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South Asian
Women's
Collective

Advancing the Social & Economic Mobility of Young South Asian Women

A Community Action Research Project Exploring the
Career Development and Employment Needs
of Young South Asian Women



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South Asian Women's Collective



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When you think about young racialized women navigating their careers in Canada, what single word or phrase comes to mind?



Founded in 2015, the **South Asian Women's Collective (SAWC)** is a social impact organization dedicated to **advancing the social and economic well-being of South Asian women and gender-diverse individuals.**

Through community-led research, innovative programming, and inclusive events, SAWC amplifies voices, strengthens networks, and drives collective action.

Our vision is to **build a connected network across Canada**, where South Asian women and gender-diverse individuals can thrive, lead, and shape equitable futures.

ABOUT THE SOUTH ASIAN WOMEN'S COLLECTIVE



OUR KEY PRIORITIES



Research on Careers & Employment

Leading community action research on the career and employment needs of young South Asian women



Flourish Career Development Program

Creating career development programming to support young South Asian women with their career & employment goals



Conferences and Events

Designing affirming conferences and events that focus on South Asian women's health and well-being

WHAT IS SOUTH ASIAN?

The term South Asian is a colonial and racial construct (Gandhi, 2014). Historically, it served to problematically group individuals from particular nations together – Sri Lanka, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, India, Bhutan, and Maldives – for the purposes of political, economic and geographical conquests (Shankar, 1999).

We recognize the complexity of this racialization, as the term South Asian was also used to identify individuals who were indentured, required refuge, and immigrated from these regions to all of the world's continents (Gnanadass, 2014).

South Asian Identities

We recognize that groups within the diaspora have suffered at the hands of targeted political and civil actions, oppression and genocide. It is important to name the intentional historic and on-going erasure of Tamil and minoritized identities from South Asian conversations. We do not take this intra-diasporic tension lightly. We know that intra-cultural differences arising from faith, culture, and traditions are used as tools for neo-colonial oppression to divide our communities from collective efficacy (Anouch, 2014).

We want to reclaim the term South Asian to represent the diaspora as a whole. We are committed to striving for solidarity amongst all the diverse communities by recognizing differences and intentionally fostering unity.

MOTIVATION TO LEAD COMMUNITY ACTION RESEARCH PROJECT

South Asians are the largest racialized group in Canada, Ontario and the GTA

- In the workforce
- In post-secondary institutions
- In public education (GTA)

Limited data and understanding on South Asian women

- Experiences in the workforce
- Career development and resource needs
- Career advancement needs and experiences

Respond to community needs and stories we often hear in programming and events

Learn and engage with community on career and employment needs, assets and proposed solutions on systems and structures that impact their economic and social well-being





BOLD FUTURES REPORT 2025

Exploring the Career Development and Employment Needs of Young South Asian Women across the Greater Toronto Area

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“The purpose of this research project was to add to the field of evidence on youth career development and youth employment focusing on young South Asian women... especially within the current economic climate in Canada, there is an opportunity to re-imagine career development and employment services to build experience, resilience, and sustainable futures.”





BOLD FUTURES REPORT 2025

Exploring the Career Development and Employment Needs of Young South Asian Women across the Greater Toronto Area

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South Asian Women's Collective led a 2 year community action research project to better understand the career development and employment needs of young South Asian women and gender diverse individuals (between the ages of 18-30) living across the Greater Toronto Area (GTA).

Motivation for this research:

- Years of SAWC-led community programming and gatherings
- Lived stories from young women navigating career barriers, employment challenges, and advancement obstacles



RESEARCH PROJECT PLAN & APPROACH

Literature Review [Secondary Data Collection]

Analyzing academic, government, industry and NGO reports to identify research gaps and inform design of survey question

Community Engagement & Recruitment

- Hosted project virtual launch event
- Launched a social media campaign
- Created digital and print marketing materials for events in community (i.e. SAWC & Laadliyan conferences)

Online Data Surveys [Primary Data Collection]

First Online Survey: **274 Responses**

Learning Circle Surveys: **217 Responses**

Learning Circles [Primary Data Collection]

Hosted 12 virtual learning circles

- 3 in Peel Region (17 participants)
- 3 in York Region (15 participants)
- 3 in Toronto (15 participants)
- 3 in Durham Region

A total of **57 participants** participated in learning circles

Research Report , Documentary and Social Media Content

Synthesize research findings to develop:

- a research report
- short documentary video
- infographics and social media content

