

Cultivating Talent and Catalyzing Change:

An Assessment of Emerging City Champions

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Prepared by Sarah Lee
Principal, Sarah Lee Consulting



Foreword

At Knight Foundation, we believe in equitable, inclusive and engaged communities. Over the last eight years, two of the key ways that we have been supporting our communities have been through investments in public spaces and to attract and nurture diverse talent. In 2014, in partnership with [880 Cities](#), we created a program to advance both of those areas of focus.

The Emerging City Champions (ECC) program combines professional development for young leaders with hands-on experience implementing projects in their communities. As a result, it supports the growth of diverse leaders in our communities and has spurred investments in public life. Since the program officially launched in 2015, 124 champions have been selected and over 100 projects have been launched in our communities. These projects ranged from one-time public space activations to catalyzing organizations.

We first examined progress of the program in [April 2019](#), as part of a broader assessment of our investments in public life. Now, while the 6th cohort is in its Champion year, we are sharing a more comprehensive assessment of ECC to date. This program has demonstrated the power of combining seed funding (\$5,000 for each Champion) with support for motivated and talented young leaders.

In 2021, communities are recovering from the COVID-19 pandemic and cities will need to innovate. The model of the ECC program provides a way to tap into local talent with great ideas. In this report, you'll see how relatively small investments can be catalytic in a community. Empowering young leaders like the Champions is a way to unleash local creativity and engage the entire community in our collective recovery.

Through this report, we welcome those who lead professional development programs or who are considering ways to tap into local talent to learn alongside us. We believe that the lessons from this assessment, along with [another](#) that we recently published about investments in public spaces, will help all communities as they recover from the pandemic and beyond.

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Executive Summary

The Emerging City Champions (ECC) program launched in 2015 as a way to cultivate a network of talented young leaders who are committed to improving public life in their communities. The program is funded by Knight Foundation, which has invested \$1.5 million in the program to date, and operated by 8 80 Cities. It's rooted in Knight's and 8 80 Cities' shared belief that public spaces and other public life investments make communities stronger, healthier and more inclusive, and in their belief that a strong network of practitioners in communities across the country can catalyze widespread change. Champions, all between the ages of 19 and 35, participate in professional development programming and receive \$5,000 in seed funding to implement their own public space, mobility or civic engagement projects. Since launching, 124 young leaders from across the country have been selected for the fellowship. This assessment of the program set out to explore its impact in two areas: how it has influenced the individual young leaders who have participated in it and how it has supported change in those young leaders' communities.

ECC by the numbers:



Cultivating Talent

As a talent-cultivation program, ECC has successfully engaged a diverse group of young leaders who are committed to improving public life in their communities. Through a combination of public recognition and a network-building and professional development retreat in Toronto, ECC provides these young leaders with meaningful, memorable experiences. **71% of participants have said that the program had a “great deal” or “tremendous amount” of impact on them.**

- ECC provides **Champions with confidence** that they can make change in their communities, which spurs them to continue working to improve public life in their communities.
- It helps them **build the concrete skills necessary to implement innovative public life projects**, and it **strengthens their social capital**, especially in terms of their relationships with other Champions during their fellowship year (though there's evidence that these connections aren't as durable as they could be).
- Champions experience **tangible career growth** after their fellowship experience: 54% have been promoted since their fellowship year and 43% have gone on to found an organization. However, there's evidence that, compared to their white and male counterparts, Champions who are people of color or female may not experience as much fundraising success nor as big of a career boost after ECC. Without additional support, Champions may still face the same structural barriers that frequently disadvantage communities of color and women in philanthropy and in the job market.

Catalyzing Change

Champions also generate innovative public life activity in their communities, both during their fellowship year and beyond.

- ECC has **catalyzed more than 100 public space and civic engagement projects**, ranging from pop-up activations of underutilized public spaces to projects that creatively use the public realm to address systemic social issues like poverty, education or mental health.
- Champions **continue to engage in community-strengthening work** beyond their fellowship year: 72% have secured additional funding for a public space, civic engagement or mobility project—either to augment their ECC project or for a different project—and 39% have joined one or more nonprofit boards in their communities.

This activity adds up to meaningful change in Champions' communities. But ECC has, as of yet, had a more muted impact on communities' overall orientation toward civic innovation. The fact that the national ECC network has not been very durable and that it is not consistently activated at the local level seems to constrain ECC's influence in changing public life practices.

The Lessons of ECC

Emerging City Champions is a strong program that drives considerable impact for the Champions and generates a significant volume of valuable public life activity in communities. Its successes—as well as the opportunities for greater impact that this assessment identified—suggest a few important lessons for any institution or entity that provides fellowship-based programs to cultivate emerging leaders in their communities or to catalyze community change. Organizations that provide these kinds of programs should consider the following:

- **Combine professional development investments with resources to implement ideas.** Having a concrete opportunity to work through and implement an idea can enhance talent-cultivation programming. And some subset of those projects may have a direct impact on communities or inspire larger-scale and longer-lasting impact down the road.
- **Invest in network building beyond the program.** Without intentional cultivation of peer relationships, it's easy for networks to wither after an initial burst of relationship-building activity. If a program aspires to the cultivation of durable, ongoing networks, it's important to actively invest in maintaining the network beyond the fellowship period.
- **Don't stop at selecting diverse cohorts if you're trying to advance equity.** Intentionally selecting diverse fellowship cohorts is a crucial starting point for any program that aims to challenge racial and other forms of inequity, but it's only the starting point. Talent-cultivation programs should take deliberate, active steps to connect participants who face persistent barriers to funding resources, career opportunities and other forms of support.
- **Activate practitioner networks locally, even within national programs.** To maximize the impact of a national emerging leader program, especially one that's geared toward place-based work, it can be valuable to invest in a local layer of the program.

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Introduction and Background

The Emerging City Champions program was developed collaboratively by Knight Foundation and 8 80 Cities, a Toronto-based nonprofit that advocates for investment in public spaces in order to develop stronger, healthier and more inclusive communities. In 2014, Knight and 8 80 Cities were actively collaborating on initiatives to highlight the role that high-quality public space plays in making cities more vibrant and more equitable. Both organizations believed that the public spaces field needed a strong network of practitioners from communities across the country who shared some core tenets about the value of public space and the importance of community engagement. At the time, they conceived of Emerging City Champions as a way of cultivating this network, composed of emerging leaders who would help spread ideas about public space and the public life of cities by implementing innovative projects in Knight communities over the course of the fellowship year. As such, ECC was devised as both a talent-development strategy within Knight's broader public spaces work and a mechanism for catalyzing innovative public space activity.

The program launched with an initial cohort of 25 Champions in 2015 and has included a new cohort of approximately 20 young leaders in each year since. The application is open to any U.S. resident between the ages of 19 and 35 who has an innovative idea to address community needs in one of Knight's resident or nonresident communities. The program has solicited a broad and creative set of ideas that address public space, mobility or civic engagement challenges.

The Champions' fellowship year has traditionally kicked off with the ECC Studio, a four-day program in Toronto.¹ The program includes immersive tours throughout the city, which showcase public space and mobility projects in action, often featuring opportunities to hear directly from the civic innovators who developed the projects. It also includes classroom-based sessions that provide instruction in specific skill sets that the Champions will need to develop to successfully execute their projects, like project planning and storytelling.

The duration of the fellowship year is spent on implementing the project ideas that Champions proposed in their original applications, for which they've each been given seed funding through a \$5,000 micro-grant. 8 80 Cities staff are available for ongoing support as the Champions need it, and there is a structured project check-in partway through the year.

