



project acorn needs assessment

prepared for the Ten Oaks Project
December 2016

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"As a young person, being given leadership responsibility, to know that my needs were important."

"Participating in Project Acorn is part of how I continue to support youth in their journeys of self discovery."

"What's made the experience worthwhile and meaningful is witnessing the kind of community that is built in a short period of time."

what has made project acorn meaningful to you?

"Project Acorn challenged me in so many ways and I learned so much more than I thought was possible during the time I was involved."

"I learned that I was allowed to be weird and quirky and that I was still going to be loved."

"It was the first community I felt accepted in and wanted to get involved to help others feel the same way, too."

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to everyone who contributed their time, energy, and expertise to the Project Acorn needs assessment. Quite simply, it would not have been possible without the generosity, insight, and passion of the Project Acorn community.

A special thank you to Ten Oaks staff Hannah McGechie and Parnian Baber for your insights, logistical and administrative support, and endless commitment to engaging and connecting children and youth from LGBTQ+ families, identities, and communities.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

SUMMARY LIST OF RESEARCH TOOLS

Data was collected from August until November 2016 using the following approaches:

- Review of existing Project Acorn camp feedback
- Review of existing Project Acorn project management tools
- One-on-one interviews with staff and volunteers
- Online surveys
- Focus groups

5 KEY ACTIONS FOR PROJECT ACORN 2017

Accessibility

Project Acorn must prioritize accessibility in its decisions regarding venue, recruitment, and programming.

BIPOC and transfeminine centering

Clarity of commitment to and thoughtfully designed efforts to recruit, engage, and support BIPOC and transfeminine staff and volunteers.

Collaborative revisioning

A facilitated session with participation from members of the LT, YAC, Ten Oaks staff, Board, and ROCs is recommended so as to co-create shared agreement on and commitment to the direction of Project Acorn moving forward. This process should reoccur at regular intervals (ie. bi-annually), or as agreed upon by the participants.

Role clarity & expectations

Annual co-creation of role-specific project management checklists and timelines, as well as agreed upon divisions of labour and accountability.

Provision of support to staff and volunteers

A commitment to providing training, flexibility and down-time during camp, and a clearly-outlined accountability framework in order for all to be empathetically responsive to conflicts as they arise.

INTRODUCTION & BACKGROUND

Project Acorn experienced massive growth since it started in 2009 and its most recent iteration in 2015. As organizations develop, growing pains are inevitable; they're also challenging, but have the potential to be an exciting opportunity for positive change as well.

After reviewing the camp feedback from 2015, and acknowledging the strain on the current structure, it was decided to hit pause on Project Acorn camp activities in 2016. It was shared with the community that the camp would not be running, and instead, effort and energy would be devoted to incorporating community feedback, and determining how Project Acorn might be made better, together.

With the aim of meeting this goal, a Needs Assessment Coordinator was hired in mid-June of 2016, in a part-time commitment of 30 hours / month, which concluded in December of 2016.

In July of 2016, the coordinator reviewed all of the past years' feedback for Project Acorn, with the aim of building a specific aim and vision for the needs assessment itself. This was co-created with Ten Oaks staff, and completed in July of 2016.

Further work was then undertaken to better articulate the goals and scope of the work, identifying all stakeholders, and imagining how we hoped to engage with everyone and meet their diverse needs both throughout and after the assessment was completed.

This led into the process of co-created methodology and community-based research.

CO-CREATED METHODOLOGY

The Project Acorn Needs Assessment followed a design-thinking approach, whereby the goal during each phase of the work was to co-create the next phase with the community. This process favours horizontal decision making and user-centered design, as opposed to a pre-determined top-down research structure. Initial work included review of all previous Project Acorn feedback, stakeholder identification, empathy work, and developing a vision for the project itself in collaboration with Ten Oaks staff. This was done in July / August of 2016.

"Vision: Project Acorn is sustainably meeting the needs of youth from LGBTQ+ identities, families, and communities across Ontario, and each of it's volunteers and staff have clearly-defined, fun, and meaningful roles."

It was decided that in order to determine the focus moving forward, it was vital to reach out to the community to determine the priorities of the Needs Assessment. As such, a series of one-on-one interviews then took place. These took place via Skype, in person, and via email.

By the numbers:

- 30 minutes to 70 minutes: range of interview lengths
- 6 interviews were conducted via Skype
- 1 interview was conducted in person
- 2 chose to provide feedback via email

In addition to the key priorities which were identified in this process (discussed in "findings"), we also heard the following recommendations of how to move forward:

- Identity based focus groups
- Task-based focus groups (YAC, LT, ROCs)
- Online survey
- Importance of multiple ways to contribute to meet people's diverse needs
- Sharing of ongoing outcomes and activities with the PA community
- An opportunity to celebrate the community's contributions to this process

With the aim of meeting as many of these community requests as possible, an online survey was created, as well as the opportunity to participate in task-based focus groups. There was a session for the Leadership Team (Ottawa, 2 in attendance), the YAC (Ottawa, 1 in attendance), and the Roots of our Communities (Toronto, 3 in attendance). Each of these ran for 90 minutes.

In total, 14 people chose to complete the online survey. As per the preliminary feedback received and with the desire to compensate people fairly for the time, expertise, and energy, each focus group participant received an honorarium of \$50, and each response to the survey garnered an honorarium of \$20.

"The needs of the few are as important as the needs of the many."

FINDINGS

Through the preliminary community one-on-ones, a breadth of major themes were identified. These were:

Accessibility

Project Acorn needs to be a physically accessible space.

Engagement

The Needs Assessment should continue to offer a variety of ways to contribute.

