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Get the Arts Outdoors: Merging Arts and Nature in Outdoor Education at the YMCA

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Get the Arts Outdoors: Merging Arts and Nature in Outdoor Education at the YMCA

The former South African president, philanthropist, and anti-apartheid activist, Nelson Mandela, is famously known for stating, “Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world” (Strauss). As humans, we are lifelong learners. The moment we are born, we begin to learn about and explore who we are and the world around us, further educating ourselves for the rest of our lives. As we grow, we spend our most critical stages of development in the education system. Later in life, we continue to evolve how we conceptualize the world based on newfound knowledge we gain, adaptation to ongoing changes in our careers, and everyday experiences. Education is all the more integral to my identity as a Sikh, which directly translates to learner or student, because it is a faith of learning. Moreover, growing up in a family that had limited educational opportunities—especially the women in my life—has led me to value education and the knowledge, empowerment, opportunity, and power one obtains with its access. Therefore, my interest in the field of education as a potential career blossomed.

However, as much as education is a human right, it is often neglected. Specifically, insight gained through the arts continues to be minimized or completely ignored while all the attention in education is diverted to subjects involving the sciences, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM). While attempts have been made to integrate STEM concepts with the Arts (STEAM), it remains an undervalued field. Growing up, I noticed a lack of attention in my education to anything related to the arts—from the humanities, language classes, visual arts,

drama, music, and more. When deciding on my undergraduate program, I was very close to not applying for School for Advanced Studies in Arts and Humanities (SASAH) as one of my majors. Many immigrant families emphasize and raise their children with the belief that careers in STEM are more reliable, economically stable, and prestigious. While my cultural background and its pro-STEM rhetoric played a significant role in my decision-making process when choosing programs, I was also influenced by educators who strongly implied that smart or good students should pursue STEM-based fields rather than the Arts. At the time, the decision felt like one of the most daunting choices I had ever made. It was all because of the label: School for Advanced Studies in Arts and Humanities. While I enjoyed the arts, I remember feeling unnecessarily guilty, as if I was wasting time and effort that could be put towards the sciences. Through SASAH, I now recognize that this separation between the arts and sciences is artificial. As I pursue my passions within the arts through SASAH, I continue to develop my expertise in the sciences and social sciences through kinesiology. In doing so, I have integrated what I have learned from each respective major to inform and create holistic approaches and methods in my work. For instance, I incorporated a drama-based activity during my second-year Coaching and Sport Leadership activity course in kinesiology. More recently, I was able to cross-list courses between these two fields due to the similar content, highlighting that the arts and sciences can be merged. When I realized this was possible, I became passionate about STEAM-based learning.

Considering these findings along with my passion for education as an aspiring teacher, I sought an internship where I could apply more integrated approaches to bring valuable experiences to children and youth by merging these long-divided fields to promote learning of all subjects within STEAM. As I looked for opportunities, I realized the perfect placement for my experiential learning was YMCA Cedar Glen Outdoor Centre (the Y). When I began my summer

job with the Y, I did so to gain educational experience working with children and youth in a non-traditional setting. As previously emphasized, I have a penchant for working outside conventional boundaries—in this case, literally! Outdoor education, compared with traditional educational institutions, has been found to benefit children and youth in many ways including intellectually, physically, and emotionally (Mutz and Müller 105; Finn et al. 35; Barford & Bentsen 151; Becker et al. 1). Moreover, preliminary research indicates that outdoor learning is particularly beneficial for students of marginalized groups, including disabled and/or neurodivergent children/children with disabilities and/or neurodivergence, who have shown greater cohesion and self-perception as a result, along with lower reports of tension and anxiety during outdoor education opportunities (Farnham and Mutrie 31). I learned not only that the arts and sciences can be merged but also that unique learning opportunities, such as outdoor education, can include STEAM-based learning while providing additional benefits to students compared with traditional educational settings.

While working there, I reaffirmed the substantial benefits of education outside the classroom (EOtC) and other forms of outdoor education, which have been supported by research but largely neglected as an experiential opportunity for most children and youth in Canada. However, EOtC still perpetuates the arbitrary divide between the arts and sciences which limits its potential. Prior to my internship, my time with the YMCA Cedar Glen Outdoor Centre involved delivering numerous programs in an outdoor setting which integrated nature through hands-on experiences using natural materials, such as making shelters using fallen logs. Seeing the care and connection students developed with nature after their experience, and hearing passion in their voices when discussing the pertinent issues impacting nature—notably climate change—highlighted the impact the team at Cedar Glen had on youth as we introduced

alternative educational opportunities to children from predominantly marginalized groups. Nonetheless, each of these programs focussed almost entirely on STEM subjects while neglecting the arts. Through this experience, I recognized a need for including the arts into the programming I conducted at the Y to diversify EOtC opportunities.

