

ADVANCING
BLACK YOUTH
MENTORSHIP
PROGRAMS IN
CANADA

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CONTEXT

In the aftermath of George Floyd's tragic death in 2020, discussions about racial injustice have intensified, especially concerning anti-Blackness in Canada. This has led to a heightened awareness of the systemic challenges faced by Black youth, exacerbated by the disproportionate impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. Canada's longstanding structure of anti-Black racism have come under global scrutiny, prompting a reevaluation of the country's narrative as a multicultural mosaic. Black youth mentorship initiatives have emerged as crucial support systems, offering a diverse range of services tailored to their needs, from academic and career guidance to financial literacy and leadership development.

The report identifies challenges in the mentorship network and proposes best practices from program directors and mentors of Black youth across Canada. Recognizing the significance of these programs, the report concludes with actionable recommendations aimed at enhancing the mentorship ecosystem to better meet the evolving needs of youth.

CATALYST

The 2020 murder of George Floyd served as the catalyst for change within the Black community. Black leaders from across the United States and Canada pushed forward new anti-racism initiatives in many established institutions, including government, universities, and the private sector. Among them, renewed efforts at integrating diversity, equity, and inclusion principles into recruitment, training, and hiring found support among many non-Black allies in executive positions. Together, they sought new ways of ensuring Black voices were reflected at key decision-making tables.

Based on preliminary conversations, many leaders quickly came to the realization that they had both a demand and a supply problem. The demand among members of the Black population to seek leadership positions in the public, knowledge, and private sectors appeared to be lower than that found in the non-Black population. Leadership roles were viewed as either undesirable or as unattainable by many in the Black community. At the same time, organizations looking to recruit and promote Black people to leadership positions found a noticeable lack of candidates.

This dual challenge prompted many Black leaders to establish mentorship programs to cultivate the desire and confidence among youth to seek leadership positions as part of their future career paths. Based on our preliminary search, over a dozen of such programs exist throughout Canada. These "pipeline" initiatives have focused mainly on high school and post-secondary students, and early-career professionals.

THIS STUDY

The resulting emergence of new Black mentorship programs across Canada is reason for optimism. Many have worked relatively independently from one another, with their own objectives, resources, and outcomes.

As a means of empowering these organizations and the youth they support, the proposed study marks the first comprehensive inventory and analysis of the scope, mandates, best practices, and challenges faced by Black mentorship programs in Canada. The findings will support the ongoing improvement of these programs, while creating a network of Black mentorship coordinators, mentors, and mentees.

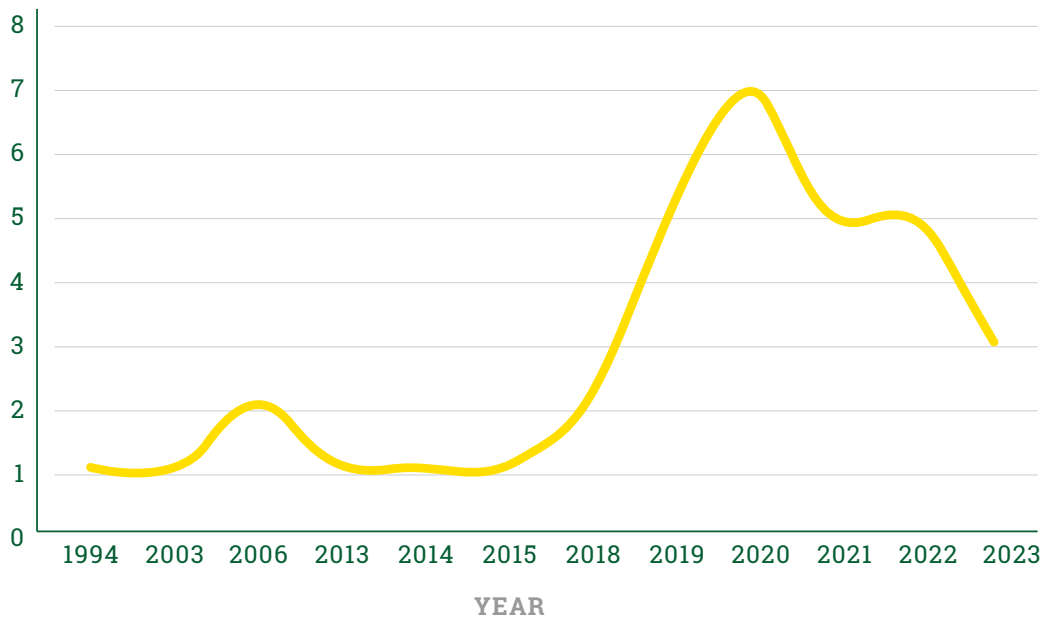
PURPOSE:

This report identifies common realities faced by existing Black youth mentorship programs (BYMP) in Canada, aiming to identify shared challenges and best practices. It also pinpoints gaps in service provision for Black youth and mentors. BYMP organizers and participants provided important feedback on preliminary findings.

STUDY METHOD & PROCEDURES:

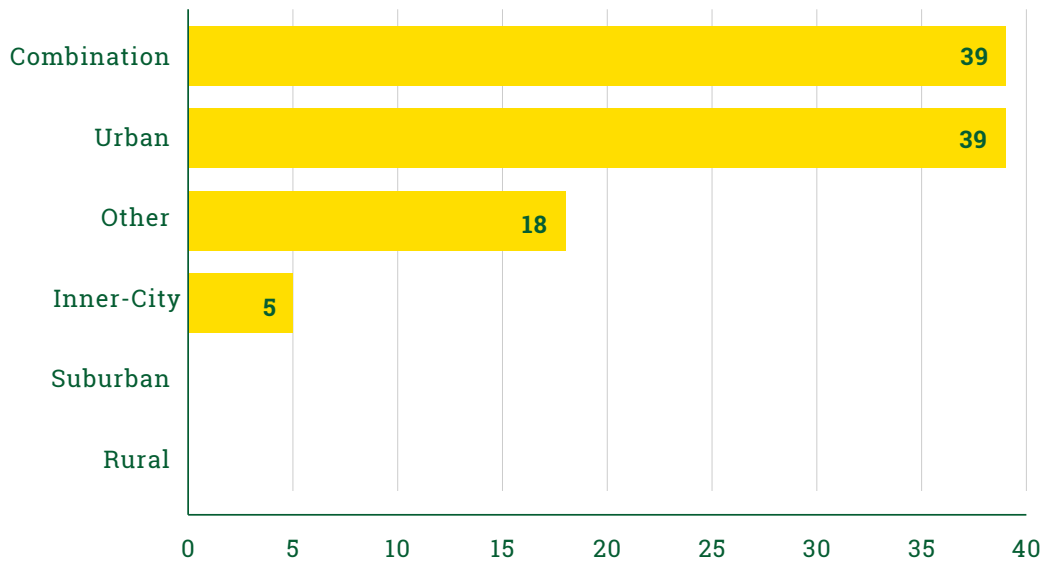
The study began with an exhaustive search for Black youth mentorship programs across Canada, which led to the identification of 46 programs tailored specifically for empowering Black youth. There was a significant uptick in mentorship initiatives in 2020, as illustrated in *Figure 1*. Mentorship programs in Canada have a history dating back to 1994, with a gradual increase observed from 2018 onwards. The year 2020 marked a notable peak in programming, coinciding with Floyd’s death and the onset of the global pandemic. However, by 2023, there was a decline in the number of mentorship programs.