Knight program staff promote the call for applications and often provide input to 8 80 Cities regarding the applications during the selection process. Many program directors have provided support and advice to individual Champions as they've pursued their projects. In at least one community, the local program director has made it a regular practice to gather all the current and past Champions together to continue to cultivate a local network of like-minded leaders.

Knight Foundation engaged Sarah Lee Consulting in 2020 to conduct an assessment of ECC. Though the program has been included in previous assessments of Knight's investments in community leadership and public life, this is the first time ECC has been the focus of a comprehensive evaluation. The study included interviews with Knight Foundation staff, 8 80 Cities staff and individual Champions, as well as a survey of the Champions. Please see the appendix for additional details about the methodologies used in this assessment.

¹ Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the 2020 cohort was not able to gather in Toronto for the ECC Studio. Instead, 8 80 Cities developed a Virtual Learning Lab, which took place via Zoom over two consecutive Saturdays.

About the Champions

Since ECC launched in 2015, 124 young leaders have been selected for the fellowship.² Each cohort has included approximately 20 Champions. These individuals hail from all eight of the communities in which Knight maintains local offices and from 12 of Knight's 18 nonresident communities. Figure 1 summarizes the number of Champions from each community across all six cohorts.

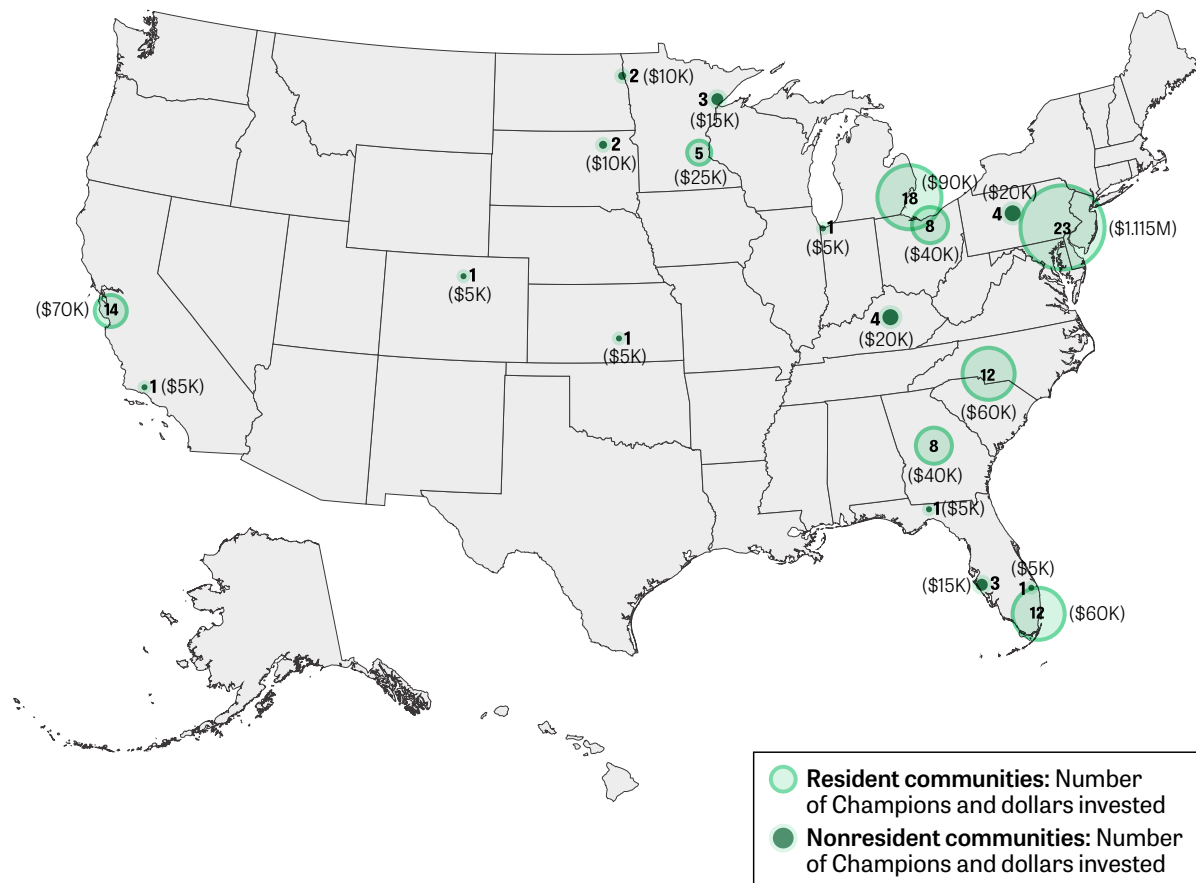


Figure 1. Champions and investments to date, by community

Overall, the Champions are a diverse group of young leaders, both demographically and in terms of their relationship to or involvement with the public space and civic innovation field. According to 880 Cities' records, 60% of the Champions are people of color and nearly 60% are women or identify as nonbinary (see Figure 2). The survey sample demographics also largely reflect these patterns. Some Champions work outside of the nonprofit world, for instance in marketing or technology, but are actively engaged in the civic or public life of their community in their personal time. Many others were already professionally aligned with the public space and civic innovation field prior to the fellowship, working at community development corporations, for instance, or in municipal planning departments.

² See <https://emergingcitychampions.org/meet-champions/> for a complete list of Champions.

