was to help young Latina women become more into their identity. I think the purpose of it was really leadership, but what ultimately ended up happening was you put these young Latin women in a space with two strong Latin advisors. And you get these really beautiful conversations about family and expectations and the roles because everyone in that space is able to relate. And so, because you have 12 Latin American girls in a space, there are some great conversations

happening there. If you have heterogeneous groups, perhaps that's not something that will result.

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

Giselle: Having the Latinx community was very powerful.

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

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

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

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

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

Most Changemakers asserted the selection process should be more inclusive. Although grades were not part of the nomination criteria, several participants noted that criteria should extend

beyond academic grades; they emphasized that leadership potential is not reflected solely through grades:

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

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

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

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

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

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

Closing Thoughts

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

—Jasmin

A fundamental intent of the Changemaker program was to offer this extraordinary experience solely to a cohort of high school women who identified as Latina. The premise was that this program would provide a safe and affirming environment where participants could comfortably flourish. Our findings confirmed this goal was well placed, and it was met. The exclusive inclusion of Latinas set the stage for the remarkable personal growth that resulted from program participation. Notably, student participants received academic credit for participating in the Changemaker program. This program model offered an innovative example of how the best student learning can occur outside traditional classroom walls.

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

This growth was facilitated by Open Roads' purposeful approach to every aspect of the river trip; they offered the Changemakers time for self-reflection and facilitated thoughtful conversations on the meaning of community and one's personal responsibility to contribute. The in-school follow-up sessions, led by capable, trusted advisors who had shared in the summer trip, were vital to solidifying students' thinking and deepening their thoughts on how they might

answer their responsibility as community leaders and contributors to the greater good. Our study offered evidence in support R. M. Lerner’s (2006) assertion that the combination of the five Cs leads to the emergence of a sixth competence: contribution. We anticipate evidence of further growth in this indicator as the Changemakers put their Declarations of Intent into action. A follow-up study is highly recommended.

We close with one final, important point: The success of such an intricately designed and ambitious program rests upon the commitment and talents of those who plan and deliver such programs. Repeatedly, participants referred to the thoughtful intent of every detail of the program design. Most of all, as is true in education, the mentors and advisors who were side-by-side with students on the trip and then back at school made all the difference to participants, and to the striking, heartwarming success of this uniquely innovative program. We commend them for blazing this unique and promising trail.



PHASE TWO RESEARCH: REPORT OF FINDINGS, NOVEMBER, 2024

A research team of doctoral students from Manhattanville University interviewed 14 participants of the Changemaker program Cohort 2024 as well as alumnae from the '23 program. Continuing with the process employed by last year’s research team, we sought evidence of indicators of positive youth development as reflected in the five Cs - competence, connection, confidence, character, and caring (Phelps et al., 2009). Additionally, our team examined whether Cohort ‘24’s insights and experiences differed from those of the pilot Cohort ‘23. The study also followed up with Cohort ‘23 alumnae to understand any lasting impacts of the program.

Mission and Setting

The Changemaker Program aims to cultivate leadership skills among young Latina women with exceptional leadership potential. The program's mission has remained the same since its initial launch in 2023 but it has expanded its geographic representation to include two additional schools this year. Cohort '24 is comprised of students from three high schools in Westchester County: Ossining High School, Sleepy Hollow High School, and Peekskill High School. Ossining High School is 33 miles north of New York City. In the 2023-2024 school year, 1,552 students were enrolled in grades 9-12. The student population comprised 9% Black, 64% Hispanic or Latino, 4% Asian or Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander, 19% White, and 3% multiracial. According to the New York State Education Department, 57% of the student population is economically disadvantaged. Sleepy Hollow High School, in Tarrytown, NY, is 31 miles north of New York City. In the 2023-2024 school year, 819 students were enrolled in grades 9-12. The student population comprised 3% Black, 65% Hispanic or Latino, 2% Asian or Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander, 27% White, and 2% multiracial. According to the New York State Education Department, 57% of the student population is economically disadvantaged. Peekskill High School is approximately 50 miles north of New York City. In the 2023-2024 school year, 1,015 students were enrolled in grades 9-12. The student population comprised 16% Black, 74% Hispanic or Latino, 1% Asian or Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander, 6% White, and 3% multiracial. According to the New York State Education Department, 67% of the student population is economically disadvantaged.

