UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

2026

REPORT
BLACK YOUTH FOR SOCIAL INNOVATION (BYSI)



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Executive summary

In 2026, Black Youth for Social Innovation (BYSI) supported 19 participants through work placements, mentorship and biweekly professional development meetings.

Building on the program's first two years, the cohort brought student leadership to the forefront: seven of the eight mentorship and professional development sessions included student leads working alongside program directors.

The program completion survey received 17 responses, an 89.5% response rate. All respondents reported that the program met or exceeded their initial expectations and that they felt better prepared for academic, professional or personal challenges. Ratings were particularly strong for workshops, director support, confidence and leadership development.

Students valued the opportunity to gain practical experience while belonging to a community of Black peers. Their feedback also identified priorities for future cohorts: more interactive meetings, stronger connections with Black professionals and community organizations, and continued mentorship beyond the summer.

BYSI, 2026 Team



Our purpose

Established at the University of Alberta in 2024, BYSI responds to barriers Black students face in accessing mentorship, professional networks and work experience. Its mission is to empower Black youth to lead a pluralistic society by connecting learning with opportunities for leadership and social innovation.

The 2026 cohort

The program supported 19 participants in 2026, compared with 20 in 2025 and 10 in its inaugural year. The completion survey captures the experiences of 17 members of the 2026 cohort and informs the evaluation presented in this report.

Biweekly mentorship and professional development

Student leadership was a central feature of BYSI's mentorship and professional development programming in 2026. Through biweekly meetings over the summer, participants led professional development sessions alongside program directors on topics connected to their academic, professional and personal experiences. These sessions gave students opportunities to share perspectives, guide peer learning, and practise leadership and communication within a supportive cohort.



BYSI students participating in a student-led mental health professional development session, summer 2026.



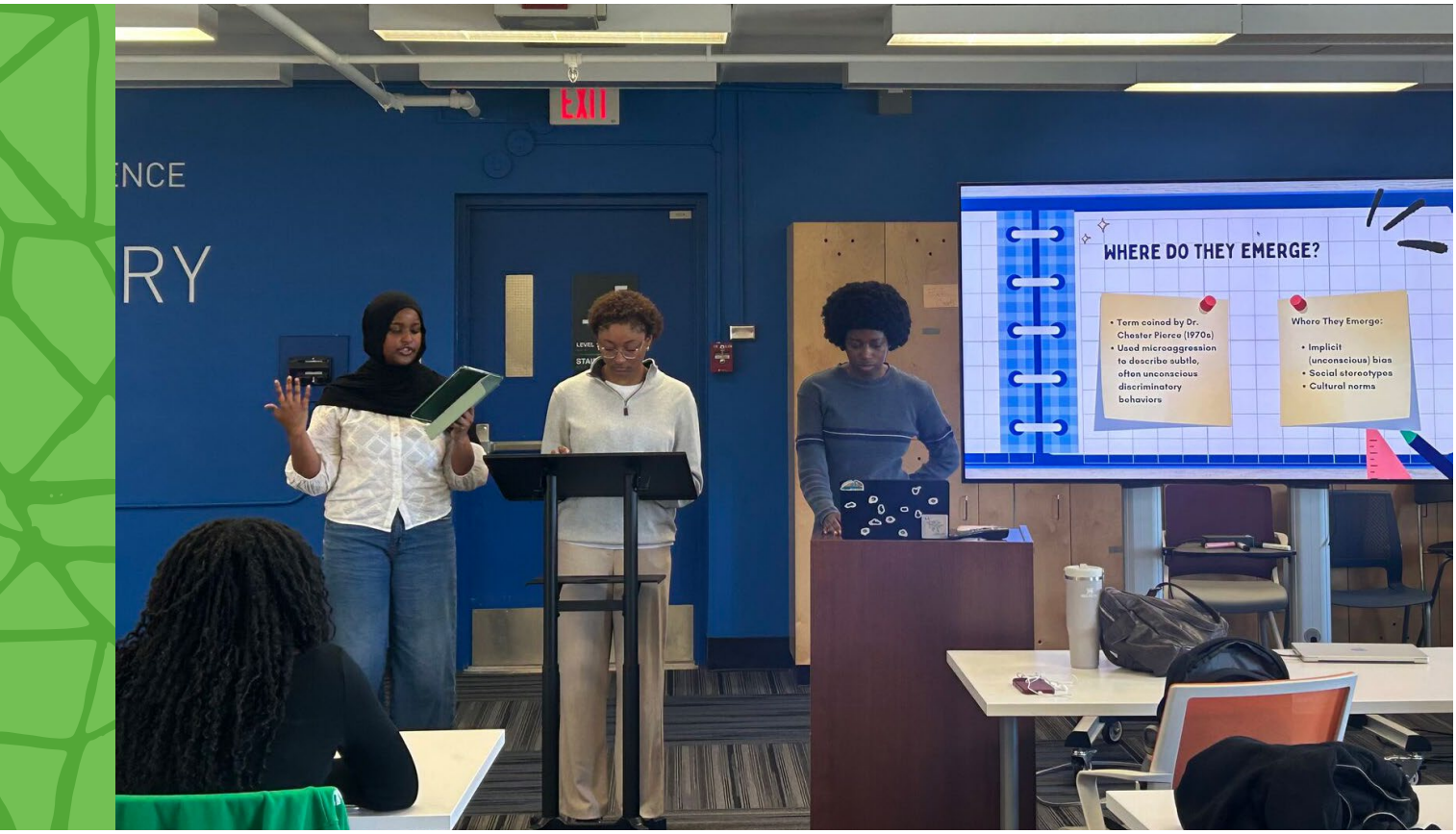
BYSI students working in teams during the student-led Black Diversity professional development session, summer 2026.