FIGURE 1
Evolution of Black Youth Mentorship Programs in Canada



While some programs on our list also cater to youth beyond the Black community, our attention was directed toward segments of these programs dedicated to supporting Black youth. We gathered essential details about these programs, including their websites, supporting organizations, founding years, mission or purpose, target audience, operational sectors, geographical locations, approaches to mentoring Black youth, and publicly available contact information. Our analysis found that mentorship programs are concentrated in urban areas, as depicted in *Figure 2* below. The graph depicts where youth in mentorship programs typically reside.

FIGURE 2
Location of Operations



To facilitate data collection, we contacted all programs via publicly available email addresses and phone numbers, inviting them to participate in a 15-minute online survey. The survey was tailored for program directors, mentors, and mentees to supplement and verify information. Participants in this study were all over 18 years old; information about the experience of younger mentorship program participants was obtained anonymously through BYMP organizers. Following four (4) rounds of follow-up contact, we obtained 47 survey responses from program directors and received two from mentors and mentees. Surveys were distributed on Sep 23, 2023, and the collection period concluded on Nov 25, 2023.

After holding our conversational sessions, we encouraged program directors to share our mentor and mentee survey to enhance participation rates. Although the response rate for program directors was high, the participation rate for mentors and mentees remained low (despite circulating the survey four times and contacting mentorship programs by phone to boost engagement).

To bolster our data collection from program directors, our research team augmented the survey data with publicly accessible information from mentorship programs that did not respond. We integrated fundamental details such as geographical locations, program sectors, funding sources, and other pertinent information.

In addition to completing the survey, program directors were invited to partake in a 45-minute 'conversational circle' to explore challenges, opportunities, and best practices within the Black youth mentorship ecosystem across Canada. Conversation circles commenced on October 25, 2023, and closed on Nov 25, 2023. We conducted three conversational circle sessions with four program directors from Nova Scotia, Ontario, and Alberta. All elements of this research design were approved by the Research Ethics Board at the University of Alberta.

Based on the data collected through these conversations, we identified the common themes found in *Figure 3*. The word cloud was created based on the transcripts collected from conversation circles.

FIGURE 3
Conversational Circle Themes

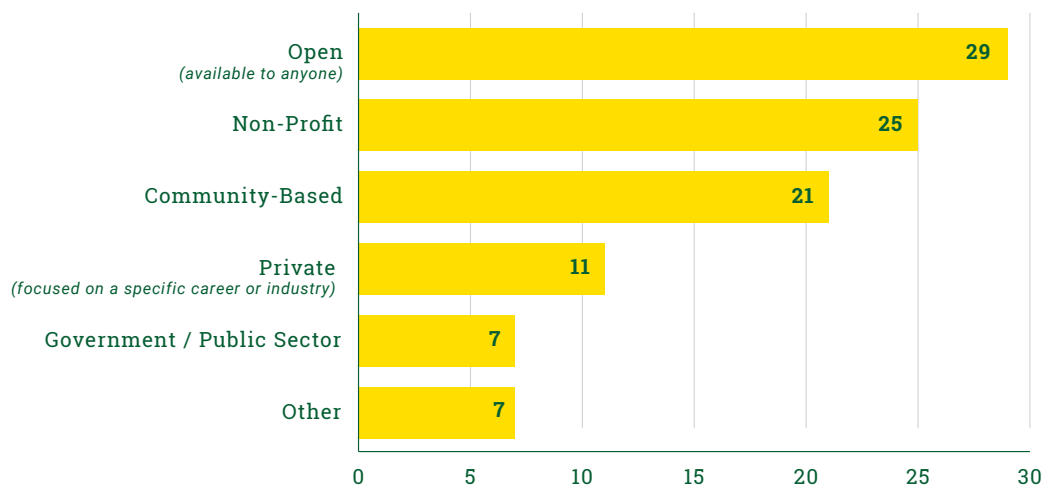


DESCRIPTIVE/DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION OF MENTORSHIP PROGRAMS STUDIED:

Results from conversations with mentorship organizers underscore the competitive nature of securing grants and program support from both provincial government and corporate donors. Competition for grants and financial support poses a barrier to collaboration within the mentorship ecosystem, hindering aspirations for collective advancement.

Due to this, most mentorship programs end up working independently from each other, preventing the effective sharing of resources among these programs. One potential solution to this challenge is for mentorship programs to explore opportunities for collaboration and resource-sharing. The breakdown of the organization type (sector) that was studied is illustrated in *Figure 4* below.

FIGURE 4
Type of Organization by Sector



COMMON CHALLENGES FACING BLACK YOUTH MENTORSHIP PROGRAMS IN CANADA

During these conversations with program directors, we documented common insights clustered around eight key themes.

GEOGRAPHIC CONCENTRATION:

Our survey data shows that Black youth mentorship programs are heavily concentrated in Ontario and Nova Scotia. Six pan-Canadian programs serve Black youth across the country. In Western Canada, Black youth mentorship programs are scarce, concentrated almost entirely in Calgary and Edmonton. We did not locate Black youth mentorship programs in four provinces (Saskatchewan, Manitoba, New Brunswick, and Newfoundland and Labrador), nor any in the territories. Our survey results are depicted in Figure 5.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

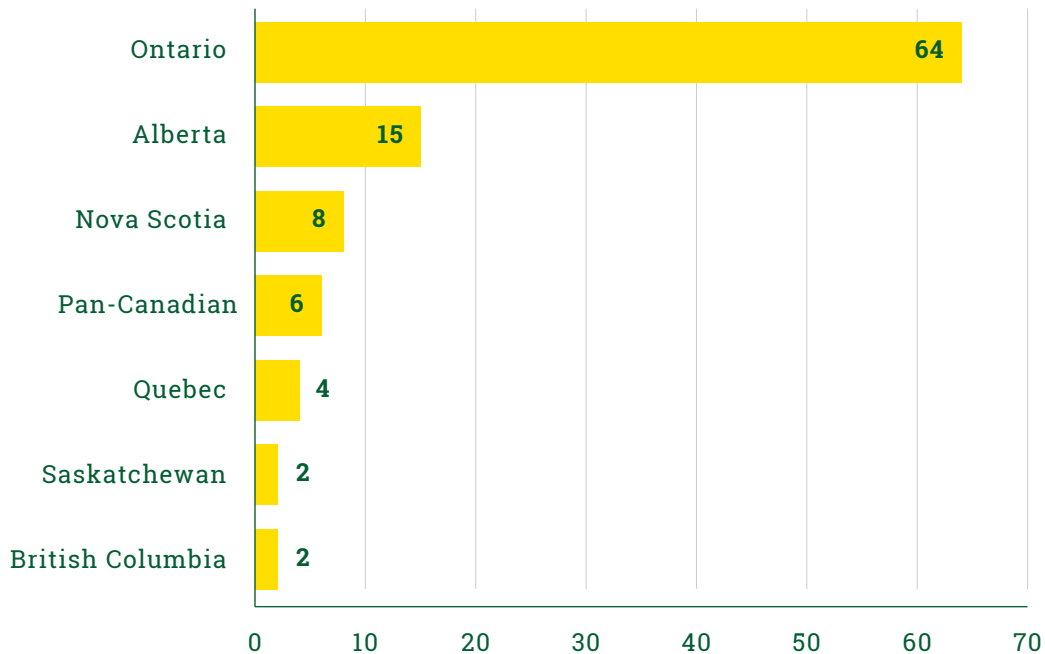
Black Youth Mentorship Programs

- » Existing programs can expand online to engage uncovered communities (e.g., rural and remote)