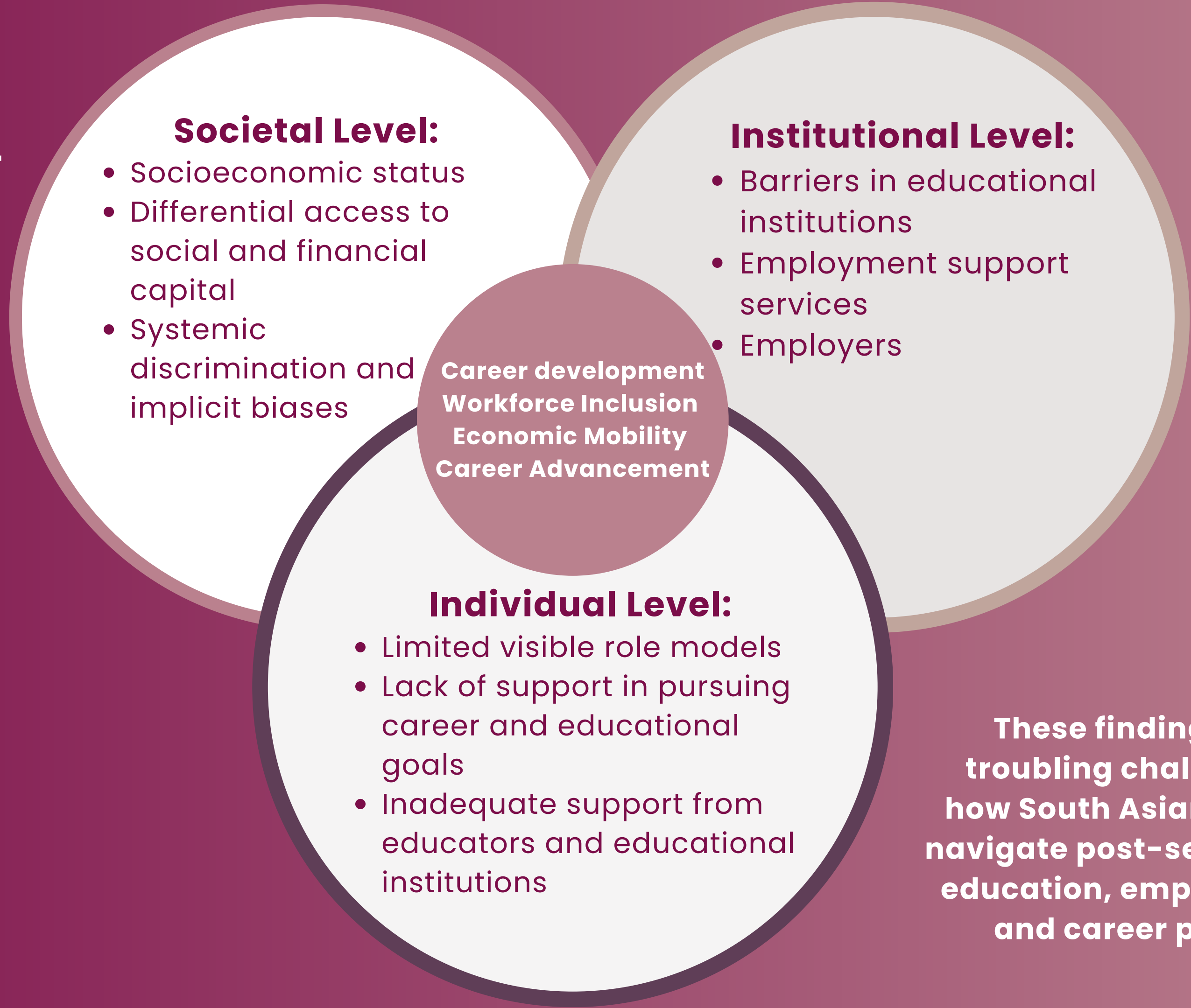
Knowledge Dissemination across the GTA + Canada

1 virtual event

3 in person events across the GTA (Toronto, Brampton and Markham)

Conference Presentations at CCMW, Mentor Canada Summit, Cannexus

According to the Future Skills Centre's 2023 report on Labour Market Implications for Racialized Youth, racialized young people in Canada face numerous barriers to employment:



These findings reveal troubling challenges in how South Asian women navigate post-secondary education, employment, and career pathways

KEY FINDINGS & LEARNINGS | SOCIETAL BARRIERS

Family & Cultural Influences on Education & Career Pathways

Family and parental relations have a significant influence on young South Asian women's career and educational choices. The influence was perceived in two distinct ways:

1 Family and parents are a crucial support system and resource in shaping career and employment pathways

2 Family and parents' expectations about careers and educational choices contribute to challenges and stressors, including:

- Cultural expectations for pursuing mainstream career paths (“doctor, lawyer, engineer”)
- Pressures to stay close to home to pursue training, education, or employment
- Expectations to care for family members (i.e., parents, elders, siblings)
- Financially supporting the household (i.e., bills, contribute to rent/mortgage payments, etc.)