Precious and Christopher led the student component of the Research Skills and AI session, bringing research and emerging technologies into the cohort's professional development discussions. Harrisen, Dami and Alison led the Mental Health session, while Marvelous and Rahmah led the session on Microaggressions. These sessions made space for learning about both professional skills and the challenges Black students may encounter in academic and workplace settings.

Harrisen, Enock, Alison and Zara led the Black Diversity session, placing students' perspectives at the centre of discussion about diversity within Black communities. Maelys, Toluwani and Aya led the Academic Career Paths session, while Zaynab, Asha, Afua and Amina led the session on Job Searching and Securing. These topics connected peer learning with students' next steps in education and employment.

Zara and Naomi took on student lead roles in the final Wrap-Up session. The summer series also included a director-led Personal Branding session. Across the eight sessions, seven included student leads, reflecting the program's emphasis on giving participants an active role in the cohort's learning.

Participants' survey feedback highlighted the value of this approach. Students described learning from their peers, gaining knowledge beyond their individual placements and building stronger connections through the recurring sessions. Some returning participants noted that the 2026 program offered more peer contact and discussion than their previous experience. The student-led sessions therefore formed an important part of both professional development and community building.



BYSI students sharing experiences during a student-led professional development session on microaggressions, summer 2026.

Connecting students with practical experience

Research and workplace learning:

Participants' survey responses describe experiences in research, marketing and public service. Students reported developing research and writing skills, learning software, conducting interviews and applying classroom knowledge in professional settings. Others described learning how organizations approach marketing and gaining a clearer understanding of public service and public policy careers.

These experiences gave students opportunities to explore career interests and connect academic learning with the responsibilities of professional work. Participants' accounts included qualitative coding, political research, marketing and public policy, demonstrating the breadth of learning across the cohort.

Placement partners and supervisors

BYSI's 2026 placements were supported by university supervisors, research projects and external partners who hired students to work with them. Supervisors and project connections included Oliver Rossier (CSSH); Jared Wesley through the Common Ground Project and Peter Lougheed School of Politics & Democracy; Angelia Wagner (Political Science); Dr. Patrick Nickleson (Education); Michelle Maroto (Sociology); and Philomina Okeke-Ihejirika through Partnership for Research with African Newcomers (PRAN).

We were also privileged to have supervisors and partners such as David Shepherd, MLA; Catherine Kellogg; Dominique Lauf (Berlin); Carrie Smith (ACB and BRNI); and Olubukola Alimi. The cohort also included independent research placements. These connections supported opportunities for students to gain experience across research, university projects, community initiatives and public service.