Black Communities

- » in unserved provinces and territories, partner with local business organizations and academics and provincial governments to explore setting up a program that aligns with the best practices and lessons developed in this report.

FIGURE 5
Location of Mentorship Programs



LACK OF COMPREHENSIVE DATA:

The scarcity of comprehensive data on mentorship's significance for Black youth hampers effective planning and implementation of strategies to empower them. Without comprehensive data, policymakers and communities face difficulties in identifying and addressing the barriers that Black youth encounter.

NARROW PERCEPTIONS OF MENTORSHIP:

There is a general perception, both within and outside the mentorship ecosystem, that mentorship programs are only for "at-risk" youth. Program organizers also note that all Black youth come with different perspectives, values and understandings about the world - they are not all the same. They also come from different socio-economic backgrounds and have other lived experiences. Furthermore, program directors view mentorship as a core feature of African traditions and a culturally specific line of support for a long time. The notion that mentorship is for 'bad' or only for 'needy' youth needs to be addressed and countered. Mentorship extends beyond addressing behavioural issues among youth; these programs serve as beneficial tools in helping youth develop leadership skills, and self-confidence, and provide them with a sense of belonging and community. Program directors noted that perceptions about Black youth being 'bad' have longstanding racist connotations that date back to early colonial practices of segregation and racism.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

Sponsors

- » insist that programs have leadership (board, administration) that is predominantly drawn from Black communities

BYM Programs

- » balance skill development with cultural development

Academics

- » establish a central hub for Afro-centric curriculum for these programs

Black Communities

- » work with academics and programs to develop Afro-centric curriculum for BYM programs

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

Government

- » support data collection driven by communities and academics

Academics

- » in partnership with communities and existing BYM programs, launch new studies, funded by government

ECONOMIC DISADVANTAGES:

Our conversations with program directors highlight that in economically disadvantaged communities, when parents fall ill, especially in single-parent or financially strained households, Black youth often take on the role of caretakers and/or providers. This responsibility is magnified in cases where sicknesses like sickle cell anemia affect families; this and other illnesses affect refugees arriving from countries such as Kenya, Ghana, Nigeria, Somalia, and Sudan (Grosse et al., 2011). Participants in our conversational circles noted that family illness and other demands often result in Black youth having to take on multiple jobs to subsidize their household income. Youth commitment to their families and their sources of income hampers their ability to participate in mentorship programs.

Moreover, program directors shared that families sometimes rely on expired foods due to financial constraints, perpetuating health risks. Youth, trusting their parents' guidance, consume expired foods despite potential health hazards. Additionally, program directors observed that some youth in economically disadvantaged communities resort to food banks for basic sustenance. In our conversational circles, we learned from program directors that Black youth living in such circumstances experience heightened levels of emotional distress, leading to feelings of insecurity

and thoughts of self-harm. Participants insisted that this pervasive sense of despair contributes to a prevailing sense of apathy among these youth regarding their future prospects. Youth in these economic conditions find it difficult to participate in mentorship programs as they often take up more financial responsibilities in their household. This economic strain places heavier financial responsibilities on Black youth in these households, resulting in some viewing mentorship programs as a privilege and not a need.

Furthermore, the prevalence of poverty in diverse Black communities shapes the romantic aspirations of youth, who often seek partners based on financial stability. Importantly, participants shared that youths' desire for a financially secure partner stems from a deep-rooted wish to avoid (and escape) the economic hardships of their lives. The pursuit of a financially wealthy partner is fueled by the stark realities of poverty, which compel many youth to engage in employment, sometimes under coercive conditions. The burden of economic deprivation prompts almost all youth in our program to seek employment in some capacity. Regrettably, some even resort to 'under the table' work to assist their families financially. We learned from program directors that youth's drive to alleviate their financial struggles leads them into the workforce, often at an early age, to contribute to their households' well-being. The glaring financial obstacles youth face, such as fulfilling their basic survival needs, hinder their participation in mentorship programs. For example, membership fees and transportation costs deter many Black youth from participating in the mentorship ecosystem.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

Sponsors

- » provide financial supports and culturally-sensitive (in-house) resources to mentorship programs

BYM Programs

- » cultural tailored mentorship that is sensitive to...

Academics

- » in-depth, focused study on the impact of the economy on Black youth and their prospects;

MENTAL HEALTH AND WELL-BEING:

Program coordinators emphasize a crucial link between economic hardship and the mental well-being of youth. They highlight the intricate ties between poverty in certain Black communities and broader intersecting issues like systemic racism, discrimination, and intergenerational trauma. Importantly, participants in the conversational circles observed that these factors cannot be approached in isolation because they also influence the success of Black youth in Canada. One significant observation made by program directors is the financial barrier that prevents Black youth from accessing psychotherapy and therapeutic services. These services come with a high price tag, rendering them unaffordable for many. Additionally, the financial constraints most

mentorship programs face make it challenging to cover the costs of employing mental health professionals. As a result, program directors stressed that this financial disparity further impacts Black youth, limiting their access to essential mental health support within the mentorship ecosystem. This lack of access perpetuates the challenges these youth face in addressing and managing their mental health needs.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

BYM Programs

- » work with communities and sponsors to identify culturally-sensitive providers and integrate that programming into the BYM programs

SOCIETAL INTEGRATION OF NEWCOMERS:

We learned from our conversational circles that economic disparities are particularly amplified within newly arrived immigrant groups, especially among Black youth refugees and the broader Black diaspora. Upon arrival, these groups often seek new social and employment opportunities, facing multiple financial barriers that impede their access to mentorship programs. Black youth refugees and those within the diaspora encounter hurdles such as registration fees, transportation expenses, and the additional costs associated with learning a new language and integrating into unfamiliar financial markets. Participants also shared that these youth often undertake unsafe jobs to support family members in their home countries, adding to their financial burdens and social responsibilities.