Sample

Study participants included 12 Changemakers: eight high school junior or senior members of the '24 Cohort, and four '23 Cohort alumnae, now college freshmen. Of the '24 Cohort, we interviewed three students from each the Ossining School District and Public Schools of Tarrytown though no respondents from Peekskill City School District. The four alumni participants all graduated from Ossining High School and are now college freshmen

Methodology and Research Questions

We employed the same methodology as outlined in last year's study. The purpose of our study was to chronicle the experiences and outcomes of the Changemaker program through the voices of the Latina high school students who participated in the program starting in summer, 2024. As reflected in a new, third research question, we expanded on last year's study by interviewing program alum from Cohort '23. The following research questions (RQs) guided our exploration:

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

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

RQ3: How do Changemaker alumnae describe the enduring impacts of the program?

New Participant Findings: Changemakers '24

Each participant discussed how the Changemaker experience broadened their perspective on their global community, fostering a sense of appreciation and responsibility for the natural world. Anna spoke of her heightened appreciation and responsibility toward nature:

Knowing that even nature is like us, like a person, if you break it, if you harm it...it'll be breaking... I feel like it made me more appreciative of nature itself, and I just try to be more mindful of the things I use, like how much plastic I use in a day, or if I can use things that are more resourceful, instead of wasting stuff, especially food and [instead] recycling, composting [doing] stuff like that. Seeing nature out there and seeing how beautiful it can be really made me want to maintain it that way and do my part.

Ava shared:

Once I saw the mountains, I kept on looking at them. It was beautiful. You see that love that mountains have. It made me even love nature even more. When I came back, I was like: 'It's all beautiful.' And it made me know that I really want to see more out there in the world, not just being in one little place.

Consistent with the prior Cohort, this newest group of Changemakers initially felt that disconnecting from cell phone screens and leaving home (the first time for some) was daunting. However, these feelings were fleeting as they began to trust each other, their guides, and themselves.

Evidence of Positive Youth Development - Five C's

As fully described in the initial section of this report, the five Cs is a prominent Positive Youth Development model structured around positive, mutually reinforcing indicators of youth development: competence, confidence, connection, character, and caring. Our research aimed to

explore how each of these indicators might have been evidenced or enhanced via students' participation in the Changemaker program. Findings from our interviews with Cohort '24 Changemakers were closely aligned with those from last year's study. Students' reflections on their experiences evidenced numerous examples of personal development in each of the five Cs. Our research adds considerable evidence to the conclusion that personal development is fostered through the Changemaker experience.

Because our findings so closely mirrored and reinforced those from last year's study, we chose to avoid redundancies in this segment of the report while offering only representative highlights from the interviews reflective of two main categories: broadening perspectives and developing connections.

Broadening perspectives

Participants cultivated a greater sense of self and developed their ability to self-reflect, often by examining their place in the world. Again and again, they shared how the broadened perspective of the trip led to feelings of increased self-awareness, competency, and self-empowerment. This was reflected in several comments:

Fernanda: I found myself, who I am, my power to do bigger things.

Anna: I learned I was capable of more than I thought and I did a lot of things out of my comfort zone.

AM: I do have some problems with self-esteem. So, the fact that I was able to get up on those rocks...I think that really helped. It did make me feel a lot more capable.

These feelings stayed with the girls after the trip, leading them to take greater personal risks when they returned:

Anna: One of the bigger things I've done recently is I spoke at a board meeting about the Changemakers program and then about another program I took over the summer. And that was a really big step for me because I spoke in front of a lot of my peers, a lot of higher people in the Board of Education, like my principal and teachers I knew. That was something that was a big step.