When I applied to complete my internship with the YMCA Cedar Glen Outdoor Centre, I intended to merge the arts and sciences in an outdoor setting by assisting in the development of curriculum-based, alternative programming. Additionally, I sought to gain professional experience in the field of education, along with further developing the collaborative, communication, interpersonal, problem-solving, and time-management skills gained throughout my undergraduate experience in SASAH. My experiential learning for the SASAH program took place during the Fall/Winter semester of the 2021/2022 calendar. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the YMCA underwent numerous changes to their programming, planning, and overall daily scheduling while moving it all online. Until recently, the entire team—myself included—worked remotely, while Cedar Glen received very few guests. While it was unfortunate that program delivery was limited, it provided the team with the opportunity to focus on and update the existing programs—which was predominately my responsibility. *Remote work* and *outdoor learning* are not often seen in the same sentence together. Despite spending a summer previously working with the Y, my internship has resulted in new learning and development. Unlike my past experiences solely involving program delivery, I sought to gain more collaborative opportunities with the rest of the team to develop new lesson plans. In doing so, I hoped to further the skills mentioned above. Additionally, I wanted to produce work which can be useful to the Y in creating more worthwhile experiences for students, whether they are physically present or “visit” through online means as the world navigates the pandemic. All in all, I sought to engage in

experiential learning at the YMCA Cedar Glen Outdoor Centre to utilize and improve upon the skills learned in SASAH, while gaining experience related to my desired career.

Compared with the typical work environment of the YMCA, my internship was different in terms of scale and setting: the team was bigger and everyone was working from home. Although I had prior experience working virtually due to the pandemic, this environment was different in that meetings were more frequent and there were a wider variety of platforms used to communicate and more people in the meetings. Moreover, as my work did not involve program delivery like it used to, it was a completely different experience. Instead, my initial duties involved researching the Ontario Curriculum for public education from kindergarten to Grade 12, seeking out potential opportunities to incorporate outdoor learning into specific units, and listing any current integration of EOtC. From my research, I realized that every subject can be adequately taught outdoors, which was supported by the work I found from various forest schools across Canada, such as Trillium Waldorf School. Likewise, due to the rise of virtual learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, I researched and produced online program options for the Y as well. Through my initial work, I established an overview summarizing the curriculum requirements per grade, opportunities for outdoor learning per subject, and accessible options to ensure all students can equitably engage with the material. In doing so, I established a framework of curricula to use as a base for the outdoor activities I intended to create.

Upon completing the research, I began my primary task this year: developing specific lesson plans per grade to be used for group programming during their time at the Y. As an illustration, I finished creating full-day lesson plans for Grade 6 students completing the unit on biodiversity by integrating the arts and sciences (see Fig. 1). For instance, one of the activities—*The Tray Game*—is heavily arts-based in that it includes using items of any kind which students

would have to list and guess what natural material was used for its creation (Band-Aid—cotton), but they also would list elements of art, such as line, shape, and form. Moreover, students are to list the principles of design they think is a part of the item, from balance to unity.