19% of participants identified familial pressure as a career-related challenge. When broken down further, 23% of Canadian-born participants cited this challenge, compared to 12% of internationally-born participants.



KEY FINDINGS & LEARNINGS | SOCIETAL BARRIERS

Social & Financial Capital: The most commonly cited challenges faced by participants was the **lack of access to social capital and job literacy**, which makes it difficult to secure employment and advance professionally.

- Many participants expressed frustration with the disconnect between the cultural values they were raised with, such as a strong emphasis on hard work and meritocracy, and the reality of the Canadian job market, where networking and personal connections are prioritized as the primary pathways to workforce entry and career advancement.

Post-Secondary Education: 46% of survey respondents shared that the **cost of education** and the **time** it takes to get through school (40% of survey respondents) were the biggest career barriers.

Discriminatory Hiring Practices: Participants described persistent structural barriers in the job market that continue to restrict access to employment and advancement opportunities based on race/ethnicity, and religion.

Systemic Barriers in Career Advancement: Underrepresentation of South Asian women in leadership roles across various industries, which contributes to feelings of isolation and limited opportunities for advancement. While they account for 6.5% of women in non-managerial roles, their representation declines to 5.9% at the middle management level and drops further to just 4.1% in senior management positions (Statistics Canada, 2021).



“I think both a barrier and a challenge is having access to social capital, like who your network is and what that looks like in the sense of being able to secure a job... The message from my parents or family was if you work really hard and put in the work, you'll get opportunities... Learning that a lot of it is who you know was when I started to find success.”

KEY FINDINGS & LEARNINGS | ORGANIZATIONAL & INSTITUTIONAL BARRIERS

Culturally Safe and Inclusive Workplaces: Culturally safe and responsive workplaces remain a major issue for South Asian women, who often have to navigate microaggressions and biases because of their religious or ethno-racial identities. Many reported experiencing gender-based remarks, age-related biases, and expectations that reinforce harmful stereotypes about young racialized women.

A participant highlighted how her religious identity posed challenges, particularly when pursuing experiential learning opportunities in the field of law.

“I feel like my identity as a visibly Muslim law student worked both for and against me. During my job search, I faced some challenges, particularly around reprisal for engaging in pro-Palestine advocacy. Even though I wasn’t actively involved, some interview offers were revoked, and I didn’t hear back from employers because of how I was perceived. However, I eventually secured a job with the federal government. I feel my identity might have helped me, as the government is currently facing legal action on anti-Black racism and likely wanted to avoid further bias issues.”



KEY FINDINGS & LEARNINGS | INDIVIDUAL BARRIERS

Networking as a Barrier:

- Networking is critical for career mobility but often inaccessible due to cost (events, conferences, meetups)
- Systemic barriers and lack of culturally relevant spaces limit meaningful access
- Creates inequities for those without financial or social capital (costs of events/conferences, digital platforms, etc.)

Digital Career & Job Search Platforms:

- Job boards feel oversaturated and ineffective, often described as a “lottery”
- Social media platforms (e.g., LinkedIn, Twitter) offer access and industry insights
- Without mentorship, participants struggled to turn online connections into real opportunities

Mental Health and Stressors

- Career navigation contributes to stress and overall well-being challenges
- Pressures include family expectations, employment barriers, and workplace navigation
- Strong expectations around “successful” careers (e.g., lawyer, engineer, doctor)



RECOMMENDATIONS | SOCIETAL LEVEL

Invest in Research on South Asian Women's and Gender-Diverse Individuals' Experiences in the Workforce

- Examine the intersectionality of gender, race, abilities, and migration in the workforce, specifically focusing on how South Asian women and gender diverse individuals navigate different industries, career advancements, and the barriers they encounter, to improve workforce policies, career development programming, and resources that address their needs.

Engage Parents and Caregivers on Education and Career Pathways

- Conduct further research on intergenerational experiences among South Asian parents and children to understand how diverse lived experiences impact parenting relationships and approaches
- Implement community-led initiatives that focus on bridging generational gaps in knowledge and comfort with different careers and workforce realities by educating parents on diverse career and academic pathways and reducing stigma around non-traditional fields.