Moreover, newcomers predominantly engage within their immediate communities due to various challenges, including limited social support for childcare, lack of affordable housing, financial constraints, and the needed skills to navigate Canada’s employment landscape. For instance, program directors shared that youth often

ELEVATING CHALLENGES FACED BY BLACK WOMEN AND GIRLS:

Program coordinators noted the participation of Black women and girls in their program but highlighted a significant gap in service provision for this group. Considering that they face more precarious conditions than men, more research is needed to understand the impact of mentorship programs on women and girls (Basra, 2021, p. 6).

Program coordinators shared that when youth enter mentorship programs, they bring with them ingrained assumptions about gender and sexuality, reflecting broader societal biases that shape their perspectives and experiences. These intersecting factors contribute significantly to the complex intersecting challenges faced by Black youth, underscoring the need for comprehensive and gender-tailored support. However, our survey shows that most mentorship programs across Canada are open to all, as depicted in *Figure 6* below.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

BYM Programs

- » work with newcomer integration agencies to develop parallel or joint programming tailored to the needs of newcomers who are youth

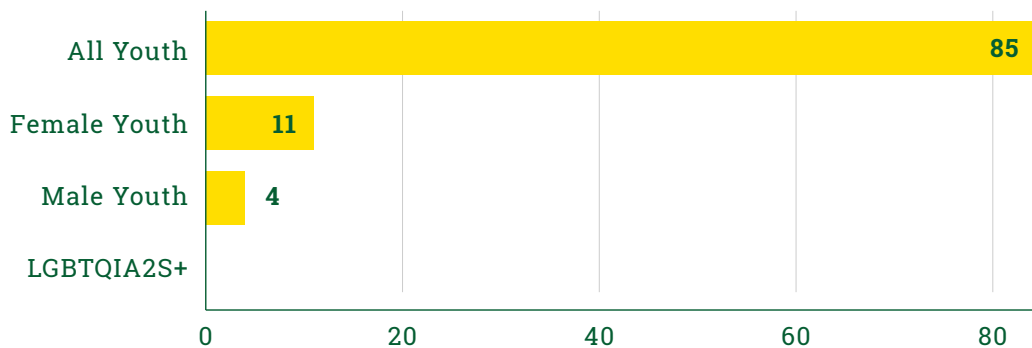
Academics

- » extend existing scholarship on adult intergration to include Black youth mentorship

underscore their difficulties in completing job applications, hindering their ability to benefit from mentorship programs and opportunities tailored to them. As such, program directors suggest that new immigrant youth and first-generation youth have the added challenge of navigating a “hidden curriculum” to integrate into Canadian society. These compounded challenges place significant obstacles before Black youth and the broader diaspora, impeding their ability to access and leverage the benefits of mentorship programs. Addressing these barriers requires a holistic approach encompassing financial support, language assistance, skills development, and community integration initiatives to ensure equitable mentorship opportunities for youth and the programs that support them.

FIGURE 6

Primary Gender Focus of Black Youth Mentorship Programs



INCLUSIVITY AND LESBIAN, GAY, BISEXUAL, TRANSGENDER, QUEER OR QUESTIONING, INTERSEX, ASEXUAL, TWO-SPIRIT, AND GENDER-DIVERSE YOUTH (LGBTQIA2S+):

While the majority of Black youth mentorship programs do not explicitly address the needs of LGBTQIA2S+ youth, many aim to provide a welcoming environment for all participants. Some youth in the LGBTQIA2S+ community find a sense of comfort within these programs, even though discussions about gender and sexuality are not openly facilitated. Some program directors observed that although most programs market the values of EDI initiatives, there is a notable absence of explicit support tailored to the needs of Black youth in the LGBTQIA2S+ community. Given the intersectional nature of their identities, program coordinators added that they work around the complexity of gender and sexual minority groups by allowing them to identify themselves with the pronouns that best suit participants. Currently, we do not know if LGBTQIA2S+ youth are paired with mentors within the broader gender-minority community.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

Academics

- » in partnership with BEKH and QEKH and BYM programs develop a research strategy surrounding BQ Youth Mentorship

MENTOR RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION:

We learned from program directors that relying solely on volunteers often leads to high turnover rates among mentors. They added that establishing connections with mentors is crucial, and the absence of honorariums (financial support) has contributed to mentors leaving BYMPs. Providing compensation acknowledges and values mentors' time, effort, and expertise, fostering a more stable and sustainable mentoring environment. Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic has also impacted mentor attrition rates in BYMPs. During the public health crisis (2020-22), BYMP organizers report the typical participation period for mentors in these programs was approximately three months. Most participants in our study felt that meeting young people face-to-face is an integral aspect of the mentoring process; as a result, public health restrictions and ongoing challenges and preferences among youth for virtual communication have led many mentors to drop out of these programs. Building and sustaining these mentoring ecosystems requires time and consistent support, which was a challenge faced during this period. Also, honorariums can offer mentors (and mentees) support, such as reimbursement for transportation expenses, to eliminate barriers to program participation. This is especially helpful for participants located in rural communities, and those who experience the effects of urban sprawl, as Black

people are pushed to the peripheries of cities to find affordable housing.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

Governments

- » support the creation of a BYM Knowledge Hub

Sponsors

- » provide compensation for mentors

BYM Programs

- » identify and share best practices for mentor recruitment
- » work with sector-specific organizations to identify and recruit mentors (e.g., Black Chambers of Commerce, Black Faculty Collectives)
- » develop value statements for mentorship

Academics

- » study the barriers to mentorship among mentors
- » create a Federation of Black Mentorship Programs and associated knowledge hub
- » develop mentorship training programs
- » host regular, accessible learning and networking opportunities

EMBEDDING AUTHENTIC EDI:

Additionally, program directors for Black youth mentorship programs observed that funding outlets such as those mentioned above use mentorship programs to achieve EDI goals and improve government and corporate public image, while being less interested in the cultural relevance of mentorship programs and the success and well-being of Black youth who participate. Once youth are part of a government-led (or government-sponsored) program, participants underscore the diminishing interest of government and corporations in EDI initiatives. Participants in the study suggested that Government focus on diversity and inclusion appears to wane once youth are within the program, potentially impacting the sustained support and recognition of the diverse needs of Black youth. Conversational circles revealed that financial support from private corporations is often tied to the expansion of corporate initiatives and the promotion of other services associated with their organizations (e.g. banking and credit). As a result, some program directors observed that conditional financing is telling of the fact that government and corporate programs primarily focus on public relations and the promotion of EDI as part of their brand, as opposed to being interested in helping Black youth reconnect with their cultural ways of life through mentorship programs. This is a crucial aspect of the mentorship ecosystem because government and corporate funding are significant in keeping most of these programs operational.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

Sponsors

- » move beyond quantification and sole focus on skilled workers for markets to treating human and cultural development and belonging as objectives