Equity

“The needs of few are as important as needs of the many.”

Clarity

Provide clearly defined roles and expectations for everyone.

Fun & Joy!

Work to build enthusiasm for Project Acorn throughout the Needs Assessment.

Connection

The Board must be engaged and supportive of Project Acorn, every step of the way.

Care

Address the emotional fatigue that can happen while at Project Acorn.

Planning Tools

A shared vision, strategic planning, and project management tools for the YAC and LT.

Empathy

An opportunity to co-create restorative processes for dealing with conflict.

Youth engagement

Youth must be centered in the building of future direction, including PA campers.

Respect

Valuing and compensating people’s time and emotional labour via remuneration.

“Increase the capacity at Project Acorn to sometimes set aside struggle, and focus on building joy.”

FINDINGS (CONTINUED)

It was the predominant response throughout the needs assessment that the current set-up of YAC, LT and ROCs is structurally sound, and participants would like to see this maintained moving forward. Many emphasized the need for more diverse representation of BIPOC and transfeminine people at each level. It was also a predominant response that this structure would benefit from accountability frameworks, user-friendly project management tools, and additional supports & training.

There were also a breadth of very specific ideas for how to improve the experience of each role:

“Emotional fatigue is not a barrier to coming the first time, but it is definitely a barrier to coming back.”

Youth Advisory Committee

- Paired mentoring with the Leadership Team, year-round
- More involvement and responsibility in the logistics of camp delivery
- To have more say in the choice of camp activities, and opportunities for leadership
- Create project management tools with the Leadership Team
- Online documentation of meeting minutes, well-defined project plans, task checklists
- Online organizational tools that can be referenced easily (such as Basecamp or Trello) could help better allocate responsibility between the Leadership Team and the YAC
- “Create a YAC that allows for more vulnerability and commitment”
- An opportunity for a facilitated planning session with all involved with Project Acorn to agree on its future direction

Leadership Team

- Collaboration support with the YAC: “possibility of paid Project Acorn staff playing a lead role on the YAC”
- An opportunity to co-create task lists at the beginning, outlining who is responsible for what from the first meeting to camp debrief
- Create a shared vision and engagement agreement with the YAC at the beginning of the work
- Opportunities to ask together with the YAC, “what can we all agree on? How might we work together based on this?”
- A chance for a strategic planning session across all levels of involvement: where is Project Acorn going? How will we work together to get there?
- An opportunity to create a workpath together at the beginning of the work, outlining clearly who is responsible for what

Roots of our Communities

- Opportunities to connect and do training well in advance of camp (retreat / orientation)
- Emotional support training, especially crisis support, with experiential learning opportunities (simulations of common occurrences at Project Acorn)
- Better structured “buddy system,” including personality tests done in advance
- Reimplementation of “Wall of ROCs” so that people can pair accordingly
- “Wall of ROCs” is also vital for campers, and will help address emotional fatigue; the YAC could potentially benefit from participating in the “Wall” as well!
- Opportunities to contribute to the future direction of Project Acorn
- Trauma training for both the YAC and for ROCs in advance of camp

“I think a lot of the frustration came from a lack of clarity around who was responsible for what.”

NEXT STEPS: 5 KEY ACTIONS

As per the priorities and insights provided by the Project Acorn community, the following are the key next steps for 2017 to move towards the project vision: “Project Acorn is sustainably meeting the needs of youth from LGBTQ+ identities, families, and communities across Ontario, and each of its volunteers and staff have clearly-defined, fun, and meaningful roles.”

(1) accessibility

It is recommended that project acorn 2017 be held in an accessible space. Moreover, that Project Acorn 2017 should prioritize accessibility in all of its decisions regarding venue, recruitment, and programming.

(2) BIPOC and transfeminine centering

Throughout Project Acorn and Ten Oaks more generally, creating clarity of commitment and thoughtfully designed efforts to continually recruit, engage, and support BIPOC and transfeminine staff and volunteers.

(3) collaborative revisioning:

Project Acorn has grown dramatically since it began. For projects with such swift development, it makes sense for staff and volunteers to revisit and recommitment to Project Acorn’s vision on a semi-annual basis. A facilitated session with the LT, YAC, Ten Oaks staff, ROCs, and campers themselves is recommended so that there is agreement on and shared commitment to the direction forward.

(4) role clarity & expectations

Co-creation and clear articulation of roles, including the co-creation of project management tools together, at the beginning of planning. This should include the creation of role-specific checklists and timelines, and agreed upon divisions of labour and accountability.

(5) provision of support to staff and volunteers

Recommendations for how additional support might be provided are diverse, as support needs can vary widely. Some of these are outlined on the previous page, under the specific recommendations for each role. It is recommended that the provision of support via ample free time and schedule flexibility at Project Acorn be implemented immediately in 2017. Additional potential 2017 recommendations for support that were also emphasized during the needs assessment include pre-camp training for ROCs, moving the debrief to a later date when people have more emotional capacity, and a well-structured buddy system.

“Keep up the good work, keep moving forward; this is an amazing space for youth to feel connected, safe, and supported - to become leaders and feel confident in who they are.”

FUTURE WORK

If Ten Oaks is to undertake similar work in the future, it may be beneficial to allocate the hours in a more condensed way. 5 full-time weeks of work might generate increased momentum than if the same volume of work is done in a more expanded time structure. This may help to manage stakeholder's expectations about the scope of the project, and the expectation of speed with which it can be completed.

Where possible, it is encouraged that all stakeholders – YAC, LT, ROCs, staff, campers – have ample facilitated opportunities to work collaboratively and co-create roles, project management tools, allocation of responsibilities, and a shared vision wherever possible.