Acknowledgements

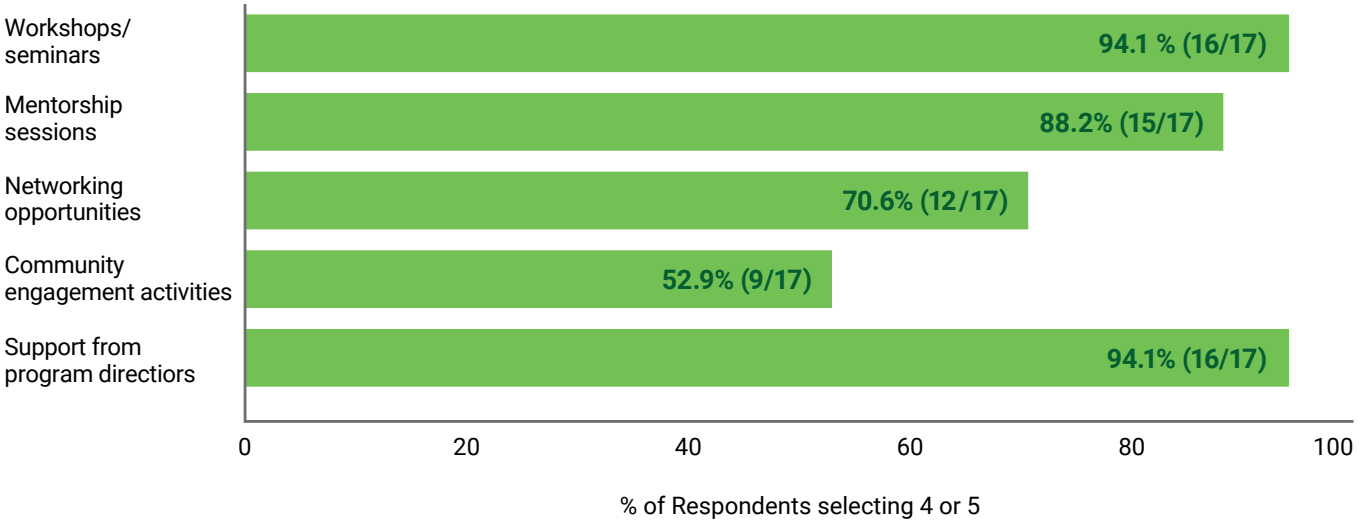
BYSI thanks the supervisors, projects and organizations that supported the 2026 cohort by hiring students and providing opportunities for practical learning. Their involvement connected participants with experience across university research, community initiatives and public service. The program also recognizes the directors and student session leads whose contributions sustained the cohort's mentorship, peer learning and sense of community throughout the summer.

What participants reported

17 of 19 participants completed the program completion survey (89.5%). All 17 reported feeling better prepared for academic, professional or personal challenges: 13 (76.5%) significantly and four (23.5%) somewhat. All respondents also indicated in their written answers that BYSI met or exceeded their initial expectations.

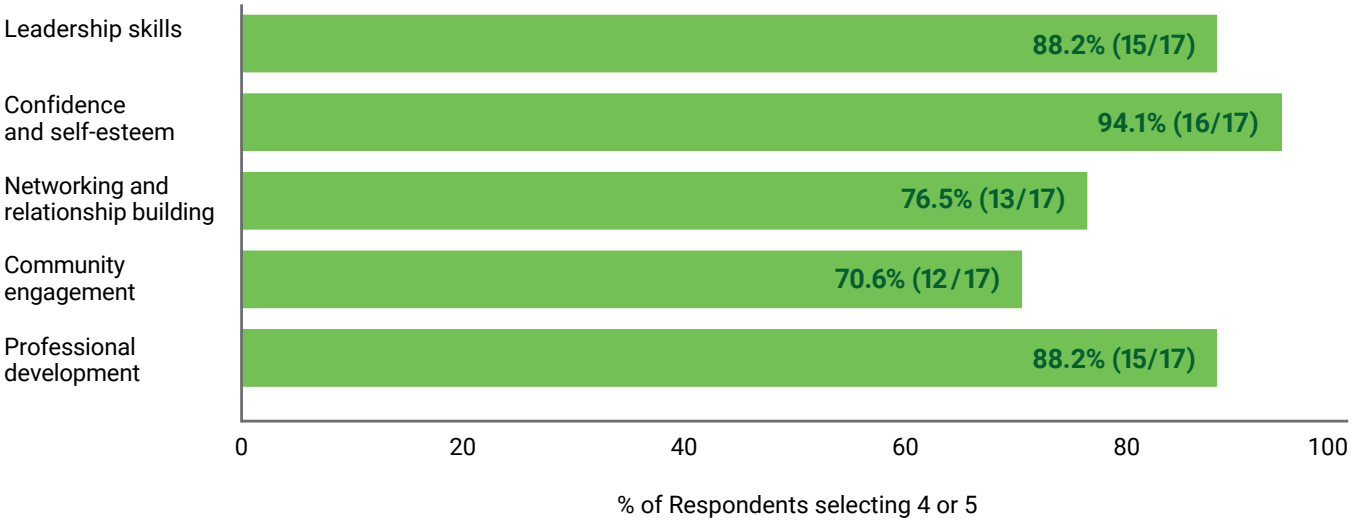
Program quality:

Ratings of 4 or 5 on a scale from 1 (Poor) to 5 (Excellent)