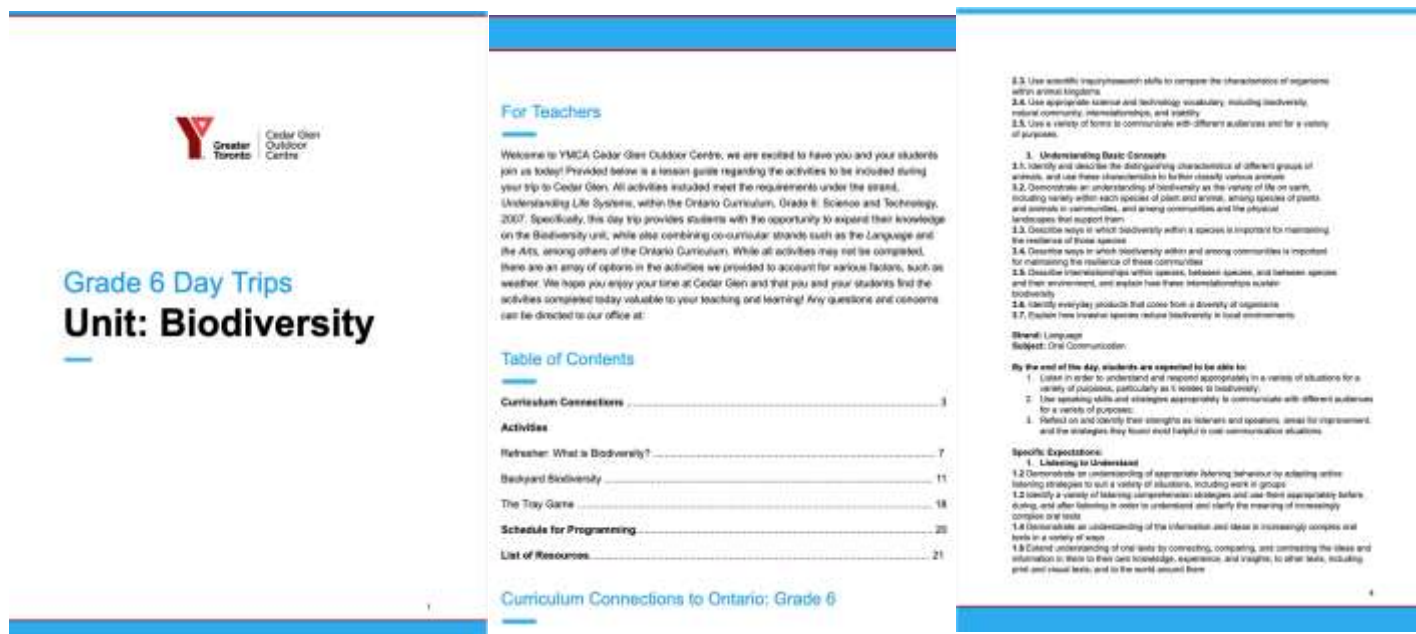


Fig. 1. Sample of the *Grade 6: Biodiversity* lesson plan created for the YMCA Outdoor Education department, beginning with the title page, table of contents, and curriculum expectations.


However, after completing a few lesson plans, I noticed that there was an emphasis placed on students' experiences while neglecting teachers' views. Consequently, I suggested to my supervisors—Jeremy and Simon—that they include specific expectations from the curriculum for each lesson in the plan to satisfy the needs of teachers who are aiming to achieve all the grade-related criteria. Furthermore, I attempted to address multiple expectations of the curriculum—from specific scientific subdisciplines to literacy—by integrating various educational aspects in an interdisciplinary manner. The resulting work included a specific section in each plan dedicated to the specific curriculum expectations met, in addition to connections to other subjects and units


(see Fig. 1). By having my supervisors' support regarding my suggestions, I felt my self-efficacy significantly increased through this experience as I developed my problem-solving skills.

This skill will be practical for my future career in education because teaching involves constant problem solving to adapt to every child's needs. In the classroom, I hope to prioritize accessibility to ensure all students can succeed according to equitable means. Thus, teachers require quick problem-solving abilities to find feasible solutions for students requiring accommodations. By gaining understanding and proposing solutions for similar challenges—such as the lack of teachers engaging in EOtC—I will be able to approach future challenges effectively. In the case of hesitancy around outdoor learning, I identified that a key barrier influencing teachers' decisions to forego outdoor education was lack of preparedness and feelings of impracticality (Pedretti et al. 11). Consequently, I recognized that there needed to be greater encouragement for diverse forms of learning while meeting teachers' needs. By understanding why there is hesitancy, I am better able to brainstorm a solution that addresses and mitigates these concerns, resulting in educators utilizing outdoor learning to its innovative potential. I am also prepared for barriers limiting students' engagement with learning material by ensuring diverse learning styles, various opportunities to demonstrate knowledge, and accessible options which are included in my lessons. By developing my problem-solving skills during my time with Cedar Glen, I will be better prepared as an educator.

As I continued creating lesson plans, I maintained my goal of incorporating the arts into the sciences. For example, the science and technology strand for Grade 2 includes the *Growth & Change in Animals* unit (see Fig. 2). In the lesson plan, I included an arts-based activity which involved the students using drama to act out animals from different classes and showcase attributes unique to their adaptation, all accomplished through acting! The knowledge obtained

by differentiating animals based on the six classes of animals (Mammals, Fish, Birds, Reptiles, Birds, and Invertebrates) is one of the primary learning goals for this unit. Moreover, incorporating role play and developing body awareness through dance and drama combine arts-based key components. Lastly, understanding the fundamental concept of the societal implications of climate change is significant to the social-studies expectations for this grade level. Consequently, the lessons I have planned demonstrate that the arts and sciences are not as divided as they are made out to be and can be merged to enhance the learning of children and youth.