AM: When I got home, it was like this feeling of “Wow, I can really do anything!”

Ava: With the trip, I became more outspoken. Like at my school, I'm doing more things. [And now I also] connect more with my team. I would have never done that if the trip didn't help me in that way.

Developing connections: “These girls are amazing” (Ashley)

The connections that were made before, during, and after the trip were evidenced through numerous anecdotes. Each participant spoke about the strong bonds built through this program and how much they cared for each other. Due to the addition of two new schools, these bonds were not immediate for some participants. There also was some division between those who chose to speak Spanish and those who preferred English but the initial groupings or pairings did not last long. As the trip went on, the girls expressed intense bonds with each other:

Panda: I think my favorite part was being with the girls because we connected so quickly; the girls became like my sisters and the counselors became our second mothers.

Ashley: We got really close. Like, I can't say in a million words that it was the most special group I've been in.

Carmen: During the trip, we began to care for each other. For example, when some began to have a nosebleed, we supported and cared for each other as true friends.

The young women shared that the friendships built on the trip gave them a greater understanding of how having good friends enhances our own human growth and development. Ava shared how the trip helped her to refine her ability to develop relationships with others:

From the program, just honestly, I learned that once you get to know the people, you just appreciate them. Get to know them, little by little. I didn't think that it was so easy to trust people or easy to trust myself. [The trip] really helped me a lot. Sometimes it can be hard or scary to put yourself out there, but if you never put yourself out there, you'll never know how to connect with other people.

Anna shared how her broadened perspective impacted her relationships with others:

I made stronger, closer bonds with different people. And not just to have such a tight knit friend group, but like, make it like bigger, like having more friends, like from all different backgrounds.

Notably, the relationships formed on the trip led many participants to reevaluate their friendships at home; some understood that certain of their relationships were positive while others were negative:

Panda: And when I came back home, I was like, okay, so definitely, these people, I can't be with because they weren't good for me, and I want to find more girls like those [on the trip].

Anna: [I] know other people that this experience would definitely help and hopefully [would] allow them to be the best version of themselves.

Overall, each Changemaker had the highest praise for the program. Panda reflected the feelings of others when she said:

Every part of the trip, even the hard parts, made this experience perfect. The hikes, the long hikes, the hard hikes, the freezing cold water. Everything made this trip perfect, and a memorable experience.

When the young women returned home from the trip, they met with their faculty advisor for several sessions to process their experience and consider how they might translate their newfound sense of empowerment and responsibly into action.

Facilitating Close Connections Back At Home

“It’s kind of like herding cats a little bit this year,” Zaira Barajas, faculty advisor to the Changemaker program, stated when asked about the after-school component of the Changemaker program that aims to develop students’ vision for how they, as leaders, might use their newfound empowerment to have an intentional, positive impact on others.

Athletics and other after-school commitments have made bringing together participants from three different schools challenging, but Zaira has found a way to make it work. On Saturdays, the girls have regular check-ins to maintain the tight connections they have built.

Zaira: This year is more introspective and the girls are more working on how can they show up as leaders in different parts of their life, and how has this particular program really helped them solidify some of those leadership qualities that a lot of our girls are going to need, whether it be more as like lead by example, or sort of take a more active approach in their leadership.

Zaira also helps support the project they are working on for December's exhibition at the Jacob Burns Film Center in Pleasantville, NY. Equally important, she is focusing more this year on honing in on the girls' leadership skills, cultivating their strengths and talents.

Closing Thoughts and Recommendations: Changemaker '24 Program

Zaira plays a pivotal role in maintaining the cohesion of this program. Perhaps the faculty advisors at each school can be more engaged in helping to facilitate in-person discussions with the whole group. "Having them physically meet together is super important," notes Zaira. As the program continues to build in numbers, it will be important to maintain the intimacy of the trip within the fall component of the program. Integral to the cultivation of the five C's are the tight bonds within the whole group. Participants also expressed a desire to attend future trips. A reunion trip, even if local, could reinforce the relationships and give new opportunities for the Changemakers to evolve into mentors themselves.