Address Systemic Workforce Exclusion through Policy Change

- Review and audit AI systems across the entire employment sector, and enforce policies for the ethical and transparent use of AI that impact hiring, recruitment, and surveillance of workers.
- Modernize and update the Employment Equity Act, the Working for Workers Act, and the Anti-Racism Act to align with the rapidly evolving changes in the labour force.



RECOMMENDATIONS | ORGANIZATIONAL LEVEL

Enhance Workforce Inclusion for South Asian Women

- Require employers to assess policies and practices to identify and address systemic barriers
- Implement transparent hiring and retention strategies to support entry and advancement

Reform DEIA Programs to Create Systemic & Structural Change

- Shift from performative DEIA to accountability-driven approaches
- Introduce KPIs (e.g., promotions, diverse candidate pools, employee experience) to track real outcomes

Create Culturally Responsive Career Development Programming

- Design programs that reflect the lived experiences of South Asian women
- Embed culturally relevant mentorship, work-integrated learning, and networking opportunities

Expand Access Across Career Stages

- Provide accessible career development and training from early to late career
- Ensure ongoing support, resources, and pathways for advancement at every stage



RECOMMENDATIONS | INDIVIDUAL LEVEL



Empower Young South Asian Women and Youth with Early Career Guidance

- Partner with schools, community organizations, and employers to expand career exposure and exploration
- Develop culturally informed career programming (mentorship, counselling, networking) to address barriers

Expand Culturally Grounded Mental Health Support and Service Knowledge

- Invest in partnerships to strengthen mental health research, programming, and services
- Deliver culturally grounded supports (therapy, workshops, peer groups) tailored to South Asian women

Bridge the Digital Divide in Career Development

- Increase access to technology, digital literacy, and upskilling opportunities
- Provide training on job search strategies, networking, and building a professional digital presence



Bold Futures: Exploring Career Development Needs of South Asian Women in th...



Copy link



BOLD FUTURES

Exploring the Employment Needs of Young South Asian Women across the GTA

Watch on  YouTube

As you watched and listened to the documentary, can you share one word or phrase that described what you felt?

RESEARCH TO ACTION

Flourish

A Culturally Responsive Career Development Program

A culturally responsive **career development program** for young South Asian women and gender-diverse individuals (ages 16–30) living or working in York Region.

Funded by York Region Government, this program launched from January – March, 2026

Program Goals:

- Equip participants with **skills** to navigate career pathways and the workforce through **workshops, a skills development project, and curated networking events**
- Provide **opportunities to connect** with mentors, industry leaders, and employers to support career development goals and exploration

FLOURISH 2026 Program Model



Flourish Launch Day

January 18th | 10:00 am - 3:00 pm

- **Welcome and Program Introduction**
- **Discussion + Activity:** Self-awareness of Experience, Skills and Gaps
- **Mentor Panel:** Identifying your Career Values, Interests and Needs for your Goals
- **Structured Networking Session:** Mentors, participants & program champions



Flourish Skills Lab

February 8th | 10:00am - 4:00pm

- Introduction & Overview
- **Workshop:** Resume & Cover Letter
- **Workshop:** Interview & Storytelling
- Case Study Work Session



Flourish Careers Connect

March 8th | 10:00am - 3:00pm

- Skills Development Project Presentations
- HR Connect Panel
- Flourish Social & Networking



Virtual Workshops

Wed Jan 28 | Virtual Social Connect
Thurs Feb 12 | Budgeting & Finances
Tues Feb 24 | Job Search Strategies

- Flourish Skills Development Project
- 1:1 Career Coaching Sessions
- Community Socials, Virtual Networking & Program Team Check-Ins





FLOURISH PROGRAM IMPACT

Actively Engaged

50+ participants

Key Participant Outcomes:

- Increased career clarity confidence
- Stronger networking & mentorship connections
- Enhanced resume & interview skills
- Developed action oriented career goals
- Fostered sense of belonging and connecting with community

I joined the program because I was in a major slump. I was consistently applying to jobs but wasn't hearing back. Seeing the cultural representation in the program and attending informational workshops motivated me to change my approach. I am now working full-time and starting a Master's program in September. Young Participant, Flourish Community Learning Circle

**How might you apply what you
learned today in your work or community?**

LET'S EXPLORE WHAT IS POSSIBLE

We're looking to build reciprocal partnerships with organizations like yours on our key priorities

We invite you to **collaborate** with us through:

- Funding, research projects, programming, and events
- Co-Host a Flourish event
- Amplify our research and programming

Have other ideas? Contact us!



THANK YOU!

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