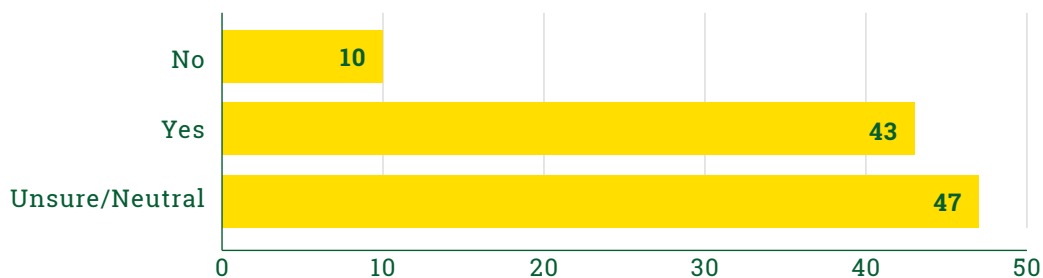
Academics

- » develop training webinar / video series on effective EDIB

Program directors shared in our conversational circles that while corporate donations from entities like the Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce, Toronto-Dominion Canada Trust and Royal Bank provide crucial financial backing for some mentorship programs, these funds often come with limitations that impact program frameworks. Program directors maintained that these constraints arise from the political and social affiliations of some sponsors, which occasionally hinder the acceptance of certain equity, diversity, and inclusivity (EDI) initiatives proposed by the Black community, such as Afrocentric frameworks, which sponsors often cast as 'exclusionary' to non-Black youth. Notably, when survey participants were asked to express their perspectives on the impact and relevance of Afrocentric frameworks, distinct viewpoints emerged. The survey results in *Figure 7* below reveal varying opinions on the significance of Afrocentric frameworks.

FIGURE 7

Significance of Afrocentric Frameworks in Programs



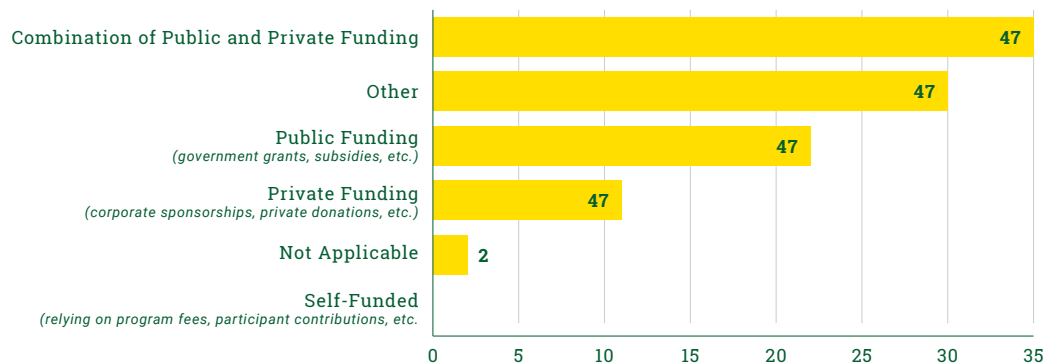
Program directors highlight a crucial disparity: while government and corporate-led programs emphasize the numbers in their EDI initiatives, a class divide exists between Black and European Canadians in the mentorship ecosystem. Black program directors noted that the leadership in government-led and sponsored mentorship programs predominantly consists of European Canadians, who serve as boards of directors and steering committee members for these initiatives.

Program directors underscored a trend where provincial government-led and funded initiatives often prioritize a “numbers approach” to issues around EDI. These programs use numerical data and statistical approaches to mentorship to analyze trends and patterns to guide the development of Black youth mentorship programs in the country. We call this approach into question, especially since the Canadian government has historically done a poor job of collecting race-based data on Black people in Canada (Boyd, 2015, p. 77; Maynard, 2017, pp. 3-4, 57).

Additionally, a numbers approach to Black youth mentorship is problematic because it places too much emphasis on the financial well-being of youth, failing to consider the importance of mentorship as a form of

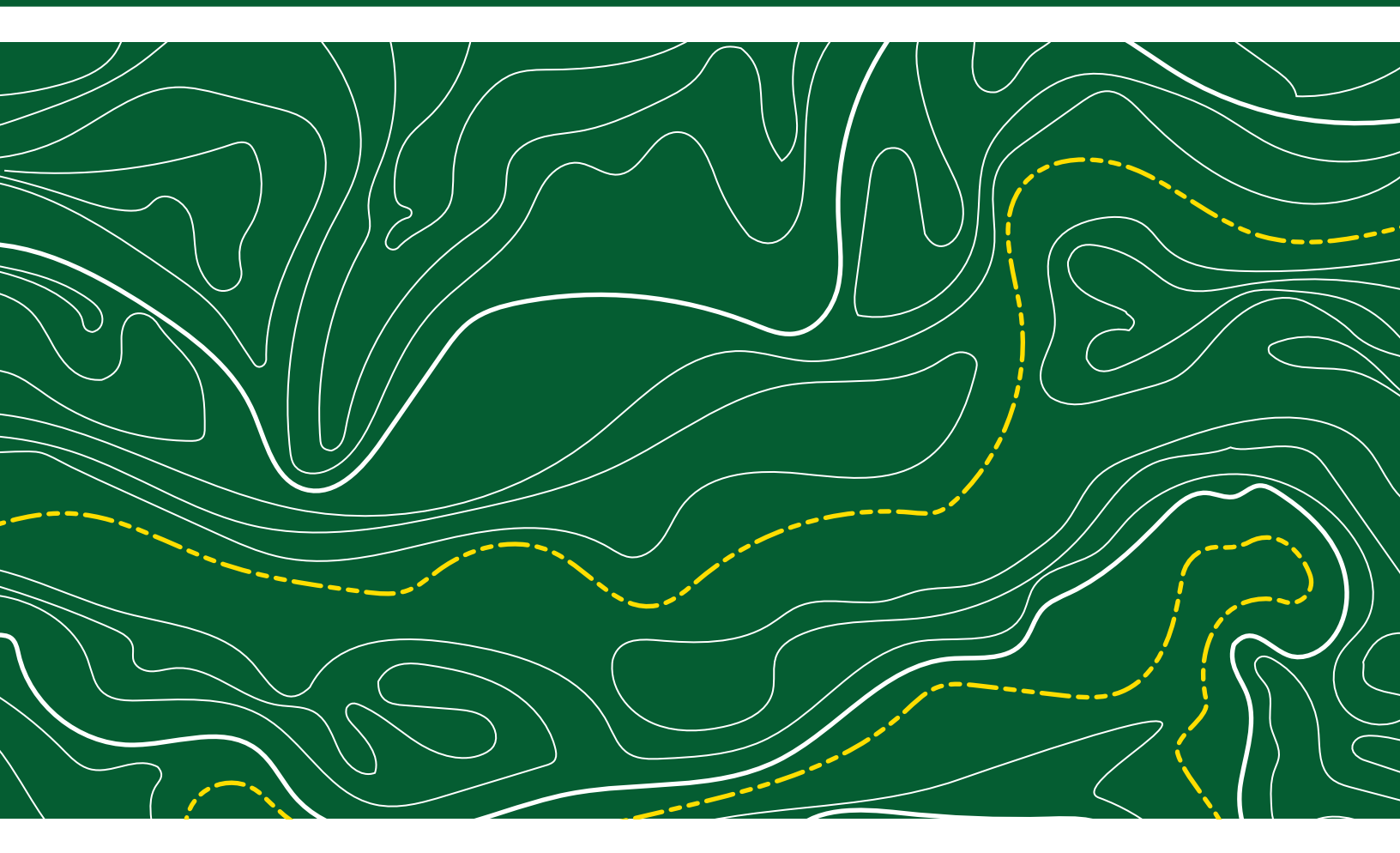
collective cultural memory that is distinct in diverse Black communities. Mentoring youth by an elder has been a longstanding tradition in African culture, predating slavery and colonization (Sinanan 2016, p. 156). Mentorship functioned to guide the younger generation through the challenges of life. Elders take on the responsibility of preparing the next generation for the world, imparting crucial knowledge gained from their own experiences. It involves transferring wisdom about navigating and comprehending the world, drawing from the elder’s personal journey. In this way, mentorship serves as a vessel for preserving cultural ways of life that are distinct to the Black diaspora. Crucially, mentorship contributes to the individual and collective memory of diverse African peoples and plays a central role in cultural transference. Consequently, market-based mentorship programs are emblematic of both poison and remedy, transforming Black youth into objects of commerce to fill Canada’s labour demands while alienating them from their culture, history, and identity. Building on this, Black program directors observed that Black people tend to hold less prominent and more precarious positions in the mentorship space, including volunteer roles, part-time contracts, and positions with limited job security, denoting a clear class divide in the mentorship ecosystem.