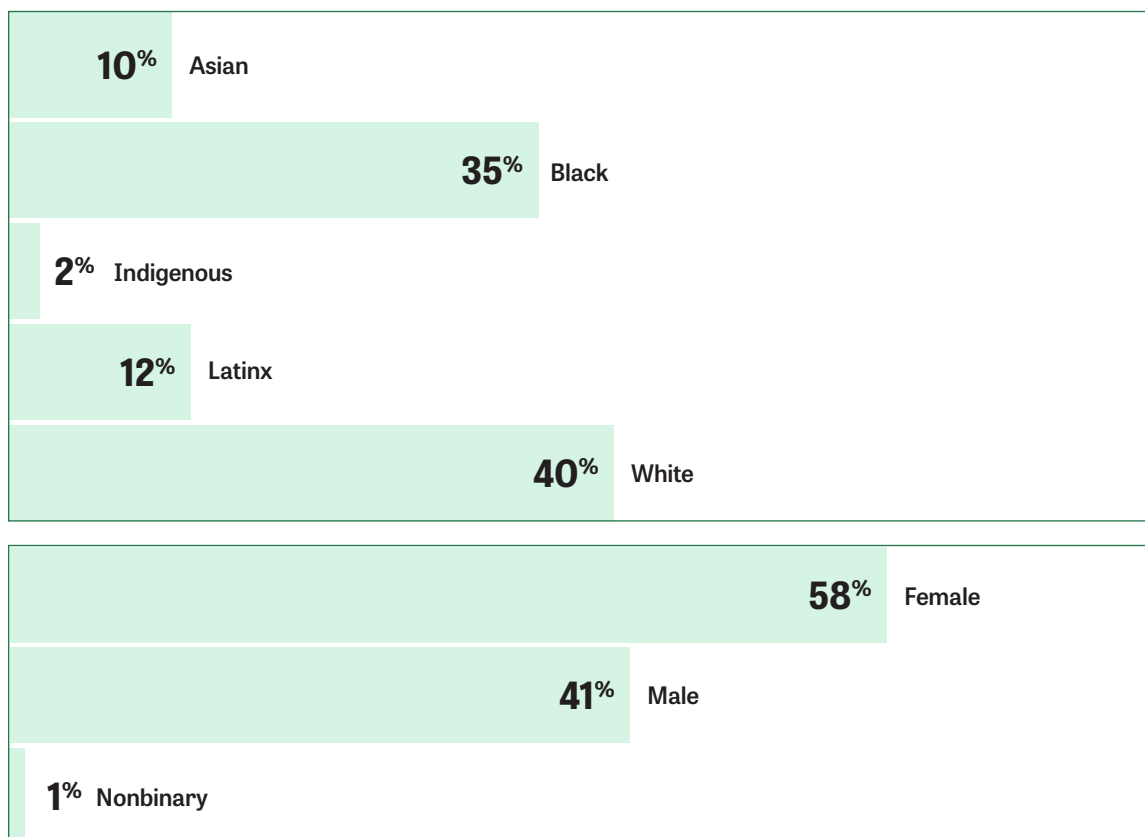


Figure 2. Race and gender composition of Champions³

In their applications, Champions propose a project to implement during their fellowship year. Some come up with an idea solely for the purpose of applying to the fellowship, while others propose a project that is already in some stage of development. 40% of survey respondents described their project as something “that I was already working on,” while 24% said that they were “starting from scratch.” The project ideas themselves reflect the full gamut of public space and civic engagement activity—from pop-up activations of underutilized public space (such as an outdoor “living room” in an empty lot in downtown Charlotte, or a short-term art installation in an alleyway in San Jose) to projects that aim to creatively use public space to address systemic social issues like poverty, education or mental health (such as the installation of bike repair kiosks in parks in Bradenton, Florida, to enable transportation to jobs and services among those in lower-income neighborhoods, or the development of mental health “gyms” to destigmatize mental health treatment among communities of color in Macon).

³ Due to rounding, percentages may not sum to 100.

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Cultivating Talent: Assessment Findings

Emerging City Champions invests in young people who have deep roots in their communities and, in doing so, it challenges the narrative that local talent is scarce or that younger people—especially younger people of color—don't have the power to make change in their communities. One interviewee said, “One of the issues we have is we look outward for talent. If we want a mural, we want someone from New York, which tells the artists here that they're not good enough for investment. I feel like [ECC] forces money to be given to the talent that is here, as opposed to going outward.” This inspires other young people and other people of color to participate in civic life. And it also enables communities to benefit from perspectives and ideas that may never come from the traditional power structures in a community. In the words of another Champion: “A lot of times, young leaders' voices are almost smothered; they're not as loud as the voices of our elders. It's not a fault of our own, or even the elders. It's the culture of how it's always been. We're shifting the culture to say, 'We got this now.' We're embracing innovation, change, the idea that a car isn't the only way to get around.”

ECC's investment takes two forms: it provides professional development and network-building opportunities to Champions as individual leaders, and it provides them financial resources for their work. In this section, we focus on ECC's investment in the Champions as emerging change-makers and urban innovators. The ECC Studio—the four days that Champions spend in Toronto at the beginning of their fellowship year—is the locus of ECC's investment in individual Champions. Several interviewees noted how much they appreciated the opportunity to be in Toronto, which felt like a retreat and, by virtue of being in a different country with different racial dynamics and attitudes toward equity and inclusion, helped Champions see their cities' challenges and opportunities from a new perspective. They also noted how valuable—and validating—it was to learn about the public life and civic engagement challenges of other communities through their peers. As one Champion put it, it's “eye-opening to learn about other cities. Knowing that people are facing similar issues as my city is—it's revitalizing knowing that it's not just me, we're all experiencing growing pains and the work isn't done.” And it was equally helpful for Champions to hear about the different ways that other cities were tackling common challenges, providing a portfolio of examples to draw from when they got back home. Champion satisfaction with the ECC Studio is extraordinarily high; all survey respondents rated it in the top two boxes on a seven-point scale. The ECC Studio is also, by a large margin, the single aspect of the program that Champions (from the 2015 through 2019 cohorts) believe to be most responsible for the impact they felt from the program. Activities like walking tours and site visits throughout Toronto provide Champions with an immersive, experiential, “sticky” way to learn about civic innovation and public space projects. Building relationships with and simply being around their peers, and hearing from external speakers, are also highlights of the ECC Studio experience.

Gabriela Sanchez | 2018 Champion, Philadelphia

As an artist, Gabriela Sanchez has long taken inspiration from the people and places around her. She founded Power Street Theatre in 2012 and launched it the following year with a play that explored patterns of gentrification and displacement in a neighborhood that had historically been populated by people of color. The play was inspired by experiences she and her cofounder, Erlina Ortiz, had as students at Temple University. When Gabriela applied for ECC, she was simultaneously running Power Street while also working full-time as the education director at Norris Square Neighborhood Project (NSNP). ECC provided resources

to invest in a new Power Street initiative: Theatre en Las Parcelas (which continues under the name Theatre al Fresco) to bring theater into Las Parcelas garden at NSNP. It was a chance to work in a space that was already meaningful in Gabriela's life—due to her role at NSNP and because her aunt was one of the women who established the garden—and to “activate it on an artistic level.”



The ECC Studio inspired Gabriela to see this work, and her role at Power Street, in a new light. She says, “To be able to go outside the country, to be immersed with so many different people from different backgrounds—that was the first time I had ever done professional development on that scale. That was a really defining moment for me.” Absorbing Toronto's public space ecosystem and learning from a wide variety of public space experts helped Gabriela to see her own hyperlocal work as part of a broader endeavor: “To be able to see on a more national scale was really helpful to know that I wasn't in my silo. Because that easily happens in nonprofit work. Even as a woman of color leader in the city, it often feels very lonely. So to have a space where I realized I wasn't so alone was really affirming for me.”

The fellowship coincided with a decision to leave her role at NSNP so that she could “say ‘I want to be an artist, I want to be my own investor.’ It's my turn to pursue my dream of Power Street.” In the last three years, Power Street's budget has increased by a factor of six, and it has extended its relationship with Knight Foundation by participating in a recent adaptive-capacity training program for arts organizations. Between Power Street, directing theater, and working as a teaching artist, Gabriela is making a living as an artist—and, specifically, as an artist who is deeply grounded in her community and working for social change. “Preserving our history is, I think, the biggest impact. Making the statement that we are here and we have been here and we will not continue to be erased in the history books.”

Overall, the ECC experience is a meaningful, memorable one in the lives of these young leaders.

71% of survey respondents said that the experience had a “great deal” or “tremendous amount” of impact on them personally (i.e., the top two ratings on a seven-point scale). The investment in individual Champions has both psychic benefits—e.g., emotional and mental well-being benefits that can't easily be quantified—and more concrete returns, in the form of stronger skills and greater social capital, which help to accelerate Champions' career advancement.

A Confidence Boost

The ECC experience provides Champions with confidence that they can play a meaningful role in their communities and that their ideas hold the potential to strengthen public life; this motivates them to continue applying their talent toward community change. 83% of survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed that “the ECC program encouraged me to continue working to improve my community,” and 77% agreed or strongly agreed that it “gave me confidence that my ideas can have a tangible impact on my community” (see Figure 3).