Schools may also want to create an application process that will open the door to students who may be overlooked. "Girls who would benefit from this trip are girls who need to be more independent, who may spend too much time on their screens, who may need to expand their mind, and who would like to fight for their dreams and become leaders" (Carmen). Allowing students not nominated a chance to demonstrate why they might be a good fit for the program could broaden opportunities for young women who deserve the chance to be a Changemaker.

Findings: Alumna Interviews

Lasting Impact

Of the twelve alumnae of the 2023 Changemaker's trip, four were available to be interviewed. Interviewers asked the now-college freshmen about the lasting impact of the trip as related to their personal development (5 C's); we also inquired about students' Declarations of Intent. Now more than a year after they went on the Changemaker trip, the alumnae we interviewed expressed their gratitude for the opportunity and articulated how the trip continues to influence their lives. All participants shared that they initiated friendships on the river and that these have grown in depth in the past year. All also reported increased confidence.

Worth noting was that each alumna expressed a new and abiding appreciation for nature. The advantages of disconnecting from cell phones, especially while enjoying nature, has remained with the Changemaker alumnae. Several shared that they now spend more time outdoors to unwind and detach from social media:

Sydney: I went on a hiking trip this weekend, and it was just four random people, and we didn't have our phones. I'm super close with one of the girls now, because it was just like a connection. We weren't on our phones, and we just got to talk about our entire lives, because there was nothing else to do, but we enjoyed that. I think that's something that the trip definitely helped me with. I now value the importance of not having my phone when I'm around people, and I want to build those connections.

Sydney elaborated:

The connections that you build with people when you're not on your phone and on technology and you're out and you're doing activities are so much deeper than the ones when you're just in a classroom on your phone, just trying to be friends with anyone.

Liz added:

Trying to remove myself from social media stayed with me a lot. I didn't really take journaling too seriously, but I implemented that habit in me; that was really nice. We have a nature preserve [at college]. It's nice and to go and just sit by it. It is great; I like that a lot. I think working and trying to incorporate more nature activities have kept me grounded.

Reflections on the Five Cs

While each of the Five Cs—character, connections, confidence, caring, and competence - were reflected in the interviews, three were most especially prominent: connections, confidence, and caring. Caring and connections were represented through two lenses: caring and connection with and for others and caring for and connecting with nature. An increased sense of competence and confidence were also evidenced throughout the interviews.

Connections with others

Friendship was an overarching theme in the alumnae interviews. All alumnae interviewed reported making lasting friendships from the trip and articulated how they remain in touch with these friends. One alumna shared that she met her best friend on the journey:

The girl I was camping with in our tent, we're best friends right now. We FaceTime multiple times a day, every day. We really, really got close from that trip. And she's one of the great friendships.

Adding to that, another alum shared:

I met my best friend; we talk every single day. I used to be embarrassed about everything... and just all get out there. I think just trying to meet your people and trying to connect with people is really helpful.

Even though the participants of Changemakers '23 came from the same school and were familiar with each other, the trip deepened these connections and grew new relationships. It is worth noting that while the program director had referenced some cliques on that trip, this was not referenced by the alumnae interviewed. The development of connections and a sense of community had a notable lasting impact on Jean who shared,

I feel like something that stuck with me was the sense of community, because that's something we really talked about a lot, and...the whole project we had going on with serving in community and creating a community, I feel like it stuck with me.

Jean went on to explain how the importance of community stayed with her as she moved on to college:

Now coming into college, I was like: "Okay, how do I create my community here? How do I help my community [through} friends or clubs?" And, yeah, I feel like it just started all back there with the whole community club we had with our guides and everybody. It's just something that really stuck with me.