FIGURE 8
Source of Funding



TRUST IN GOVERNMENT:

According to our discussion circles, there is a prevailing sense of distrust within Black communities towards organizations affiliated with the federal government. Program coordinators stressed that parents and youth are reluctant to engage in government-led or government-sponsored programs. They say that there is a widespread belief that these programs underscore a historical context where government initiatives have historically abandoned the needs of Black people in the country and treated engagement as a means of extracting value. Additionally, historical events such as the forced displacement of Black communities from their ancestral homelands in Africa and the dispersal of Black populations across the Caribbean, North America, and Europe, stemming directly from colonization and slavery, further fuel this skepticism. Notable examples include the case of Africville in Nova Scotia and the chronic underfunding of Black-led educational institutions in the country (Maynard, 2017).





BEST PRACTICES IN BLACK YOUTH MENTORSHIP PROGRAMS

Study participants appreciated the opportunity to share and discuss successful strategies and best practices employed by Black youth mentorship programs in Canada. Several innovative approaches have shown positive outcomes in supporting Black youth's social, educational, and economic development.

CONSISTENT ENGAGEMENT:

Program directors emphasized the significance of maintaining ongoing engagement not just between mentors and mentees, but also between program administrators, participants, and parents. They stressed the value of regular meetings, underscoring how consistent interactions with youth help bolster cohesion among mentors, mentees, and the organizations supporting Black youth. They also suggested that scheduled engagements play a pivotal role in cultivating trust and establishing a foundation of stability within the mentorship landscape. To enhance these connections, program directors recommended the establishment of robust communication channels. This involves prompt email correspondence, proactive telephone outreach, and the regular distribution of newsletters among mentors, mentees, and stakeholders. By fortifying an environment for open communication, programs can effectively foster an environment conducive to knowledge sharing and transfer within the mentorship ecosystem. Open and consistent communication is crucial for organizational workflow and establishes a clear system for parental consent and ensures the safety of Black youth in these programs. Consent should be central in structured activities and external engagements with mentors.

ACCESSIBILITY AND INTEGRATION:

Accessibility is another cornerstone feature for designing effective programming for Black youth. Program directors shared that Black youth coming from diverse linguistic backgrounds often face challenges participating in mentorship programs due to language and cultural barriers. They suggest connecting new immigrants with other youth in the mentorship ecosystem to provide a sense of community for newcomers. Linguistic barriers can also be challenged by pairing new immigrant youths with someone from their cultural background or a mentor who speaks the same language in situations where this is possible. To do this requires an approach to mentorship that takes seriously youth ability to transition from one socio-cultural setting to another. As such, mentorship programs can act as a bridge to help youth integrate into their local communities and the broader Canadian society while resisting the forces of assimilation by empowering those youth to shape these groups. Additionally, Black youth mentorship programs play a crucial role in helping Black youth transition from childhood to adulthood and provide them with the skills needed to combat systemic racism. In this context, mentorship programs can be seen as a form of social responsibility between mentors and mentees, pointing to how mentorship is connected to a broader ethic of care to uplift and support Black youth.

ADDITIONAL SUPPORTS FOR YOUTH:

Some Black youth mentorship programs integrate paid internship opportunities into their offerings, with mentors either serving as employers or as a second resource. Successful programs ensure that paid hours include some professional development training and time for active mentorship. The financial benefits to youth offset (and can even exceed) the opportunity costs of engaging in unpaid mentorship opportunities, thus making the mentorship programs accessible to a larger pool of youth. Offering specialized mental health support to Black youth through workshops and/or workplace learning also helps to build greater awareness within diverse Black communities on the pervasiveness of racism-related stress and helps youth develop the necessary skills needed to process complex emotions.

EDI TRAINING:

Conversation circles underscored the pivotal role of EDI training for all stakeholders within the mentorship ecosystem, including mentors, mentees, program operators, sponsors, and board members. Program coordinators emphasized that while racism is often perceived as external to Black communities, they urge us to recognize that racism also exists within the Black diaspora itself, often manifesting through “colourism.” Program directors describe colourism as a form of racism among Black people, where ‘lighter-skinned’ Black people perpetuate racist behaviours in the community by viewing darker-skinned people and youth as ‘delinquents’ and ‘at-risk’. Others have highlighted that colourism can also manifest in the opposite direction, where darker-skinned youth may ostracize lighter-skinned youth for not being perceived as ‘Black enough’. One notable example provided during the conversational workshops is how some parents refuse to allow their children to interact with other youth in the program. They also explained that some upper-middle-income families refuse to register their children in mentoring programs that consist of Black youth from underserved communities. Given the complexity and internal nuances of racism within the Black community, program directors suggest all members of the mentorship ecosystem should undergo EDI training to address these issues.

MENTOR-MENTEE SYNERGY:

Another important best practice raised in our conversation circles regards the role and positionality of mentors. Participants stressed the importance of mentors being actively involved in their communities, such as initiatives on social justice, combating racism, and other community initiatives aimed at building and strengthening Black communities. Mentors engaged in advocacy initiatives in their community offer unique depth and perspectives of the intersectional challenges Black youth face and the programs they support. Mentors who are part of the same community and cultural background as mentees can offer more relatable lines of support in a shared cultural setting. Program directors maintained that mentors who are active within diverse Black communities bring personal experiences that often resonate more deeply with mentees, facilitating trust, and fostering secure attachments with mentees. This is crucial because mentors provide a positive role model for youth to emulate. Mentors with the lived experiences of discrimination, racism, sexism, and homophobia offer relatable and culturally sensitive guidance to youth that mentors without these experiences can offer. Mentorship programs should prioritize pairing mentors with mentees who share social and cultural common ground, where possible. This requires a significant investment in mentor recruitment to build a diverse pool.

