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The Power of Community: Reflections from the Education Commissioner of Active Minds Western

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CEL Final Report: The Power of Community

While writing this report, I’m forced to reflect upon the year as a whole and consider what really happened. Fourth year was one of the toughest years of my life. I wouldn’t be here in Toronto, finishing the academic year, existing on this planet even, if it weren’t for my community. As someone who struggles on a daily basis with mental illness, communal support is the key to maintaining mood stability. Through my Community Engaged Learning experience, I have come to appreciate the value of community as site of mutual upliftment, like a large symbiotic organism. During my university career, I worked within the academic community to hone my critical awareness of the world around me which has opened my eyes to the injustices faced by people all over the world. Given this awareness, I have been faced by the same question time and time again: as people (living in a Western country) who profit from governmental and economic systems that are predicated on unethical practices and stratification, how can we ethically exist in this world? If I have all of this knowledge about immorality and injustice, what do I do about it? To me, community is an antidote to the apathy and inaction of academia and a cornerstone of support and engagement for those that find a place.

On a grand scale, we are in the midst of a mental health crisis that is sweeping Canadian campuses across the nation on an unprecedented scale (Purdon). In the wake of mental health stigma reduction and a newly developed openness to talking about mental health, the demand for mental health services and supports on campus has never been higher (Purdon). As a mental
health advocate, I am passionate about advancing mental health reform and increasing mental health literacy in my communities. Feeding from this passion, I worked with Active Minds Western (AM), a USC-regulated mental health advocacy club, as their Education Commissioner this year. I decided to use the second half of my term in this role as my Community Engaged Learning (CEL) project as I recognized the value in academically structuring and critically assessing my progress toward increased mental health literacy at Western University.

As Education Commissioner, my responsibilities consisted of creating a portfolio vision, organizing mental health workshops, assisting in facilitating mental health conversations, and supporting the organization in other ways such as volunteering at AM events. The Education Portfolio, established this year and nested under the Internal Portfolio led by Samara Bengall, was a collaborative construction that resulted from a conversation with Tom Lee, last year’s AM President, about the need for increased mental health literacy at Western as cited by the Ontario Undergraduate Student Association and Active Minds’ own mental health report (Pierre; Claggett et al). Thus, my primary role was collaborating with Sam to inform the direction and tangible outcomes of the portfolio. After several summer and fall meetings that tested my program planning and project management abilities, we decided to approach implementation cautiously and agreed on the need for mental health workshops that would balance theory and practice – weighted in favour of practice. We wanted to ensure that our members knew how to respond to mental health crises, were confident in referring students to mental health services on- and off-campus, and could support themselves emotionally and academically during the school year. By
executing these educational outcomes, AM members could act as an accessibility bridge between students and professional supports, cultivating a healthier, safer, and more aware campus environment in accordance with current mental health recommendations (Clarke, Mikulenaite, and de Pury; Dietsche, Toneguzzo, and King).

Working with Lena Schreyer, Education Coordinator, we developed five mental health workshops that provided a general overview of mental health and addressed helping a friend, maintaining wellness, succeeding academically, and advocating for mental health beyond AM. In developing these workshops, I applied critical research methods, demographic analysis, and creative thinking to ensure that the educational content and brand messaging was targeted, accurate, and engaging. I exercised effective leadership, delegation, and time and workflow management to consistently meet monthly deadlines among other academic and extra-curricular obligations. In running the workshops and facilitating Community Hangouts (casual mental health conversations), I employed professional presentation and interpersonal skills to build comfortable learning environments that adapted to the audiences’ knowledge and experiences. In reflecting on my role, my responsibilities forced me to reconcile my comfort with the academic bubble and my relative unfamiliarity with the application and implementation of knowledge.

Outside of my role, I regularly volunteered at AM events which shifted the focus from education and leadership to effective marketing, brand awareness, approachability, and connectivity with the Western community. Through the organization, I met many people who
were similarly passionate about the mental health movement including Sam and Lena who supported me in my portfolio, as well as Victoria Han, VP Events and Annie Lin, VP Creative. These students inspired me through their enthusiasm and dedication to push harder for mental health. Carole Palattao, Communications Director, was a particularly compelling influence as her tireless online advocacy work and friendly check-ins reminded me of the importance of self-care through the times when I was not taking care of myself, despite what I was preaching at the workshops.