Activity: Animal Adaptation

<p>Lesson Overview:</p> <p>Grade: 2</p> <p>Subject: Growth & Change in Animals</p> <p>Length: 1 hr</p> <p>Topic: Animal Adaptation and Characteristics</p> <p>Summary: Following the previous activity, students act out different characteristics and movements of animals from the six different classes to compare and contrast the similarities and differences in the characteristics of animals. They will compare animals from various habitats to investigate their adaptations to a particular environment through a physical education-based game where the teacher provides a scenario of an animal, which students follow and mimic.</p> <p>Essential Questions:</p> <p>What are the different characteristics of animals in different classes?</p> <p>How do animals adapt to their environment?</p> <p>What are the similarities and differences of animals within the same and different classes?</p> <p>Learning Goals:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Students will be able to recognize and act out the provided animal. - Students will make connections between an animal's environment and its need to adapt accordingly. - Students will recognize there are patterns among animals in the same classes and stark differences among animals in differing classes. 	<p style="text-align: center;">in Ontario. Migrate back North for the summer. Flap your wings and honk all the way back home.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 4. After a few rounds, you may wish to have a student volunteer instruct the rest of the students with their own examples to further demonstrate their understanding. 5. Another expansion of this activity includes pairing up students and providing two distinct animals from different or the same classes. (Ex. Deer and Chickadee; Owl and Mouse; Bear and Snake; Elephant and Frog) 6. The students must find three differences between the animals. (Fur vs feathers, four legs vs two legs, can't fly vs can fly, etc.). Complete this for a few rounds using your own examples or the ones provided listed above. 7. A final expansion involves the students in pairs or groups where one student will receive a flashcard. The student will then provide the class of the animal, along with hints provided on the card about the animal. 8. Students must guess what the animal is based on the hints. Other ways the question can be asked include "yes" or "no" questions about the animal's characteristics such as: Does your animal have fur? Does your animal fly? Is your animal big? Is your animal small? 9. Complete this for a few rounds before completing a final debrief asking students, "How can we tell the differences between animal class?" "What are some ways animals adapt to their environment?" and "Can you identify the characteristics which are similar in each animal class?" <p>Accommodations:</p> <p>This activity may be extended by using any of the previous examples to expand on the original activity. Otherwise, continue the original game and adapt by changing the animals to a specific habitat/ecosystem.</p> <p>Depending on the group, the game can be generalised to less specific animals if it is confusing for the students. A visual aid showing the animal may be beneficial for students to get an idea of the animal they are portraying.</p>
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Fig. 2. Sample of the *Grade 2: Growth & Change in Animals* lesson plan created for the YMCA Outdoor Education department, which highlights the merging of the arts and sciences in a lesson on animal adaptation and characteristics using dance and drama.

My problem-solving skills to creatively find ways to merge the arts and sciences in an outdoor setting reflects my top themes from the CliftonStrengths Assessment: Ideation® and Responsibility®. People whose strength is Ideation can find connections between apparently disparate phenomena to innovate new ideas for projects, while Responsibility involves the commitment to stable values such as honesty and loyalty as these people are known to take ownership of their tasks (Gallup). Over the course of the year, the lesson plans have undergone numerous changes. Per my identified strengths, my fascination with ideas allows me to conceptualize novel approaches to my work (Gallup). Not only was this a key component of the interdisciplinary approach taken in SASAH courses, but it was beneficial to me during my time with the Y. When editing lesson plans with Simon, I realized that specific learning outcomes were not addressed for each activity. Given the findings of Pedretti et al. regarding hesitancy among teachers to engage in EOtC (11), I feared the lack of explicit outcomes per activity may further deter teachers from our programs. Thus, I came up with the solution to include learning goals for each activity, along with the overall curriculum expectations. My sense of responsibility led to the robust research and thoroughness of my suggestions on targeting specific learning goals while also developing key skills in other subjects like drama, as previously mentioned for the *Grade 2 Growth & Changes in Animals* unit. I strongly felt that even if others did not give my program much thought, it was still important that each aspect of the plan was supported and actionable. Due to my experiential learning, I developed key skills for teaching, including problem solving and responsibility.