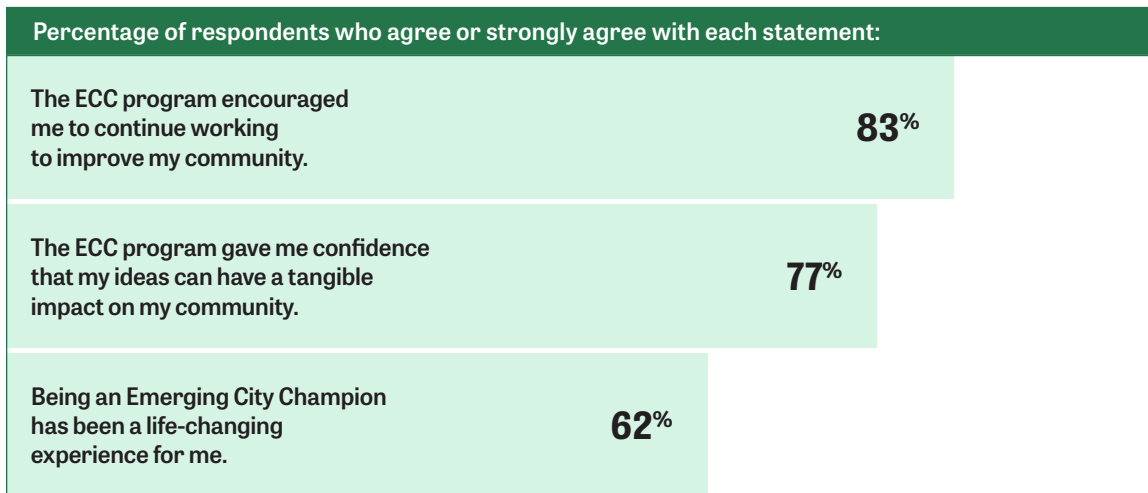


Figure 3. Psychic benefits of ECC

ECC generates this confidence boost both through the “stamp of approval” of being selected for a fellowship that they perceive as prestigious and through exposure to other Champions and their ideas, which helps the Champions feel more grounded in their own identities as change-makers or urbanists. One said, “It helped me be more confident in my ideas and what I have to say. Knowing that this is a fellowship and there was a selection process; my idea was selected over others.”

Orlando Bailey | 2015 Champion, Detroit

At age 31, Orlando Bailey has already earned a prominent platform in his hometown of Detroit. He’s the director of engagement at BridgeDetroit, a nonprofit journalism and community engagement organization, and a co-host of the Detroit chapter of Urban Consulate, which convenes people to talk about building just and equitable communities. He describes himself as “an outspoken advocate [for] honoring the experience of Detroiters as expertise.” For his work, he’s been honored as a 2019 Marshall Memorial Fellow with the German Marshall Fund of the United States and a 2020 BMe Vanguard Fellow.

But in 2015, he was struggling with the limitations that his youth seemed to be imposing on him in the community development field. He describes feeling that “my work or my ideas were valued when they came out of the mouth of somebody else . . . like I needed to purport to be older to be heard.” His experience as an Emerging City Champion changed all that: “It was the first checkpoint of validation, externally, that I didn’t know I needed. It was the beginning of me ridding myself of this imposter syndrome.” It helped him become his “real, true authentic self” in the way that he advocates for Detroit and Detroiters.

His ECC project was part of what made it such a transformative experience. Orlando engaged 60 young people and artists in his neighborhood to transform an empty wall into a mural that conveyed the group’s sense of pride in their community. But his experience at the ECC Studio in Toronto and with his fellow Champions was equally if not more crucial to the program’s impact on him. “The learning together, the interrogating and questioning, the moments of joy and triumph and affirmation for young people who are really committed to this work is what I take with me. You get the encouragement to go on a little while longer and to fight a little harder and to see it through to the end.” As an investment in him, specifically as a young person, ECC helped Orlando step into his power and use his platform to advance equity in the city he loves.



Feeling more confident and grounded in this identity encourages the Champions to be courageous in advocating for their ideas, to be bolder and more ambitious in their ideas and to simply sustain the determination needed in community-change work. It “amplified my voice, gave me the strength and confidence to say what I mean,” said one Champion. Another told us, with respect to obstacles they’d faced while implementing their project, “what kept me moving forward was hearing people’s stories. I knew someone was going to stand in the way. [If not for ECC] I would have said, ‘This is too annoying.’ There was value in hearing the narratives here; I was remembering people’s stories.”

Project Execution Skills and Social Capital

The ECC curriculum also provides Champions with instruction in concrete skills that help them implement their projects and influence change, and those skills are a critical part of the program’s overall impact. 68% of survey respondents agree or strongly agree that, through the program, they “developed practical skills that have helped me successfully implement innovative ideas in my community,” and 67% agree or strongly agree that it “has helped me to effectively influence change in my community.”

For a few Champions, the skill set they acquired from ECC includes frameworks and ideas that continue to help them think critically about the public space field—including the 8 80 Cities model. When describing their takeaways from the program, one told us, “I always carry that with me: inclusive spaces for an 8-year-old and an 80-year-old. When you have them together, you’ll have a space for the people in between.”

The skill set that the program seems to be most effective at strengthening is project planning and implementation. Both the ECC Studio and Virtual Learning Lab have included specific modules about project planning, as well as tools and templates for Champions to use; many interviewees pointed to these as a valuable component of the program. One interviewee said, in describing the Studio, “it was like a lightweight bootcamp—an opportunity to sit down and flesh out ideas. They gave us worksheets to facilitate what we were trying to do, to break things down. [The project] was bigger than I had done before, and it took away the ambiguity of figuring out how to do things.” The opportunity to see and hear about other public space or civic engagement projects—during tours of Toronto, from outside speakers and from other Champions—also helped Champions hone and strengthen their own ideas and workplans. And, of course, the process of actually implementing a project over the course of the fellowship year is a hands-on opportunity to learn project execution skills by doing. As they activate their projects, Champions learn important lessons about how to start small and scale projects over time, how to recover and learn from mistakes, and how to face and surmount obstacles.

The ECC experience also provides Champions with opportunities to build their social capital. The Champion network is an essential part of the ECC Studio experience. 8 80 Cities deliberately structures the Studio experience to include both formal and informal opportunities for Champions to build relationships with one another. For many, this is a highlight of the Studio experience and part of what makes the program such a validating and encouraging experience. One said, “To build in time to mingle—that was really helpful. When you’re in this work, you can feel like you’re the only one who cares. When you have 20 people who all feel the same in a room, it’s very electric.” The fact that each cohort includes young leaders from across the country is part of its value for Champions; it exposes them to ideas from outside of their own communities and helps them feel connected to others on a larger stage.

The Power of Local Activation: ECC in Macon

Knight's program director in Macon has deliberately cultivated a local network of Champions who continue to connect beyond their fellowship year—for instance, by convening Champions from across all cohorts a couple of times a year and creating opportunities for past Champions to offer advice and support to current Champions. Though this is not an intentional part of the program design, it provides an opportunity to explore the value that can be added by intentionally activating local networks within a national program.

The survey data suggest that the Macon Champions have gained more from the program, personally, than Champions in other places, and that they perceive an even greater impact of the program on the community. 100% of Macon Champions believe that the program had a “great deal” or “tremendous amount” of impact on them, compared with 67% of the remaining Champions. They felt a bigger confidence boost and sense of encouragement from the program, were more likely to say that it had given them practical skills, and were considerably more likely to feel that ECC had made the community more aware of their work and that they'd enjoyed more access to local leaders. The social capital they built during the program has also proven more durable: They remain much more able to rely on the other local Champions and their local Knight program staff. They're more likely to have been promoted since ECC, to have secured funding for public space or mobility projects, or to have established an organization. So it's perhaps not surprising that they also feel themselves to be more of a unified force for change in their community: 83% agree or strongly agree that their local Champion cohort has “become firmly established leaders in our community” (compared with 38% of other Champions). These results are tantalizing in their suggestion that, with a little bit of deliberate activation at the local level, in addition to offering a strong national program, the overall impact of a program like this could be even greater.