Both of my mentors at the Student Success Centre, Leslie Gloor Duncan, Associate Director of the Transition, Leadership & Enrichment Programs, and Rebecca Smith, Scholars’ Programs and Academic Outreach Coordinator, were overwhelmingly positive about the work I did throughout the year. While I wish that I had contacted them and secured their support sooner, their feedback – encouraging and constructive – was essential in convincing me that I had, in fact, produced compelling content and pursued and accomplished something worthwhile. Through them, I realized that education creates a cascading potential impact as information travels laterally between individuals (and groups). Leslie and Rebecca, both impressed with my work, invited the Education Portfolio, myself included, to share resources and collaborate with their office in the future. Their willingness to cooperate with student-led advocacy efforts feels hopeful as their office, an official body of the Western administration, recognizes the role and validity of our work at the university. Student-administration alliances represent the future of mental health advocacy as youth voices – the ones most affected – are essential in defining
mental health needs, assessing current efforts, and passionately advocating for mental health reform that responds to the rising demand for mental health supports.

Engaging with my CEL opportunity was a valuable exercise in uniting academic knowledge with my varied skillset. In working in mental health education, I found purpose in action which instilled me with a greater sense of confidence. The clear evidence of my success, assessed through critical reflection, prevented me from writing off what I had accomplished: I did important work, and I did it well! In a yearlong process of learning and testing, I engaged soft skills like research and presentation skills, thinking creatively, project management, working theory into practice – all developed in SASAH – to translate wide bodies of knowledge into tangible educational outcomes. Through SASAH, I also connected with Sean Keith, a director at Eagle Eye, who reminded me that change is a slow process, so it is essential to *take it slow* to avoid burnout in the advocacy field. I also learned about the stress-relieving benefits of effective time management through calendar planning and consistent communication, the organizational value of establishing a clear project vision at the outset of an endeavour, and the importance of asking for help, personally and professionally, in maintaining workflow.

Working with Active Minds solidified my desire to be a part of the mental health conversation and showed me an informed way forward in mental health education. While change is a long and slow process, I managed to
make an impact in a relatively short time – less than a year. After recognizing my impact and trusting my experience, I decided to apply to a summer internship with Jack.org to explore the marketing, brand awareness, and motivational elements of mental health advocacy. For me, CEL offered me a sense of pride and belonging in my community while confirming my pursuit of a better mental health future through advocacy. The value of CEL lies within the real-world experience, the concrete deliverables. CEL reflects the value of education back to students through its utility in application. It is an antidote to the disillusionment that many students feel due to the acute, critical awareness of social issues accompanied by a distinct lack of actionable solutions. CEL projects show students that we all have the capability to make a remarkable difference in our communities.

But mental health is only one aspect of community support. Art is another core aspect of community that echoes social and political realities and offers a cultural refuge to those who feel disenfranchised by society. By operating at the fringes of society, art reflects on the past and generates solutions for the future. London has a little known but extensive history of artists backed by the Regionalism movement that was popular in the 1960s (Highlights). Penn Kemp, my CEL partner from last year, grew up with this movement through the work of her father, James “Jim” Kemp, a famous artist in his own right who worked with the likes of Alice Munro, Greg Curnoe, and James Reaney (Belanger). Penn Kemp, London’s inaugural poet laureate (Jeresky), had a host of ideas that she wanted my CEL group (made up myself, Isabel Halfar, and Natalie Firth) to work on implementing. At the time, her newest book, Local Heroes, was coming out in time with her launch of The Dream Life of Teresa Harris, a sound opera in CD form. Partnering with Penn and her independently-run artist company, Pendas Productions, our responsibilities consisted of consolidating her social media presence, producing The Dream Life
of Teresa Harris, creating a promotional video for as well as reviewing Local Heroes, and digitizing Penn’s old slides, remnants of London’s aged art movement. These tasks were both ambitious and overwhelming as they required technical savvy, effective project management, and a whole lot of time. In working through them, we realized we had taken on too much and reassessed to determine what we could realistically accomplish before the end of term.