Competence

Across the alumnae interviews, participants consistently shared a learned feeling of competence and the belief that challenges they may face, while hampering, can be overcome. The developed sense of competence led alumni changemakers to recognize that problems can be solved over time as part of a process of healing and growth. One respondent shared that she learned the value of perspective:

Ever since...that trip and everything, [the experience] just brought me to this positive mindset. Now, when something goes wrong, I always try to see the good in that. I try to sit down, calm down, lay everything out. (JVG)

The feeling of expanded competency increased the Changemakers' sense of independence. It allowed the alumnae to believe in their abilities and move forward into new situations with the knowledge that they could do anything independently. In some cases, we witnessed the development of newfound ability to reflect on the day, think of the positive, and rest easy knowing they could solve their problems and heal.

Confidence

Increased confidence was yet another overarching theme among the alumnae interviews. Each of the alumnae spoke at several points in their interview about the things they now feel comfortable doing and trying because of the trip, and several spoke about risks they took on the trip that led to increased confidence. Several alumnae referred to an expanded “comfort zone” to describe this. One student spoke about jumping off rocks into the water, and another talked about how trying new and somewhat scary things helped her grow her confidence:

I just had this confidence in me. I think the fact that I also did try some things out of my comfort zone, that I was like, no, I can actually basically do anything right? I feel like I was way more confident after that trip.

Another offered,

Ever since that trip, it just brought me to this positive mindset. When something goes wrong, I always try to see a good in that. I try to you know, sit down, calm down, lay everything out. Like: not everything's bad. Even though it feels like that, no, take a deep breath.

She went on to refer to the confidence she derived from the trip:

I feel that confident boost that I got from that trip. I was actually able to really find myself; you could see the happiness in me.

A new, more confident world view was reflected in another student's comment:

[The] past me would have never even thought of going. (JVG)

Finally, another student offered a compelling image of her newfound confidence:

I feel like one of the biggest things was, I always used to walk with my head down, so I started walking with my head up.

As a result of her Changemaker experience, the alum's newfound confidence allowed her to face the world with her head held high rather than hiding herself. She developed pride and confidence, which has stayed with her since her journey in 2023. Moreover, another alum, Jean, reflected upon her shyness before the journey and her worry that:

If I do this, people are going to judge me" and compared her reshaped self-concept after stating that Changemakers "also gave me a confident boost." She reflected upon her newfound outlook towards herself and how she became "proud of being myself and loving myself and...I could do what makes me comfortable because it doesn't really matter what people say about me.

Jean's growth in confidence and self-esteem continues today, and her approach towards life is one where she embraces being herself and encourages others to be themselves.

Caring for Nature

The concept of caring came up most clearly in each respondent's appreciation of nature since the trip. Every alumna interviewed mentioned a new or deepened appreciation of nature, as reflected in Shane's comment:

I think what is so important is the connection to being outside and what it can do for you mentally, and what it can do for you in terms of wanting to and widening your perspective, making you want to give back.

One respondent currently studies the environment and sustainability at her university and spoke passionately about how she now sees environmental education as a social justice issue. She also spoke of her family from South America, who instilled in her an appreciation for nature, which was cemented on the trip. Other respondents spoke of the peace they felt interacting with nature and how they had been reticent before the trip to intentionally walk in the woods or spend time outside. One respondent spoke about how being in nature helps her detox from her social media:

People have been living there for 1000s of years. I think that accepting those human-nature interactions is important. We are part of the ecosystem, part of the earth. And I think that going out there helps you understand that, at least to me personally, it did. I got to see if I fit into the ecosystem of something that doesn't feel supernatural sometimes.

(Shane)

Three of the alumnae spoke about their increased awareness of the need for environmental action. Sydney summed it up:

I think it was the first trip that made me aware of nature, not in the sense of pretty trees, but in the sense of: this is something to preserve.

Each participant expressed an awareness of the need for the individual to get involved in environmental activism and awareness. They spoke of their increased understanding of their consumption and the need to conserve. This was reflected in one alum's comment: "I'm drinking from a glass cup instead of Starbucks every day. I make my own drinks and am becoming aware of the small changes that can make a big impact."