My experience with SASAH as an interdisciplinary program which includes course content addressing history, Indigenous studies, creative writing, visual art, and more, prepared me for the challenges and expectations of my role in program development. Having completed

such work as developing a campaign proposal, coding a website, and writing persuasive pieces, I had hands-on experience using various tools and skills which aided me at the Y. When overcoming the difficulties of being selective in what units I chose to include per activity, I persevered because I was delegated this task which could influence the learning of thousands of students. By improving my responsibility to take ownership of my ideas and follow through on them, I will be able to use this theme in my future classroom as I must decide what skills and knowledge to pass onto students as an educator, mentor, and supporter of these lives. To manage such a task, SASAH prepared me through the development of my adaptive abilities. As I had prior experience managing work from various fields at once, my feelings of self-efficacy increased as I knew I was capable of being responsible for such a workload.

Prior to this experience, I did not realize how much work went into lesson planning: the initial researching, brainstorming ways to integrate lessons in the outdoors, and the actual writing of the lessons is a long process. Consequently, the development of these programs would not be possible without the Cedar Glen team, who were welcoming and supportive throughout my learning. Specifically, my internship supervisors, Jeremy Koo, the Outdoor Education & Operations Director, and Simon Pettafor, the Outdoor Centre Coordinator, aided me the most in my experiential learning. I primarily communicated and worked with Jeremy and Simon, who are now mentors to me. They would address my concerns, assign me tasks, and provide me with feedback on the lessons I created. During our meetings, my supervisors clearly communicated my duties to me, in addition to providing visual examples to aid in my understanding. Moreover, the pandemic has resulted in changes to communication, particularly in work environments. By completing my internship during the pandemic, I further developed my collaboration and communication skills. For instance, I became comfortable with sending daily and weekly updates

on my work through written summaries and verbal presentations. Likewise, the inclusive environment Jeremy and Simon provided allowed me to share my ideas—such as adding accessible options to each lesson. By the end of the internship, I developed a strong relationship with my supervisors as we listened and acknowledged each other's ideas, equally divided tasks, and communicated our thoughts clearly to ensure the team collaborated effectively.

Overall, my experiential learning with YMCA Cedar Glen Outdoor Centre was an empowering and essential part of my undergraduate program in SASAH. I used and enhanced skills previously developed in the program, while engaging in meaningful work beneficial to the children and youth in my community. Moreover, the career-related experience I gained from this internship has been invaluable. As an aspiring educator, I solidified my professional goals related to teaching, while expanding my options regarding career direction. Working at an alternative educational setting has revealed the numerous opportunities available in the education sector. Thus, it is reassuring to know that I am not limited in the teaching profession. For instance, although Jeremy and Simon are both certified teachers, they work in outdoor education, a field I did not consider for myself until this internship. Additionally, the meaningful work I completed through the development of inclusive and accessible lesson plans affirmed my passion for pursuing work that has an impact on the local community and world at large. Likewise, it was through this experience that I could demonstrate the importance of the arts by creating lessons incorporating STEAM instead of STEM, which continues to be perpetuated as the integral aspects of education in society. As expressed by Nelson Mandela, education is the way to change the world. Through SASAH and this internship, my drive to work in education has been ignited. Knowing the lessons I helped create will expand the knowledge, development, and lived experiences of numerous children and youth for years to come is invaluable. As a result of this

experience, I have gained the skills and growth necessary to change the world one student at a time through education.

Upon reflecting on my experiences with the YMCA as part of my SASAH experiential learning, I thought more critically about the impact my work had on me, my team, and the community at large. As part of SASAH's experiential learning, I was required to constantly write reflections about my work and development throughout the semester. In doing so, I could see the progress in my development in my skills as I took time to reflect on my experiences over the course of the Fall/Winter semester. In the end, I produced a summative report summarizing these experiences which allowed me to view my progress on a broader scale because I combined all my reflections into one. Additionally, I could further reflect on my experience as I prepared my presentation. Because my time with Cedar Glen began at the beginning of the semester, it took me some time to review all my experiences. It was easier looking back on the more recent experiences I had at the Y, while the ones at the beginning of the year took a while. Creating the presentation benefitted me because I had to cogently summarize all my work, skills, and value from the experiential learning which required looking back on all my experiences. Thus, having to complete the report and presentation allowed me to further my reflection on my time with YMCA Cedar Glen because I could reflect on the beginning, middle, and end of my experiences.