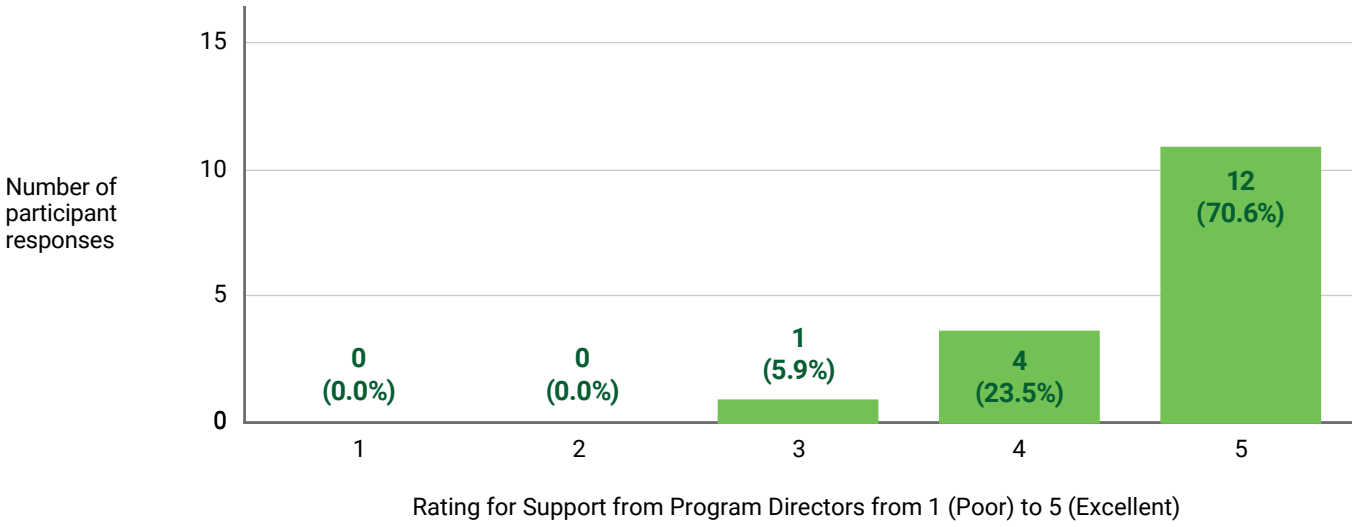
Personal development:

Ratings of 4 or 5 on a scale from 1 (No Impact) to 5 (Significant Impact)



Support from program directors:

17 responses



Support from program directors received strong ratings: 12 respondents (70.6%) rated it as excellent, four (23.5%) selected 4 out of 5, and one (5.9%) selected 3. Overall, 94.1% rated director support as 4 or 5, highlighting it as a key strength of the program.

Student reflections

Written feedback emphasized meaningful work experience, supportive relationships and a stronger sense of belonging. Several students described their first opportunity to enter a professional or research setting; others highlighted the chance to explore a new field or reconsider their career direction. Participants also reported greater confidence in research, public speaking and leadership.

The biweekly meetings extended learning beyond individual placements. Students valued hearing from peers, sharing experiences and forming friendships with Black youth who had similar ambitions. Returning participants described stronger peer contact and discussion, while others emphasized the reassurance of having directors and mentors available for support.

Student voices

"BYSI is a program I would recommend over and over again. The opportunities are endless and it's an environment of constant learning and improvement."

- BYSI participant, 2026 program completion survey

"My experience in the BYSI program has been very valuable to my personal growth. The BYSI program has helped me to develop my confidence, public speaking, and leadership skills while surrounded by like minded individuals who encouraged and supported my self development."

- BYSI participant, 2026 program completion survey

"BYSI helped me become more confident in my abilities as a researcher and gave me an experience that I will carry with me throughout my academic journey."

- BYSI participant, 2026 program completion survey

Opportunities for improvement

Students recommended more interactive PD meetings and informal cohort gatherings. They also sought broader access to networking, conferences, and community activities involving Black professionals in Edmonton and Alberta.

Further suggestions included continued mentor–mentee relationships, career-specific activities, alumni reunions, collaboration with other Black youth programs, and clearer online access to program information and student work.

Proposed priorities for 2027

- Strengthen student-led PD through practical activities, discussion and cohort reflection.
- Expand connections with Black professionals and community organizations.
- Explore continued mentorship and alumni engagement beyond the summer.
- Align career-specific opportunities with student interests and partner capacity.

These priorities respond to participant feedback and will require consideration of funding, staff capacity and partner commitments.

Conclusion

BYSI's 2026 experience demonstrates the value participants place on practical opportunities, peer leadership and a supportive community. Building on these strengths will help the program continue to support Black youth as they develop their skills and shape their academic and professional futures.

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