But while a few found the network to be a source of ongoing support or established strong, long-term relationships with a number of people, most felt that the network has not proven as durable as they'd hoped it would be. As one Champion put it, “we spent a lot of time developing relationships [during the ECC Studio]. Then, after we left, there wasn't the same opportunity to develop those relationships. Yes, we were put in a Slack channel and on Facebook. But in terms of sharing additional experiences, we didn't have that. It started to fizzle after the first month.” In fact, the one aspect of the ECC program design about which there was consistent criticism from the Champions has to do with the lack of ongoing support to keep the network engaged and active. 61% believe that the program as a whole included too few opportunities to build and strengthen relationships with their cohort after the Studio, and only 30% consider themselves moderately or extremely satisfied with the opportunities they've had to engage with the ECC alumni network since their fellowship year. When asked whether they're currently able to rely on the other Champions from their cohort for support, advice and encouragement, only 28% selected a top-two box rating. This suggests that, for a program that aims to foster social capital formation among a group, a more sustained approach to network building is important.

ECC also holds the potential to strengthen Champions' connections with local stakeholders and decision-makers outside of Knight Foundation. The program is currently most successful in this regard through the media attention that the fellowship shines on them. One described being “catapulted into local stardom. I was on the front page of the paper and on the news all the time. A reporter reached out to me for a different article. I started getting so many interviews: ‘Local woman returns and receives grant to address mental health issues.’” The survey data indicate that many Champions feel that the fellowship made people in their community more aware of their work (62% agree or strongly agree), but fewer, just 46%, felt that it actually increased their access to key leaders and stakeholders. For many, ECC is an important early step in strengthening their local networks and spheres of influence.

Career Advancement

In the years following their fellowship year, many Champions experience notable career growth, suggesting that the ECC investment helps fuel their future work. Over half of all Champions (54%) have been promoted since their fellowship year, whether within an organization related to their ECC work or in an unrelated organization. 43% go on to found an organization, and 35% get a new job at an organization that has some connection to their ECC project achievements (see Figure 4).



Figure 4. Champions' career advancement

For some, ECC represented an explicit opportunity to reflect on professional identity and career goals, with the intention of finding a personally meaningful and socially significant path. One Champion described their career at the time that they began the fellowship this way: "I went to work and did my job but was looking for outlets to get more involved in [my community] outside of work." Over time, they were able to grow their "extracurricular" ECC project into a full-scale organization—and a full-time job. They said, "I attribute all of it to ECC. It set me up to be successful. It set me up with a network. They did a great job of showing new ideas are possible, even if you don't have the knowledge or training." A current 2020 Champion is grappling with some similar questions, but in the context of trying to carve out a meaningful career without having to leave their community: "I feel like I'm at this place where I have to figure out how to pivot from early to midcareer. What does that look like? What roles make sense? How do I have impact in my work?"

For others, ECC's role in their career growth has stemmed from connections made during the program. For instance, one Champion was inspired by an informal conversation with a Knight program director (from a community other than their own) during the ECC Studio to transition from a corporate marketing job to a position within a community foundation (which was not directly connected to their ECC project). Another felt that their career progression was at least partly related to the fact that they were able to migrate their personal relationships with Knight Foundation to a new organization.

Interestingly, whether a Champion experienced the kind of tangible career advancements included in Figure 4 is not associated with whether they felt the experience, as a whole, had an impact on them. This may be because, for some, ECC is perceived to be an accelerant to their careers, but they don't directly attribute their career achievements to the fellowship. As one put it, "I'm on the trajectory I would

have been on anyways. But it wouldn't have been as accelerated if it wasn't for the fellowship and the elements connected to it. It would have taken me a little longer to develop a voice for myself without the fellowship."

The flip side of this dynamic is that the institutional structures that advantage some and disadvantage others continue to shape Champions' career trajectories despite the ECC experience. Though most Champions of color secured funding for a project, whether additional funding for their ECC project or funding for another project, they were less likely to do so than their white counterparts (68% of BIPOC Champions had secured funding for any public space, civic engagement or mobility project, compared to 82% of white Champions). They were also less likely to have been promoted since ECC or to have established an organization as an outgrowth of their ECC project (though just as likely to have established an unrelated organization). Women were also less likely than men to have secured project funding, established an organization, been promoted or joined a board. These findings suggest that the ECC boost doesn't completely catapult Champions over the structural barriers that communities of color and women face with respect to philanthropy and career advancement.

3

Catalyzing Change: Assessment Findings

ECC is an investment in talent, but it's also an investment in the ideas that these young leaders have about how to strengthen public life in their communities. This investment is both direct, by virtue of the \$5,000 micro-grants given to Champions to put an idea into motion, and indirect, through the additional public life and civic engagement activity that Champions generate in their communities.

ECC-Generated Activity

Since it launched, ECC has generated more than 100 public space and civic engagement projects in communities across the country. 24% of these projects were wholly inspired by the ECC opportunity and an additional 36% were put into motion through ECC's catalytic investment. Many of the projects supported through ECC include ideas that might not have gotten traction through more traditional funding mechanisms, which Champions see as a strength of the program. One said, "I like that they invest in ideas that might fail—cool, zany ideas that might not get funding from traditional revenue sources. That's really cool. Other places are really restrictive."

Erin Salazar | 2015 Champion, San Jose

Erin Salazar was a recent nonprofit founder when she began her ECC fellowship; in fact, she learned that her organization had received official 501(c)(3) status while she was in Toronto for the ECC Studio. A trained artist, Erin had been freelancing mural jobs while bartending when she discovered a passion for connecting other San Jose artists to paying work. So, she established a nonprofit, The Exhibition District (now known as Local Color), to "provide economic opportunities for artists at the intersection of public art and community development," in part through support from a Knight Cities Challenge grant.



ECC was the first fellowship Erin received after establishing the organization, and the Studio gave her a much-needed space in which to experiment with the work—engaging with community, erecting murals and connecting local artists to paid work—while also settling into her identity as an executive director. About the Studio, she said, "The pure and raw form of creativity was something that was celebrated." Champions were encouraged to "throw dumb ideas at the wall, see what sticks." She says, "It gave me permission to explore these kinds of creative and wild thoughts." It emboldened her to take on more challenging fellowships—including becoming one of Knight's inaugural Public Spaces Fellows in 2019—which have helped her to continue developing the organization and to take on even more ambitious projects.

Erin and her colleagues recently rebranded the organization as Local Color to acknowledge that it has grown far beyond murals to a "multifaceted, more holistic approach to empowerment in this community." They're working with developers to turn buildings that are slated for demolition into work spaces for artists and other creative professionals, they're supporting artists with the administrative and financial aspects of existing as an artist, and they're serving as fiscal sponsors for local creative groups. Right now, Local Color is supporting just under 40 artists, and it has become a critical pillar in San Jose's arts community (and among Knight's San Jose investments). The organization itself is thriving: "One of the things that I'm most proud of is that we are about to hire a fourth person. I just can't believe that I can raise enough money to pay a reasonable wage and health insurance and benefits. That is beyond my wildest dreams—being able to support so many people."

Even for those whose projects were already in some stage of development prior to ECC, it's clear that the ECC experience—particularly the inspiration and learning provided by the ECC Studio—helped Champions shape their projects in directions that were both more effective and more community-grounded. One Champion said, “I feel like the experience was great and crucial to the way my project panned out. My project changed after the Studio.” Lessons about prototyping and testing out small-scale, low-fidelity versions of their ideas were particularly valuable in helping Champions adapt their projects to maximize the likelihood of success. The attention generated by ECC, and the implicit endorsement that receiving funding for an idea suggests, also lent additional credibility to these projects that likely elevated their value to their communities. As one Champion articulated it, “It gives credence to our projects being there. There's a sense of accolade that gives merit to the project.”