With our updated outlook, we decided to focus on CD production, social media consolidation, and promotions. I spearheaded the Local Heroes promotional video, working closely with Natalie Firth and Western Archives as well as paying several visits to Penn’s house to get footage of her father’s paintings. Though I could not do any sound editing as we did not have access to the sound files for The Dream Life of Teresa Harris, I helped produce the CD by preparing the covers and assembling the CD cases. I also prepared a document of production options (pictured right) that included a budgetary and value breakdown. After reviewing it with Penn, we decided that local production best fit her community-driven artistic focus as well as her budgetary constraints. On the social media side, I assisted in organizing and arranging albums on her SoundCloud profile to increase organization, navigability, and aesthetic. In working on these disparate projects, I engaged my project management, creative collaboration, and professional communication skills to create reasonable timelines in concert with my team members and keep track of various deadlines through emails and calendaring tools. On the technical side, I delved into the various aspects of video
production, from storyboarding to filming footage and taking stills, and applied those skills to develop the promotional video that features Penn reading a descriptive review of *Local Heroes* atop footage and photographs of Museum London, Couplets (collaborative poetry reading in London), the Western Archives, and the London area. I reapplied my technical knowledge to organizing the SoundCloud page which engaged my ability to adapt to new situations and systems, software in this case, and benefited from my detail-oriented approach. Through this project, I gained an intimate understanding of grassroots production and came to appreciate the sense of community in local art movements.

Penn was a persistent whirlwind of creative energy and enthusiasm. Working with Penn is like working with creativity itself: there are infinite possibilities waiting to be explored. But in the confines of a half-term CEL course, we did not have infinite time. Rather than a mentor, I saw Penn like a creative partner. She offered us the ideas and the general framework of what she wanted, and we crafted these ideas into the particulars and specifics. As a mentor, she instilled a sense of independence within us. We learned to be motivated self-starters and create our own directions and constraints to effectively follow through on our projects. Part of this process was learning how to draw professional boundaries – learning how to say no. While it was necessary to draw these boundaries, it was no less difficult given the power dynamic between student and supervisor. Toward the end of the year, our team mutually agreed to prepare and send Penn an email to inform her of what we could and could not achieve in the remaining time with her. To Penn’s credit, her openness to change allowed us to take control of the project and shape it to suit our skillsets which eventually strengthened the end-of-term deliverables.

Penn’s unique position in the London art community connected me to many artists, living and dead, who I would not have otherwise discovered. As a Regionalist, Penn encouraged us to
get involved with other artists in the movement which directly related to the course content of ENG 3580F: Creativity and the Local, the CEL course that replaced the first half of my SASAH CEL requirement. Her house, our typical meeting place, was essentially a mini art museum! Hanging on her walls were some of London’s most well-known artists, the Curnoes, the Chambers and, of course, her father, while trinkets and knick-knacks, some from the Reaney family, lay on crowded, dusty desks. Her connection to London as a city and a kind of storybook character shifted my own perspective of time and place and helped me see history as a living process. As an artist, this perspective opened my eyes to the complex negotiations of space that happen every day. For example, Eldon House, a local London historical manor and tourist attraction, is a grandiose symbol of British colonial power which is reverently gazed upon by London locals as an artifact of the past. But its power continues to resonate in the city as Indigenous people continue to be marginalized and pushed to the fringes of the city. Penn, as a community figure embedded in its structures, created new narratives in her works through the likes of Teresa Harris, an untraditional and remarkable 19th century woman whose origins lay in Eldon House (Montanini). Working with Penn consistently brought me back to the age-old adage: don’t judge a book by its cover. I realized that both the CEL experience and London as a whole had a lot more to offer than I initially gave them credit for.
While this CEL course was not run through SASAH, the experience felt distinctly similar to a SASAH course. The project was primarily self-directed and lacked the traditional (and oftentimes suffocating) structure of most arts and humanities courses. The content was contained in observation of and reflection on cultural objects alongside one-on-one conversations with Penn who, despite the power dynamic, felt like a peer. The assessments weren’t term tests or critical essays, they were numbers at an event, social media reach, assembled CDs, and a promotional video. The class lecture time was attending local London events, visiting museums and historical sites, and researching in the Western Archives. These kinds of activities, a far cry from the organization of academia, are aligned closely with the spirit of SASAH: learning with humanity. The CEL experience was designed to test student responses to real life problems and situations, away from the stifling limits of the classroom. Therein lies the value. Without this experience, I likely wouldn’t have been exposed to or evaluated on creative production, working with archival material, or promotions in my creative writing and English degree.