Reflections on the Declaration of Intent

In the culminating project of the Changemaker program, participants drafted a Declaration of Intent to describe how they intended to make a positive difference in their community. A follow-up study was recommended from the initial report to assess how participants' Declarations of Intent unfolded. Changemakers '23 alumnae were asked to reflect upon their progress in fulfilling their Declarations. One success story stood out. An alum applied for and received a college scholarship because of her participation at the Changemakers Event. Participants were so impressed with her Declaration of Intent that they asked her to apply for their scholarship. "It helped me pay for college," she (Jean) shared. Referring to her intention to enhance outdoor education via her Declaration, another alum, Shane, shared,

I think I lived up to it. I continued working in outdoor education at Teatown (Outdoor Education Center). I continued being part of environmental campaigns. I was a board member of my Environmental Club in high school my last semester, pretty much all through high school. So I think it was, and it's how I live my life now, really, it's so important to me.

Shane's lifelong love of nature was instilled in her by her Indigenous Ecuadorian mother. The Changemaker's journey cemented her love of nature and belief that the outdoors should be essential to every person's life. Her declaration supported her beliefs, and she continues prioritizing nature and interaction with the environment in her life. She also encourages others to commit to time in nature.

Alumnae Advice for Future Changemakers

The alums we interviewed readily offered advice to future Changemakers:

I think I would just say, go in with an open mind. I think everything that you do there has its reward. So I would just say, do everything and anything when you are there.

Generally, once it's gone, you're just thinking back on it again [and thinking]: I really miss this. So I think the more memories you make with everything you're doing definitely pay off, for sure. (Sydney)

Be open-minded. I mean, try new things. It's that that's the tenant of the program, is that you are willing to learn and to try something new. It's scary. (Shane)

Try to make as many connections as you can. I met my best friend; we talk every single day. I used to be embarrassed about everything, and she was like, we have to do more. (Liz)

Be in the moment. Just really be in the moment. Just be there. Be yourself. You know, be friends. Befriend everybody you know. Try to make friends, though. It's not really hard; we're just a group of people there. Yeah, just be yourself, be there, you know, just be present. (Jean-Margaret)

Changemaker alumnae spoke about the power of the trip and encouraged future participants to embrace the experience. Participant alums also encouraged future changemakers to embrace the experience no matter what. "Just really be in the moment," one alumna said, "and try to make friends." The alumnae's advice for future Changemakers includes maintaining an open mind, being present, and, perhaps most importantly, that participants should always be themselves. It is apparent that the alumnae learned to value others and themselves. Their advice is more than

words; it is a lesson in living an entire life with positive connections to people and nature, reflectivity, open-mindedness, confidence, and pride.

Alumnae Participants' Program Recommendations

All alumnae interviewed felt a solid connection to this program and the opportunities it provides these young women. The young women have walked away feeling more confident, capable, and connected to people and nature, recognizing their worth and value in the world. The alumnae believe in the positive impacts gleaned from the Changemaker experience and stress the importance of continuing the Changemaker program. Sydney reflected the views of the alums we interviewed when she spoke to the program's value, "Something that this program is doing beautifully.... [is that it's] giving the spotlight to these women and lets them know that they are important." Each Changemaker alum expressed continued gratitude for the opportunity to have been part of the program and wish to participate in the experience again because of the program's value to their lives.

Closing Thoughts

The Changemaker program's positive impact on the lives of its participants is noticeable, heartfelt, and moving. Most importantly, it is lasting. The alumnae interviewed each shared their perspective on their experience in 2023 and the enduring impact on their lives. Changemakers allowed vulnerability into their lives and reaped the benefits of opening their worlds and minds to new people, new experiences, nature, and deep reflection. Shifted mindsets emerged through the Changemaker experiences. Participants found new approaches to life challenges and recognized the importance that confidence, connections, competence, character, and caring have in creating a more joyous life for themselves and others.

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