The projects catalyzed by ECC run the gamut from time-limited, site-specific activations of public space, to projects that address deficits in a community's public space or mobility infrastructure in longer-term ways, to projects that use public space or civic engagement strategies to address persistent social issues in a community—so there is no one assessment framework that can be used to gauge the impact of this activity. In interviews, Champions described the impact of their projects in a wide variety of ways. For some, the impact of the project was in drawing attention to an underused public space through a small-scale activation and inspiring additional activity in the future. For others, the impact resided in how activations made nearby community members feel: “When you're activating spaces, planting flowers—the community embraces that. That's community development. When you see blight, it makes you feel like trash. Cleaning up the neighborhood gives others hope.”

At an aggregate level, two-thirds of the Champions themselves agree or strongly agree with the following statement: “The projects that I and my fellow Champions implemented in [our community] made a tangible impact on the community” (see Figure 5). Champions in Detroit, Macon and Philadelphia were particularly likely to believe that ECC projects have made a tangible impact on those communities. One Macon Champion, in describing the set of projects that have come out of ECC there, said, “These are life-changing programs. The city is different because of ECC.”

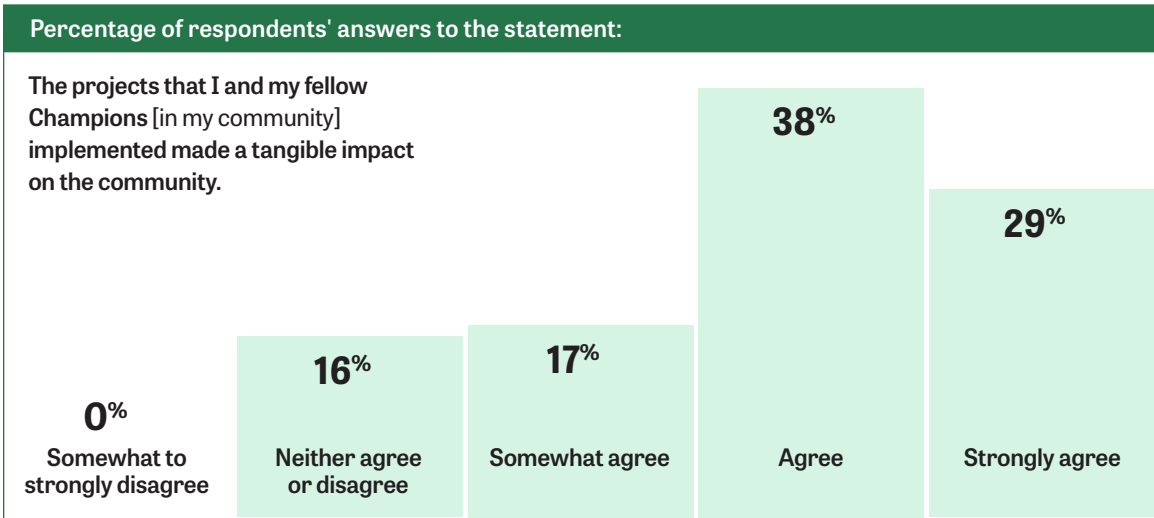


Figure 5. Impact of ECC projects

Not all 100+ projects have been such standout successes. Many of the 2019 Champions were mid-implementation when the COVID-19 pandemic began, and their projects have been substantially affected by social distancing measures and other changes to public life. The 2020 Champions have been able to develop their ideas with more foresight about the current realities of public life, but are

nevertheless facing some obstacles related to the pandemic. Pandemic aside, however, it seems reasonable that some portion of the projects would fall short of Champions' initial visions, given the program's focus on innovative, bold, sometimes untested ideas. It's hard to say whether the program could or should do more to maximize the likelihood of project success and community impact. One Champion described their take this way: "My hunch is that it was a miss with some fellows. Some just burned money on their project. It makes sense, but maybe there were some missed opportunities."

Rachel (Hollar) Umana | 2015 Champion, Macon

Not long before she became an Emerging City Champion, Rachel (Hollar) Umana bought her first bicycle. She was living in downtown Macon, less than a mile from her office, and became a bicycle commuter. As she looked for a community with whom she could connect over this new identity, she came up short: "The only thing I could find were these cycling groups that take 30- or 40-mile trips on the weekends and wear spandex, and that wasn't really my crowd." The ECC application gave her an opportunity to imagine how she might fill that gap.

At first, after returning from the ECC Studio, Rachel used her micro-grant to organize small-scale social opportunities with other bicyclists: meet-ups at local breweries, a costumed ride for Halloween. After a few months, she was invited by the Urban Development Authority to implement Macon's first Open Streets event. It was an inflection point for the budding organization: "We went from small rides that had 20 or 30 people to this event where we shut down two miles of streets, and 1,500 people came out." Building on that momentum, Rachel and other volunteers began getting more involved in policy work, advocating for bicyclists and pedestrians in Macon's transportation policy.

Not long after, an anonymous donor approached Rachel about making the group—which was still an all-volunteer effort—sustainable. In late 2017, she was able to quit her job to become Bike Walk Macon's full-time executive director, and established a board of directors. In 2020, the organization received a \$1 million gift to sustain it for ten years. Looking back, Rachel says, "When I started, it was just something I thought was cool. But it just kept growing, and I kept learning that this is something that people really care about." Macon now has more than seven times as much bike lane mileage as it did in 2015, and Bike Walk Macon is laser-focused on "creating a city that works for everybody, not just people who drive cars." Rachel says, "ECC is the single-most pivotal thing that I've done in my life, professionally. Having that opportunity is what made it happen."



Champions and the Civic Life of Communities

While the projects that ECC catalyzes and funds have direct impact on communities, there are additional indirect benefits that stem from having a cadre of motivated, talented young leaders working actively toward community change in their cities. The evidence suggests that Champions continue to engage in community-strengthening work beyond their fellowship year, generating additional public life activity and exercising leadership toward positive community change.

For instance, 72% have secured additional funding for a public space, civic engagement or mobility project—either to augment Knight's investment in their ECC project or for an additional project (see Figure 6). 43% have established an organization (some as a direct outgrowth of their ECC work)⁴, and 39% have joined one or more nonprofit boards in their communities. (Note that all these numbers are higher when we look only at the 2015–19 cohorts.)

⁴ Some Champions both established an organization as a direct extension of their project and established an organization that is unrelated to their project, so the total percentage of those who have done either is less than the sum of these two categories in Figure 6.