While I deeply respect Penn’s work and the ways it challenged me, I realized that I don’t have the level of motivation required to be an independent artist at this stage in my life. Penn’s success as an artist is due in large part to her sustained efforts that contribute to a long-term creative vision tied to her community, beyond her relationship to other London artists. She is supported by London’s art community through a
mutually beneficial network that ensures attendance, engagement, and creative evolution. Penn Kemp is a nexus; I simply don’t have her level of creative connections. But I do have my mental health advocacy family. I have a network of students, educators, political figures, entrepreneurs, and professional supports that believe the same thing that I do: we need to see a change in the way mental health is treated – socially and medically – in Canada. Penn taught me that nothing is more important or more valuable than a powerful and passionate network of individuals who are willing to stand by you through failure and success.

Not everyone has a community like this. Thus, we come back to the original question: how can we ethically exist in this world? What can we do about all the wrong in the world? When I used to be in Scouts, we had a prevailing motto: do a good turn for somebody else every day. I think we were on to something. To ethically exist in this world, we can come together as individuals contributing to a community and make minute differences every day. In time, these differences will add up and multiply through the benevolent Butterfly Effect. Through the course of my CEL experience, making a difference meant helping out a local, independent artist with her work and sharing my knowledge of mental health with students at my university. Academic education helped get me to that point, it helped me understand the shape of our world, but it isn’t everything.

Academia, especially the liberal arts, tends to presume that we live in a vacuum. We have the privilege of detaching ourselves from Earth’s gritty realities for three hours at a time to learn about complex theoretical concepts or argue whether Beatrice-Joanna in Thomas Middleton’s The Changeling is or isn’t a whore. That separation from real life has undeniable value: we need to put distance between our thoughts and our feelings in order to focus on developing soft skills like critical analysis, effective communication, and creative problem-
solving. If we were constantly consumed by the world’s horrors, of which there are many, we wouldn’t get a whole lot done. But as someone who believes we have a moral responsibility to strive for equality and equity, academia, in of itself, doesn’t cut it.

Enter Community Engaged Learning. I believe CEL is an integral part of and yet a distinct entity from education as it offers something that academia does not: CEL offers a holistic learning experience that assesses theoretical and practical knowledge. If you can succeed in a CEL course, it’s a pretty good indicator that you can succeed in the real world. As my time at Western comes to a close (though not quite closed), I have come to recognize the mark that CEL has left on me. Through careful and critical reflection, I feel more confident in my abilities whether in the classroom or out in the world. I feel more connected to my communities and I know how to serve them better. I feel more at ease with the world knowing that a strong community can accomplish pretty much anything with enough time and effort. These CEL experiences were never very easy for me. They often took a huge amount of labour and commitment, and sometimes I didn’t have the energy to provide that. They challenged my habits – good and bad. They forced me to think differently about my environment and confront my biases. These CEL experiences made me a more effective student, but moreover, they made me a better person. I know I don’t have all the answers to the inevitable questions of our uncertain future, and that scares me immeasurably. The mental health crisis still rages, Neo-Nazism has crawled back out of the darkness, and our planet is on a twelve-year clock that’s ticking away. But whatever happens, I move forward with faith in myself, with hard-earned knowledge, and with trust in the power of community. Bring it on.


Reflection on CEL Presentation

In producing my presentation, there were a few considerations I had to account for: my CEL partner, a student-led mental health advocacy group, was an untraditional choice, Active Minds Western would only be familiar to those who were involved with our mandate, and I am not an accredited mental health educator. Considering these points, the goals of my presentation were establishing Active Minds’ legitimacy, promoting our work on campus, and legitimizing my voice as a student working in this field, in addition to discussing my CEL experience. If I could show the process of making a difference in my community by the end of the presentation, I hoped students would realize that they too could make an impact in their communities.