Upon completing the presentation, I realized that it allowed me to further develop my communication skills as I spoke about my experience to an audience, in addition to having to adhere to the time constraints while ensuring all the significant aspects of my experience were included. Doing a short presentation on my internship also allowed me to isolate the most pertinent skills, development, and work experience I gained from this experience because I had to compact everything in my summative report into this time. As a result, I practiced effective

communication while also problem-solving ways in which I could summarize my experiential learning through interactive means to exemplify similar lessons I created for the Y involving online interactive opportunities. For example, I used an online word mapping platform at the beginning of the presentation to garner interest in my presentation as they typed words relating to the outdoors. Instead of explaining my research on the lack of educational opportunities, particularly the arts, in outdoor settings, I summarized it with the input from my audience, who corroborated my findings because none of the submitted words involved education or the arts (see Fig. 3). The activity was an engaging way to introduce the audience to my presentation while also giving me time to calm my nerves.



Fig. 3. Responses from the audience to the interactive element of my presentation.

After completing the presentation, I was asked questions by the audience relating to my experience. The questions period was interesting as it provided me with an additional opportunity to reflect on my time at the Y, while also gaining insight as to what the audience wanted to know about my experiential learning. All the questions asked me to contemplate on the challenges associated with my work due to the pandemic. These queries reminded me that my experiential learning was unique due to the COVID-19 pandemic presenting challenges to educational

institutions such as Cedar Glen. Had it not been for the pandemic, I would not have had the opportunity to explore elements of education, such as lesson planning, which I had not previously considered. Moreover, like the perspectives of the listeners, I assumed outdoor education was less writing-intensive in which outdoor educators have a more “fun” job with the freedom to work in a camp-like environment (see Fig. 3). However, I learned that most of the work involves lesson planning, which I had the responsibility to complete during my internship. When I was creating brand-new lessons for the Y, I recognized that working in outdoor education is more complex and detail-oriented. By completing my internship presentation, I concisely highlighted these findings which is useful in building my resume to summarize the growth, skills, and experiences I gained.

Subsequently, creating the presentation to summarize how I grew in my experiential learning will be beneficial when I will be seeking employment in the future. Being able to succinctly reflect on the growth, skills, and experience I gained at YMCA Cedar Glen Outdoor Centre will be useful when writing my resume and completing interviews. These situations require marketing my experience in a short period of time, and I will be able to do so because I completed this presentation. Likewise, I can choose specific skills to emphasize based on the job I apply for due to the extensive experience I gained from this internship. Moreover, I realized that unlike other experiences I had in education, this opportunity with the Y was unique because I was involved in the lesson-planning process. As a camp counsellor or coach, I was solely responsible for the program delivery. Thus, from this experience, I gained unique insight into the teaching profession because I had the opportunity to be involved in the lesser considered aspects of education, such as planning. Therefore, by having a well-rounded experiential profile pertaining to education, along with the ability to succinctly present my development during my time with

the outdoor centre, I believe that I will be better able to access opportunities within the educational field.

After presenting my internship, I listened to other student's telling of their experiences and found their presentations to be beneficial because they shared their own development and marketable skills relating to their desired professions. The presentations highlighted the unique experiences of each presenter while showcasing their creativity because the presentations reflected the internships through the formatting and demonstration of the work. Likewise, I realized that the kinds of skills and development gained from each internship were similar to mine despite the varying experiences. The event was a fitting conclusion to my SASAH journey as it brought together students from diverse backgrounds, interests, and aspirations united by SASAH. By coming together in a collaborative environment to share our experiences, it shows how vast our learning from SASAH can go as students presented work related to research, police services, media, and communications. SASAH cultivates an interdisciplinary environment in which we can explore our diverse interests and share these learning opportunities.

Reflecting on the work I completed at the YMCA Cedar Glen Outdoor Centre, the unique experience and the resulting skills and development I gained led to an invaluable time. From the supportive team members to the meaningful work I did, the experience was incredible as I was able to gain hands on learning through this unforgettable internship. I am grateful to everyone who has been a part of my undergraduate years, particularly those within the SASAH program and this experiential learning. I am extremely appreciative to have had this unique opportunity to participate in a program allowing me to explore my interests and develop into who I am today. As I move on from SASAH, I am a stronger, surer, and more capable individual due to the

opportunities I was given in this program, of which I will take the learning with me in my future endeavours.

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