CULTIVATING BELONGING (EDIB):

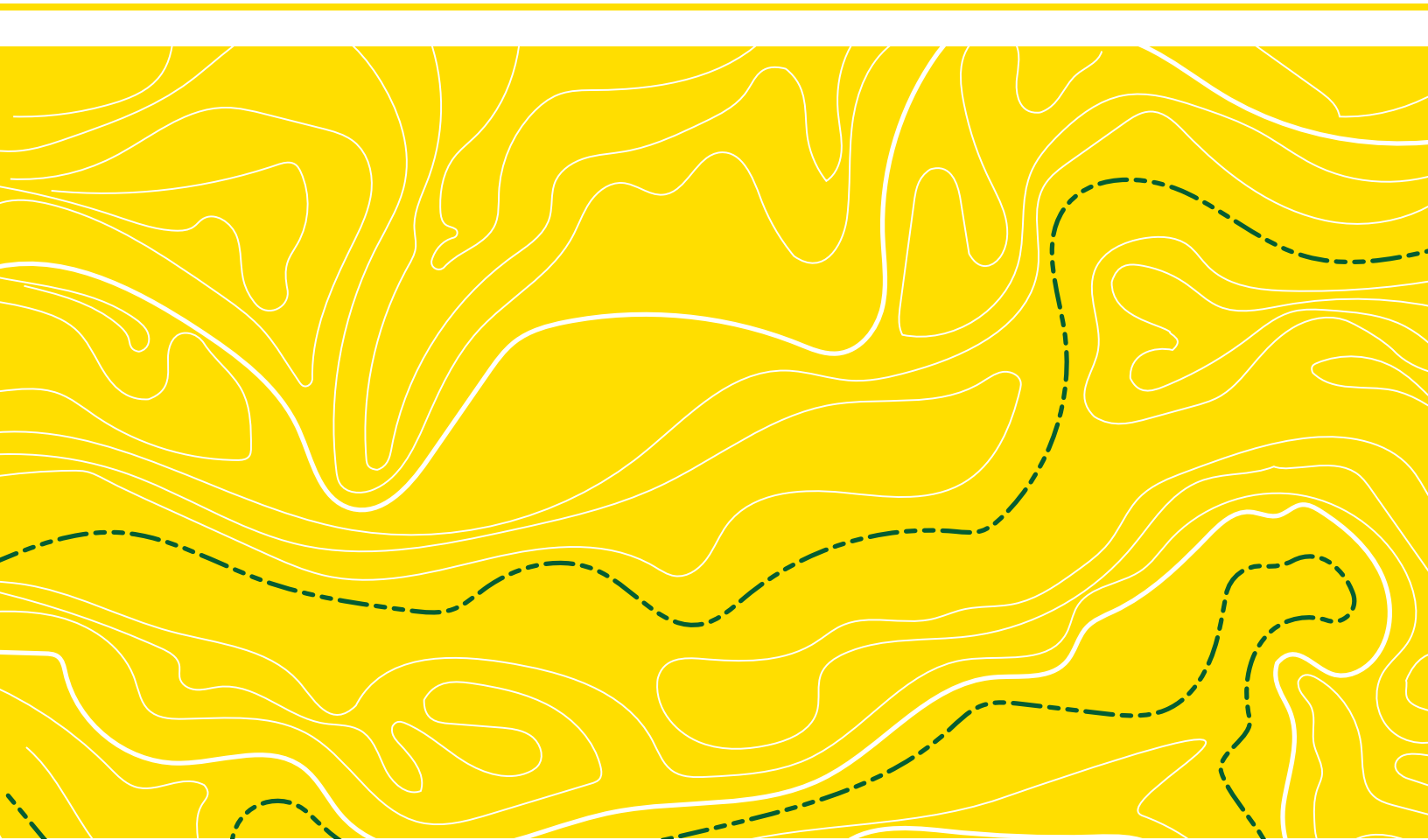
Program directors have suggested that successful mentorship programs not only acknowledge the intersecting complexities in the lives of Black youth but should also strive to “meet youth where they are”. Participants in conversational circles have highlighted the effectiveness of developing effective communication skills with oneself and others. Indigenous frameworks such as “decolonial love” can help youth feel a sense of belonging in their lives. According to Simpson (2016), decolonial love—developed in the context of Canadian settler-colonialism by Indigenous feminists—involves the reclaiming of one’s culture and ancestral teachings. It is a form of love dedicated to preserving and recovering cultural and traditional practices central to how Indigenous peoples perceive themselves in the world. This form of love is not individualistic but involves the appreciation and acceptance of Indigenous worldviews and teachings, and using those teachings to inform how one relates to others and the world (Butler, 2023, p.1381).

Decolonial love is the stark act of resistance to colonialism, challenging dominant frameworks that are often imposed on Black and Indigenous peoples in Canada. As an act of resistance to anti-Blackness in the mentorship ecosystem, programs can create a strong sense of belonging by teaching youth about their histories and legacies as distinct and diverse peoples, helping them to make sense of their place in the world. It is a ‘love language’ of resistance which rejects dominant Eurocentric culture and centers the histories, stories, lives, and experiences of Black people in mentorship and other learning environments. Furthermore, it is a way of developing Afro-Indigenous processes of “radical self-love”, simultaneously resisting anti-Blackness in Canada (Butler, 2023, p.1381).

MEASURING SUCCESS:

During conversational circles, we heard of several ways in which these programs measure success. It is important to note that the unit for measuring success must change according to the focus and goal of any specific mentorship program. Some programs use satisfaction surveys or positive testimonials as a key indicator of success, while others are more interested in the number of youth participating in mentorship programs. Others measure success by how many youths return to the program. Participants noted that success is also measured by connecting youth with job opportunities to help them build core skills and professional training needed in the job market.

Programs dedicated to helping Black youth navigate structural racism typically measure success by establishing initiatives aimed at addressing the adverse effects of racial capitalism in the country. This involves educating youth about Black culture and traditions, providing them access to and engaging with narratives and perspectives that recognize their presence and resilience in Canada. Success is evaluated through a justice-oriented lens, assessing the effectiveness of advocacy initiatives led by Black youth within these programs. Importantly, success can be gauged by the transfer of culturally attuned frameworks for understanding one's place in the world. Effective mentorship is thus characterized by the revitalization and rekindling of Black practices of survival and success in a nation shaped by the historical and ongoing legacies of colonialism and slavery.





CONCLUSION: NEXT STEPS

The analysis reveals several areas of improvement for the Black youth mentorship ecosystem in Canada. The following are actionable recommendations by governments, sponsors, Black youth mentorship programs, academics, and communities to apply for a more effective and culturally sensitive approach to equity in the mentorship ecosystem.