I chose to structure my presentation similarly to a mental health workshop as that style of content delivery has worked in the past and offers some underlying connection to my deliverables. The first step in that process was establishing legitimacy. My introduction functions like a statement of interest as it shows my prior dedication and future goals in the field within which I am presenting. The clean “Who am I?” slide invites the students to focus solely on me, the speaker, thus rendering me authority and attention. The introduction slide then offers my title in the organization, Education Commissioner, which adds an official air to the presentation. While seemingly minor, these introductory remarks reinforce the legitimacy of the organization and my role within it, later qualified by the work we do at Western.

The next section, an introduction of Active Minds, emphasized our scale, growth, and impact. To colour in these details, I referenced our parent organization in Washington D.C., but restated our operational autonomy here at Western. I then led into the pillars of our organization, executive structure, and recognized accolades to show the depth and efficacy of our club. Our mission, to educate, connect, and advocate for students, was highlighted as the overarching goal
of my project. This section naturally segued into my role in the organization, accompanied by an explanation of my personal goals of building the foundation of the Education Portfolio, increasing mental health literacy within Active Minds, increasing awareness about mental health services on campus, and stimulating student conversations about mental health.

As I described the process of meeting those goals, I explained the initial challenges I faced including choice paralysis given the possibilities of the brand-new Education Portfolio, a perceived lack of expertise, and widely varying levels of mental health literacy. I addressed these challenges through a laser focus on tangible outcomes: educating through the mental health workshops. Alongside these workshops, I also presented some of my other work including volunteering at Active Minds events, preparing a turnover document to inform the future direction of the Education Portfolio, and facilitating Community Hangouts (hour-long mental health discussions). In terms of program impact, I used positive verbal feedback and a statistically driven assessment to show my success in reaching my goal of increasing mental health literacy. In the final section of the presentation, I addressed the problems that I faced – poor marketing, lack of engagement, and inefficient workflow – and explained how I fell back on the two R’s, realistic and relatable, to overcome these issues. In resolving these problems, I learned how to manage my time effectively, how to establish a clear project vision, and how to ask for help when I need it. By balancing relatability and legitimacy and employing a traditional narrative arc in my presentation, I hoped the evidence of my success would encourage others to get involved in their communities – at Western or beyond.
Deliverables

Mental Health Workshops

If you’d like the scripts as well, just email me and I’ll send you the links!

AGM Workshop – Workshop #1:

https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1w2WtsQr32APcxG4P3GXObEEUX_zn-3PoFD5NEVzutb4/edit?usp=sharing

How To: Help A Friend – Workshop #2

https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1somRo3UP0b71QAUzfwdccwjKI4EYbdPx7MjyUYOF0Bo/edit?usp=sharing

Stress Management – Workshop #3

https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1OcQPlom0AwHWG9ES3Du4ou7lyIQRUe5GuDILMdrLHAk/edit?usp=sharing

How To: Help Your Grades – Workshop #4

https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1dkqAdZAerAh-Y9WZuqqBEz1VB-N CpG61agQwvjydfbo/edit?usp=sharing

How To: Be a Mental Health Advocate – Workshop #5

https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/18Zbt5u7YLgkXtMczvnECX0EctwgNyLGFWmKHTtQi yjE/edit?usp=sharing
Community Hangouts Presentations

Community Hangout #1

https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1n5L9deMu7mLCi_IqVuJzEjzs2a9tZn7ipPRHLvWz7FA/edit?usp=sharing

Community Hangout #6

https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1yCbOU8gEY0X5o3gRYMrixY-Z7gyVs7MG7-2yiz4CVHM/edit?usp=sharing

Turnover Document

https://docs.google.com/document/d/1cvIXaYzqms4nPqikcaceA9aXZGnsESC rwLIcfe6ms48/edit?usp=sharing

CEL Presentation

https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1eRfbbXJTzDKF9J5msmHnKlq15sxzhedpYYeiQVCtXgw/edit?usp=sharing