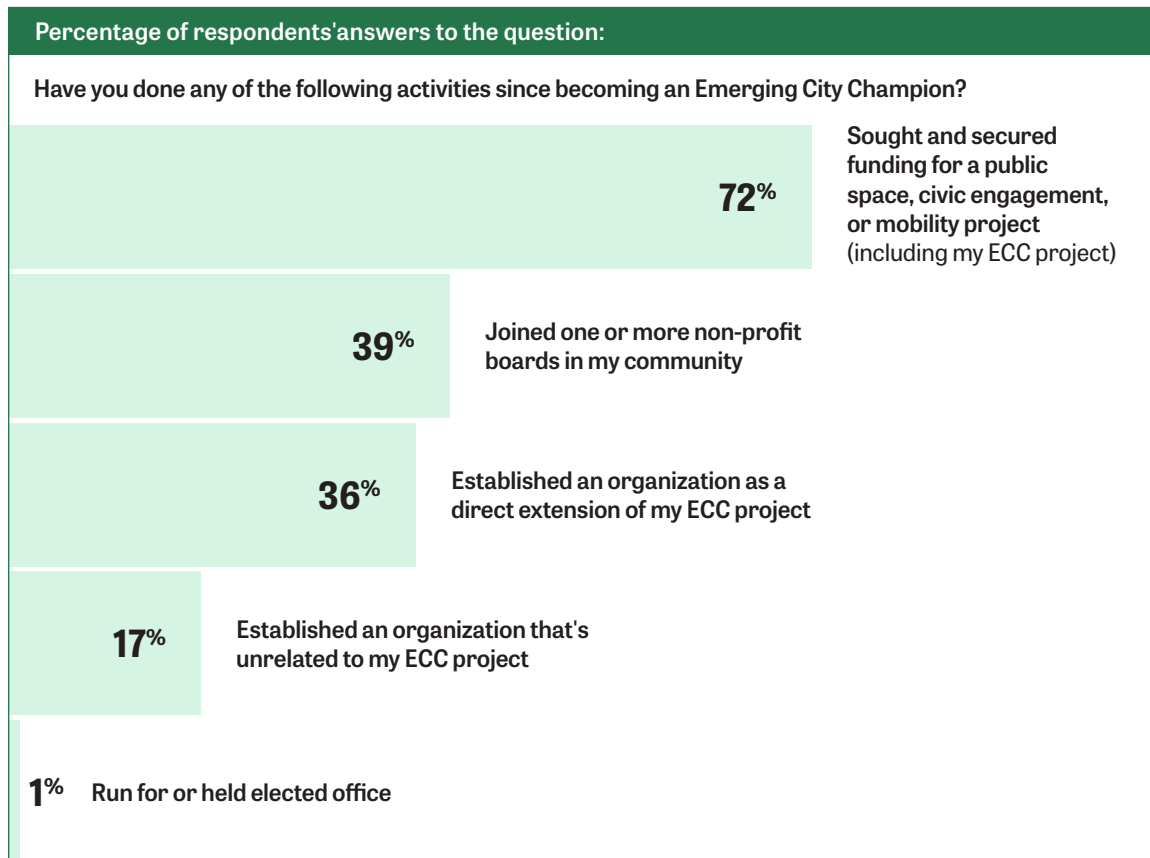


Figure 6. Champions' community achievements

Champions see their ECC experience as having played an important role in motivating them to continue working for the betterment of their communities, giving them the opportunity to embrace new leadership roles and apply what they learned during ECC in new ways. One interviewee said, "I feel like I've influenced my community as a whole. A lot of the social justice work I do, to empower other Black women who don't think they have that platform, a lot has come out of that grant." Another said, "I started a whole different nonprofit because it made me so confident." In a survey response, one Champion wrote: "I leveraged my break-out opportunity into a full-time job shaping a massive development in my city. My pop-up project (and all the lessons learned and relationships built therein) is now influencing permanent, trailblazing, private sector investment in Charlotte." In a survey question about their civic accomplishments since ECC, Champions wrote about their work on local elections, the local and regional leadership awards they've received, and the boards and other community initiatives they're involved with.

Part of the theory behind a program like ECC is that, by investing in a network of emerging talents, it contributes to the continued development of a practitioner community. While there are glimmers of progress in this direction, the evidence suggests that, with a more durable national network paired with more deliberate support at the local level, ECC could have an even bigger impact in this area.

Richard Young | 2016 Champion, Lexington

When Richard Young applied for ECC, he was running the first place-based community development corporation in Lexington, Kentucky, which he had cofounded a couple of years prior. As the 2016 election approached, he was also increasingly interested in “exploring this relationship between democracy and transit—specifically, the ability to vote.” But it was an interest that he couldn’t fully pursue from within his organization.

ECC provided an ideal opportunity for Richard to experiment in the civic engagement realm outside of his full-time job. Over his fellowship year, Richard worked with Lexington’s public transit authority Lextran to develop a suite of interventions designed to nudge transit riders to vote in the 2016 election: messaging to encourage voting at bus stops and on buses; free rides to early voting locations and on Election Day; and maps to guide transit riders, especially those for whom public transit was their only transportation option, to their polling places. The flexibility and scale of the ECC micro-grant was essential: “A very small investment in a project that I could focus on and didn’t have to be housed within my organization—that was the only way that I would have been able to do a project like that and to have so much flexibility with it.”

The project’s success—many of the tactics that he implemented are now policy for Lextran—led Richard to imagine investing more of his time and energy into building a healthier democracy. “I was feeling really inspired to take on this civic engagement approach, to focus on it a little more explicitly.” Richard established CivicLex in 2017, a civic education and media organization that helps Lexington residents meaningfully engage with the political process, and left the CDC to run it full-time. He traces its origins directly back to ECC: “CivicLex grew right out of that project. I would not have started CivicLex if it weren’t for that project.” In under four years, CivicLex has grown into an organization with a six-figure budget, and its work is receiving national acclaim. For instance, Richard was recently invited to speak on a panel at the Library of Congress about civic media in the digital age. Richard says, “I think we built something that’s really unique and interesting and new. There’s actual national validation for the work we’re doing.”



Interviews with Champions and survey responses suggest that Champions share some values and practices that define them as a community of practice: their commitments to innovation, their focus on community improvement, and their use of practices that support executing innovative ideas in a community-embedded way—along with special attention to equity and inclusion among many of them. For instance, one Champion said that what ECC had “solidified” for them as a practitioner was “working with, not for, community.” Champions believe that the program has been effective in advancing these ideas and in providing legitimacy to young leaders as sources of civic innovation. Three-quarters agree or strongly agree that it “has provided critical validation for creative, innovative ideas in my community” and 71% agree or strongly agree that it “provides a platform to young leaders whose ideas otherwise wouldn’t be taken seriously in my community” (see Figure 7). One interviewee said that, in their community, there was “not a lot of new and innovative stuff until you see stuff coming from ECC. I see others being inspired. It’s opened the city up to new ideas and people.”

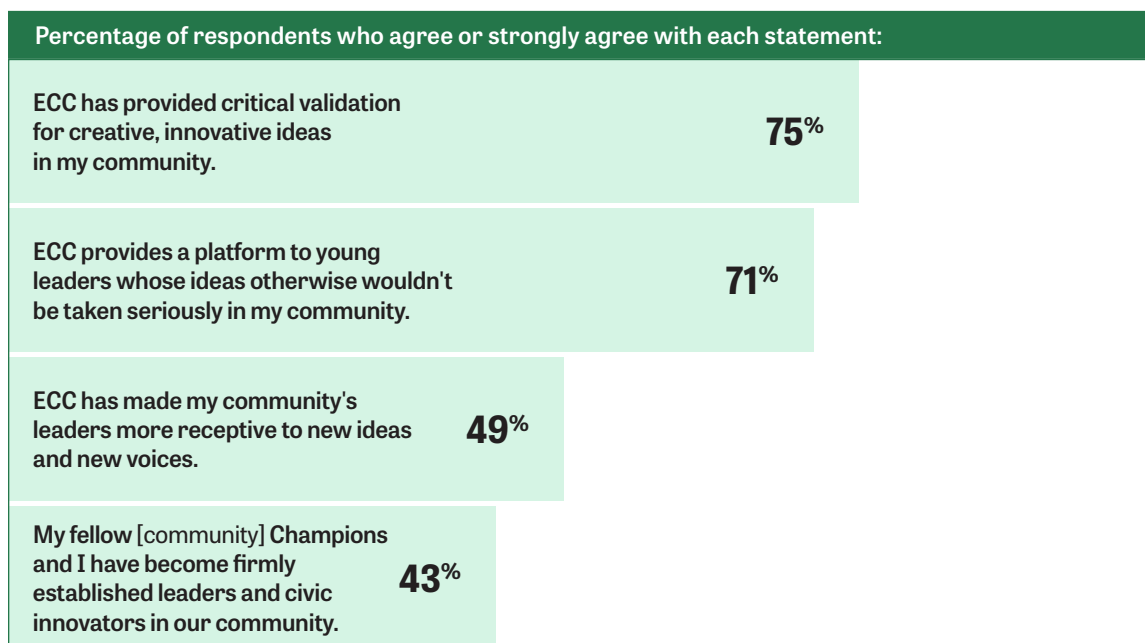


Figure 7. ECC community impact

As Figure 7 also shows, ECC's impact on the overall orientation of their communities and their communities' leaders toward innovation has been somewhat less pronounced. 49% agree or strongly agree that the program has "made my community's leaders more receptive to new ideas and new voices" and 43% agree or strongly agree with the statement: "My fellow [community] Champions and I have become firmly established leaders and civic innovators in our community." Champions aren't overwhelmingly rejecting these statements; just under 10% of survey respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed with either statement. But that's a higher level of disagreement than we saw for any of the other impact statements, at either the individual or community level.