GOVERNMENTS (FEDERAL, PROVINCIAL AND MUNICIPAL):

- » Governments should prioritize community-driven data collection for diverse Black populations. Academic-community collaborations should be leveraged for primary research. This will inform evidence-based assessments of mentorship programs, aiding in equitable funding distribution.
- » Furthermore, they should prioritize the establishment of a Black youth mentorship hub to streamline research across provinces, addressing racialization impacts on youth. The hub will foster an extensive support network spanning urban and suburban areas.
- » It is imperative to acknowledge and address the negative impact of government branding on mentor and mentee recruitment for BYM (Black Youth Mentorship) programs. Instead of engaging with Black communities for labor extraction and subsequently withdrawing, governments should prioritize building sustained community presence and support.

SPONSORS (PUBLIC AND PRIVATE):

- » Sponsors should ensure that leadership within mentorship programs (including boards and administration) be predominantly drawn from Black communities. This ensures authentic representation, fosters cultural sensitivity, and facilitates a deeper understanding of the needs and challenges faced by Black youth.
- » Provide financial support and culturally sensitive (in-house) resources to mentorship programs. This assistance will enable programs to tailor their services to Black youth's specific needs and cultural backgrounds, fostering a more effective and supportive mentorship environment.
- » Offer paid compensation for culturally sensitive mentorship to alleviate the economic and mental strain associated with excessive workloads. This support acknowledges the invaluable contributions of Black mentors while ensuring their well-being and continued commitment to their communities.
- » Sponsors must shift their focus beyond mere quantification and the sole emphasis on skilled workers for markets in order to deliver culturally sensitive programming. Instead, they should recognize youth as complete individuals with diverse cultural and traditional backgrounds must be taken into account when designing these programs. While culturally sensitive approaches may necessitate more upfront capital investment, they yield significant improvements in the social capital of the youth they serve. It is essential to recognize that culturally attuned programs generally incur higher costs and cannot be effectively managed through blanket funding systems that fail to account for these additional expenses.

BLACK YOUTH MENTORSHIP PROGRAMS

- » To address the geographic concentration of programming, existing programs can leverage online platforms to engage communities currently underserved, such as those in rural and remote areas. Incorporating this expansion into the funding structure of programs emphasizes the importance of inclusivity and accessibility for diverse youth.
- » The Canadian Black youth mentorship ecosystem requires a pilot program focused on fostering belonging through culture. New mentorship initiatives should prioritize embedding belonging into program development. By centering belonging in Afrocentric programming, Black youth are empowered as active creators in their world-building processes. This shift acknowledges the significance of culture in mentorship programs.
- » Mentorship programs should explore collaborations with newcomer integration agencies to design parallel or joint programming customized for youth newcomers. Reposition mentorship as a means of cultural transfer, emphasizing its role in preserving and transmitting cultural knowledge and heritage.
- » In recognizing the effects of racialization on Black women, girls, and LGBTQIA2S+ individuals, mentorship programs should actively acknowledge and address these dynamics. Sponsors and program directors must design these considerations into programming, fostering open and consistent dialogue to combat heterosexism, homophobia, and transphobia. This approach is crucial for creating a sense of belonging for diverse Black youth.
- » Develop a comprehensive policy framework to enhance mentor recruitment practices, leveraging best practices and partnerships with sector-specific organizations like Black Chambers of Commerce and Black Faculty Collectives. This framework should include the creation of value statements that articulate the importance and principles of mentorship, fostering a more inclusive and effective mentorship ecosystem for diverse communities.

ACADEMICS:

- » In collaboration with communities and established Black Youth Mentorship (BYM) programs, academics should spearhead new evidence-based studies funded by governments. These studies must thoroughly investigate the needs and experiences of Black youth, facilitating informed policymaking and customized program development to bolster their empowerment and success. Additionally, it is crucial to recognize gender and racial capitalism as pivotal factors fueling the increased momentum of mentorship initiatives in Canada.
- » Academics should establish provincial mentorship hubs, with a focus on creating centralized platforms for Afro-centric curriculum within these programs. These hubs would serve to mobilize funding back into the community, ensuring that resources are directed towards culturally relevant and impactful initiatives.
- » Conducting comprehensive studies that contextualize mentorship within Canada's broader political economy could offer valuable insights into how market influences shape programming and mentorship initiatives. Understanding the interplay between economic forces and mentorship can shed light on the challenges and opportunities faced by both mentors and mentees. This knowledge can inform the development of more effective and sustainable mentorship programs that are responsive not only to markets, but to the youth that they serve.
- » Methods and frameworks aimed at capturing the importance of mentorship to Black youth should prioritize the utilization of intellectual resources generated by Black scholars and allies. By embracing perspectives and insights from within the Black community, researchers can better understand the experiences and needs of Black youth from their own vantage point. This approach fosters a more authentic and nuanced understanding of mentorship dynamics and ensures that interventions are grounded in the lived realities of Black youth.

- » Scholars and researchers should consider extending existing adult integration scholarships to include Black youth mentorship, which would enhance our understanding of mentorship dynamics. This expansion can illuminate the unique challenges and opportunities encountered by Black youth, underscoring the importance of culturally sensitive approaches in tailored mentorship programs.
- » Partner with the Black Entrepreneurship Knowledge Hub National Qualitative study, the Advancing Black Youth Mentorship Program, alongside other Black Youth Mentorship (BYM) programs, to develop a research strategy focusing on Black LGBTQIA2S+ youth, as well as Black girls and women in mentorship. This collaboration targets the literature gap to understand their unique needs and experiences. Through research, insights will inform effective mentorship programs tailored to Black Queer youth.
- » Conduct studies to identify barriers to mentorship among mentors, enabling a thorough understanding of their challenges. Establish a Federation of Black Mentorship Programs and an associated knowledge hub to centralize resources and foster collaboration.
- » Develop systemic design workshops aimed at educating mentors and community advocates on essential skills for engineering equity, diversity, inclusivity, and belonging into targeted programs, employing culturally sensitive approaches. These workshops should be conducted regularly and made accessible, providing ongoing opportunities for learning and networking to foster continuous professional development.
- » Additionally, creating training webinars can streamline costs and address the geographic concentration of programs. Academics could collaborate with community members, program leaders, sponsors, and Black youth to develop culturally sensitive training content, filling a gap in the ecosystem.

BLACK COMMUNITIES:

- » In unserved provinces and territories, collaboration among Black communities, local business organizations, academics, activists, and provincial governments should facilitate the exploration of establishing a program aligned with the best practices and lessons outlined in this report.
- » Black communities can emphasize the importance of Afrocentric mentorship, which reflects the unique ways they express their care and support for one another, countering the negative impacts of slavery and racialization in Canada. By viewing mentorship programs through this lens, Black communities should expand their reach beyond local boundaries, fostering connections and support networks across different regions.
- » Black communities should be attentive to how racism infiltrates their communities, complicating the lives of youth through the discourse of colorism. Communities should combat colorism by promoting Afrocentric education and awareness, challenging stereotypes, and fostering empowerment and self-love through mentorship and support programs.



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