Women Focus Canada 2023 Youth Civic Engagement Readiness Program (YCEP)

Background

Women Focus Canada Inc was incorporated in 2018, just prior to Covid with the mission of developing programs targeted towards the reduction of poverty, primarily for Women. Through its initial programming, WFC delivered key programs and community support towards women, and while the programs were gaining traction and deemed a success, the WFC board wished to expand its services to include youth so that the organization's mission of poverty reduction could be approached from multiple angles.

In efforts to extend programming and services to youth WFC established an internal workgroup comprising 9 volunteer individuals with various roles and responsibilities to implement a new program offering called the Youth Civic Engagement Program (YCEP), later to be called the Youth Civic Engagement Readiness Program (YCEP).

Purpose

YCEP is an initiative designed to encourage young women, **aged 15 - 29 to** learn about Canada's political infrastructure and governance systems. YCEP key purpose is to foster increased political literacy and youth engagement through the achievement of 4 major goals:

- Enhance knowledge about Ontario's political system, legislature, governance, and electoral process.
- Develop understanding about the role of MPPs and Queen's Park role in provincial governance.
- Build leadership competencies for community engagement, political advocacy, and careers in public service.
- Encourage networking with public sector, community leaders and mentors.

Program Delivery

In April 2023 the inaugural YCEP program was announced to the public via multiple marketing channels that included

- Direct outreach to schools and universities
- Postering and word of mouth promotion &
- Social media marketing

These promotion efforts yielded positive results with the first program registering **thirteen** responses.

The inaugural program curriculum consisted of three key learning sessions, two networking sessions, a post program reflection, and a certification ceremony.

Each learning session was between **1.5 hours to 2 hours in length** and covered **three** key subject areas aimed at preparing program participants for adequate civic engagement. These **three** subject areas were:

- **Understanding Civic engagement** - An introductory session to Women Focus Canada, the YCEP and a shared understanding of civic engagement.
- **Networking & Personal Branding** - An interactive preparatory session aimed at providing participants with effectives means of connecting with community leaders during the program's Provincial Legislative Assembly tour and networking event.
- **Leadership & Career Development** - A capacity building session focused on nurturing leadership and exploring a career in civic related appointments.

Each session began with some form of relationship building such as ice-breaking or group activities. Each session was recorded and provided to participants so that they could revisit materials and key learnings at their own time.

The two networking sessions served individual purposes and one was hosted prior to the workshops of the program and 1 halfway through the program. These included:

- **Virtual Meet & Greet** - Aimed at fostering connections within program participants and between facilitators and participants.
- **Ontario Legislative Assembly Tour and Networking Reception** - Aimed at providing program participants with an understanding of the role of MPPs and the Legislative Assembly and to provide participants with the opportunity to learn and gain experience from and connect with key community leaders which included guests, activists, members of Provincial Parliament and community developers.

The program was delivered across the span of two weeks, and following the sessions, a post program reflection exercise was distributed to participants as an evaluative tool of program completion. The post program reflection exercise was aimed at getting participants to critically think about their learning experience and enhance transferability of key concepts to day-to-day behaviors.

Each participant who attended 50% of all sessions and submitted the reflective exercise were provided a certificate of completion following the program's certificate ceremony. The ceremony was structured in a way to further build on the relations between participants and enhance connectedness of the group.

Program Success

Despite limited time for promotional efforts of less than 2 weeks, it was an astounding success for the program to receive 13 registrations. Registration came from a diverse population in terms of age, school, and educational level.

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- There were a total of **12** different academic institutions from which participants registered from. All 13 registrations came from individuals of a differing academic program ranging from advertising to public health.
- **50%** of registrations were from students in 2nd year and **24%** in or having recently graduated from high school.
- **48%** of participants joined the program to learn about civic-related career development or opportunities, **16%** joined because they were interested in enhancing leadership skills and 1**6%** because they wanted to participate in civic engagement.

Of the 13 registered participants and with assumed attrition, a variance rate of 50% was noted with each session achieving attendance of 7 participants on average. The 7 participants remained consistent attendees for all workshops and 50% of them attended the networking reception. Full attendance of participation at the networking reception was not achieved due to two main reasons:

1. Work related obligations and
2. Lack of transportation

To measure the effectiveness of the program a post program evaluation of sent to all participants and it yielded positive results which highlighted that YCEP's goals were achieved:

- **75%** of respondents said that they have a better understanding of Ontario's political system, Civic Engagement, Networking, & Leadership
- **50%** respondents agreed that the session on Civic Engagement provided them with a better understanding of related concepts.
- **100%** of respondents indicated that they have a better understanding of how to enhance networking and personal branding skills after attending the Networking and Personal Branding workshop.
- **50%** of respondents said that the Legislative Assembly tour helped them learn more about how policies are made in the province.
- **50%** of respondents also indicated that they felt inspired to take local action on civic issues in their communities after the Networking Reception at the Ontario Legislative assembly.
- **100%** of respondents indicated that they have a better understanding of leadership and career development after attending the session on Leadership & Career Development.
- **100%** of respondents also said that they would recommend the YCEP program to other youth in the future if the program is offered again.

Positive Testimonials from Participants

- " I thoroughly enjoyed the program. I got to learn so much and it was really lovely meeting all the workshop facilitators who put in the effort to put this program together "

- " The sessions were very helpful, specifically the Networking and Personal Brand Building workshop, because this is something I struggled with but after the session, I had a better understanding of how to approach networking."

- "The leadership and career development session was useful because it highlighted the various ways I could get involved in civic related appointments. It helped me gain clarity on the different ways I could approach my career path."

- "The program was a great way to create a community of like minded individuals who aspire to leave an impact on the community, while our interests differed, it was fantastic to be come together around a passion for civic engagement"

Conclusion

Overall WFC's inaugural YCEP was a success with key objectives of the program being met. The program also translated to immediate civic engagement commitments with 3 participants getting involved with women focus Canada as a volunteer.

The program shows high promise and with increased marketing and lead efforts, the program could attract significant applications. More lead time would also enable the program to be extended over a 4-week period allowing for more workshops and increased opportunity for networking opportunities for participants.

Women Focus Canada aims to launch the YCEP at the national level, however, there is a recommendation that the program be run at the provincial level one more year before making the jump to the national level. Such an approach would enable WFC to further enhance the program without stressing organizational capacities.