In our opinion, it's possible that the program is simply too young to have made a stronger impact in this way. After all, the program is only six years old, virtually all Champions are still under 40 (most are under 35), and influencing civic leadership at this level is a high bar to clear. But the evidence suggests that ECC has not generated as strong of a community of practice as it could have. As previously discussed, the national ECC network has not been very durable, and local ECC networks have not been consistently activated. Because of this, it seems that the latent collective power of the ECC network—to, for instance, shift public life practices in a systemic way—has not been fully unlocked. One survey respondent succinctly diagnosed the missed opportunity this way: "Building a collaborative network of practitioners with real relationships could have been transformative. I don't feel like there was enough emphasis on that aspect of the program." Nevertheless, individual Champions continue to apply their time, intellect and creativity to catalyzing positive change in their communities.

4

Conclusion

Emerging City Champions is a strong program that drives significant impact for the Champions and generates a considerable volume of valuable public life activity in communities—both directly, through the projects funded by the program, and indirectly, through Champions' continued engagement and leadership in their communities' public life. The fact that ECC is a national program that's concentrated in a relatively small number of local communities is distinctive. But the program's successes—as well as the opportunities for greater impact that this assessment identified—suggest a few important lessons for any institution or entity that provides fellowship-based programs to cultivate emerging leaders or to catalyze community change. Organizations that provide these kinds of programs, whether at the national or local level, should consider the following:

- **Combine professional development investments with resources to implement ideas.** What's distinctive about the ECC model is that it's both a professional development program and a project grant. The skills and network building that take place during the ECC Studio help Champions activate their projects, and the project-implementation funds provide an experiential learning opportunity to reinforce what Champions learn during the ECC Studio. Having a concrete opportunity to work through and implement an idea can enhance talent-cultivation programming. Plus, some subset of those projects may have a direct impact on their communities or inspire larger-scale and longer-lasting impact down the road.
- **Invest in network-building beyond the program.** Building relationships with other fellows can be one of the most rewarding aspects of any fellowship program. But without intentional cultivation of those relationships after they're initially formed, it's easy for networks to wither. If a program aspires to the cultivation of durable, ongoing networks, it's important to actively invest in maintaining the network beyond the fellowship year.
- **Don't stop at selecting diverse cohorts if you're trying to advance equity.** Intentionally selecting diverse fellowship cohorts is a crucial starting point for any program that aims to challenge racial and other forms of inequity. But it's only the starting point. As the ECC example shows, the structural barriers that communities of color, women, and other historically marginalized groups face in systems like philanthropy or the job market will persist beyond any one fellowship. Talent-cultivation programs should take deliberate, active steps to connect participants who face persistent barriers to funding resources, career opportunities and other supports.

Additionally, organizations that provide national programs should also consider how to:

- **Activate practitioner networks locally.** Practitioners of place-based work, whether they're emerging or established, benefit greatly from the cross-pollination of ideas and examples that happens within a national program. But actually activating place-based change requires a strong local network, which emerging leaders may still be developing. To maximize the impact of a national emerging leader program, especially one that's geared toward place-based work, it can be valuable to invest in a local layer of the program. The especially strong impact of ECC in Macon, where such local activation has been taking place, is a potent example.

Appendix

Assessment Methodology

This assessment included three primary activities:

- **One-on-one interviews with Knight program staff and 8 80 Cities staff:** Interviews with five Knight program directors and four current or former 8 80 Cities staff members, focusing on overall program goals and design as well as feedback about the program. Interviews were conducted throughout November 2020.
- **One-on-one interviews with ECC Champions:** Interviews with 19 Champions (listed below) who were randomly selected from across all cohorts and a mix of communities, focusing on the impact that the program has had on them, their perceptions of its broader impact on Knight communities and their feedback about particular components of the program. Interviews were conducted throughout November and December 2020. Note that separate interviews were conducted with the five Champions whose stories are featured in this report.

Makayla Binter | 2020, Charlotte
Alexa Bush | 2020, Detroit
Nancy Cleveland | 2019, Macon
Akeem Dixon | 2015, Philadelphia
Amber Genet | 2015, Akron
Deidra Greene Larkins | 2017, Bradenton
Kyree Holmes | 2018, Philadelphia
Timothy Jackson | 2018, Detroit
Josy Jones | 2018, Akron
H. Lyn Kim | 2019, Charlotte
Marcus Laws | 2020, Palm Beach County
Kyle Maharlika | 2019, Miami
Spud Marshall | 2017, State College
Josh Nadzam | 2017, Lexington
Hannah Smith | 2016, Duluth
Jason Su | 2016, San Jose
Andy Renè Tran | 2020, San Jose
Rachel (Hollar) Umana | 2015, Macon
Sarah Yeung | 2016, Philadelphia

- **A survey of ECC Champions:** A survey featuring primarily closed-ended questions about Champions' experiences with the program, the impact it has had on them and their perception of broader community impact. The survey was administered by email to all Champions with the contact information provided by 8 80 Cities and, where possible, updated by Knight program staff. It resulted in 69 completed and 7 partial responses, for an overall response rate of 62%. Response rates varied both by cohort year (from a low of 30% for 2016 Champions to a high of 100% for 2019 and 2020 Champions) and by community (from a low among Knight resident communities of 44% in Detroit to 100% in Macon). Because we cannot accurately assess whether those who responded to the survey are representative of those who did not respond from their cohort or in their community, we have chosen not to weight the data to adjust for differential response rates. We encourage readers to interpret results with this in mind. The survey was administered from December 7 to 18, 2020.

Consultant Biography

Sarah Lee (she/her/hers) is an evaluator, strategist and facilitator for the nonprofit and philanthropic sectors. Through Sarah Lee Consulting, she helps foundations and nonprofits strengthen their work in partnership with their constituents by clearly articulating their goals, designing programs for impact and rigorously assessing what they do. Current and recent clients include the William Penn Foundation, the Jorge M. Pérez Family Foundation, the Cleveland Museum of Art, LA Phil, the Music Center, and the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Sarah's work focuses primarily on arts and culture, public space and other place-based initiatives to build and strengthen community, and she's committed to using evaluation and other organizational learning efforts to advance equity. She has authored several studies about organizational change, capacity-building and community engagement in the nonprofit sector. Previously, Sarah spent fourteen years at Slover Linett Audience Research, a social research and evaluation firm that serves the arts and culture sector, most recently serving as the firm's president. She earned a BA in government from Harvard University and completed doctoral coursework at the University of Chicago's Harris School of Public Policy, where she also earned a master's degree. Sarah lives in the Boston area, where she serves on the boards of ArtsBoston and Company One Theatre and on the Town of Arlington's Community Development Block Grant sub-committee.