

## ASSESSING THE IMPACT AND EFFECTIVENESS OF A COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM ON BLACK LEADERS

### Abstract

Community leaders working in Black communities are faced with countless challenges yet require unique skills for which evidence-based training is often limited or difficult to find. The current study employed a mixed-methods approach using archival data to evaluate a promising and much needed neighborhood leadership program for Black community leaders, the Bunting Neighborhood Leadership Program. The three primary foci of the program were to examine who were selected as fellows, the goals fellows presented with upon entering the program, and the primary outcomes following immediate program completion and follow-up. Nineteen fellows have matriculated through the program, and all completed pre- and post-surveys, and were each contacted about current awards and other leadership successes. Additionally, seven fellows were interviewed about their experiences with and outcomes following the program. Surveys demonstrated important gains in knowledge and skill development for fellows. Following participation, many fellows developed their own organizations, and some secured funding and received awards for their community leadership work. Three key themes emerged from coded interviews, namely (1) characteristics of those who seek a community leadership training, (2) successes in community impact and activities observed among fellows following program completion, and (3) skills-based outcomes for fellows following program completion. The COVID-19 pandemic and killings of Black civilians by police also impacted participants' responses. The role of blackness in Black community leadership was observed across themes that emerged. Overall, this is a promising community leadership program with important implications for leaders who serve Black communities.

### Introduction

Black communities experience structural racism through inequitable systemic care and resources from housing to employment to educational and justice systems (Bailey et al., 2017). Structural racism – defined as policies, institutional practices, and cultural norms that perpetuate inequality – contributes to physical and mental health inequities and to elevated mortality rates in the Black community (Bailey et al., 2017; Barnes et al., 2008; Lewis et al., 2014; Polanco-

Roman et al., 2016). Thirty states and American Public Health Association, American Medical Association, and American College of Physicians have declared racism a public health problem. Indeed, the list of organizations, cities, and counties with such declaration is growing. Additionally, activists and leaders from the Black community are working to reverse the systemic and historical suppression, oppression, and injustices that contribute to structural racism. This onerous task implores skilled, Black community leaders to develop, implement, and evaluate programs to

curtail structural racism (Williams & Cooper, 2019; Williams & Purdie-Vaughns, 2016). There is a paucity of studies on leadership development of people of color (Kodama & Dugan, 2020). Toward this end, the current study used archival data to evaluate a promising and much needed neighborhood leadership program for Black community leaders, the Bunting Neighborhood Leadership Program (BNLP). In particular, we examined who are the BNLP fellows, what goals they presented with upon entering the BNLP, and the primary outcomes from the BNLP.

Issues tackled by Diversity, Equity and Inclusion leadership teams (specifically fairness, equity, and inclusion) have become priorities of CEOs, with 32% increases in attention to these issues since 2014, but leadership capability to address this emerging priority is not quite there (Deloitte, 2017). The too familiar stereotype of angry Black women or intimidating and arrogant Black men might stifle the voices of Black leaders (Woodson et al. 2020). While strong racial and ethnic identity can improve leadership capabilities, leaders of color also experience racial discrimination and barriers to obtaining leadership positions (Chin, 2013; Kodama & Dugan, 2020). Therefore, leadership programs for people of color should focus on supporting development of strong racial and ethnic identity but should also address strategies for addressing and countering racial stereotypes.

Research demonstrates the effectiveness of three core community leadership strategies and skills in successfully enacting community-level change. First, community-centered approaches are advised; evidence suggests innovative ideas may be required to address community problems while preserving community value (Seyfang & Smith, 2007). Community-centered approaches encourage recognition of the interconnectedness and interrelationships within and between communities, creating synergy, calling for collective purpose, and influencing power at the community level rather than assuming power (Burns, 2000; Robinson, 2000). Second, to impact change, community leaders must acquire leadership skills. Such skills include communication skills allowing one to convene and facilitate community meetings,

engage in strategic planning, and garner support from inside and outside the community (Affolter & Findlay, 2002). Third, abilities or skills that can be enhanced through training promote effective community leadership. For example, aspects of emotional intelligence including empathy, self-awareness, self-regulation, social skills, and motivation are important in fostering teamwork (Goleman, 2004; 2006).

## Existing Black Community Leadership Training Programs

There are programs specific to Black leaders that operate on a national level including the Center for Creative Leadership (for educators), the African American Leadership Institute, and the Leadership Learning Community. While these programs reflect important efforts, they either do not focus on community leadership specifically, are expensive and therefore exclusive, or have not been rigorously evaluated. The W.K. Kellogg Foundation reviewed 55 leadership programs (not specific to Black community leaders) that vary in intensity, target population, evaluation measures and outcomes. The research literature has a dearth of information on Black community leadership development, effectiveness of such programming, and who might engage in such opportunities and could benefit from examination of these constructs.

The scope of research in Black community leadership development is limited, yet we can extrapolate important lessons from existing research. Until late, research on leadership has taken a deficit approach to leadership, viewing race as a constraint that needs to be managed or overcome (Ospina & Foldy, 2009). To counter these barriers, researchers should examine the strengths of Black community leadership in programs that employ best practices (Dugan et al., 2020). Researchers have also grappled with understanding experiences of Black leaders including how perceptions of leaders are impacted by their race and ethnicity (and the race and ethnicity of those they lead) and other intersectional social identifiers

(Brooks & Jean-Marie, 2007; Collins et al., 2017; Lowe, 2013; Woodson et al. 2020). Altogether, this work emphasizes the need for careful deliberations of how race impacts perceptions of leaders, the ways leadership is enacted, and translation to a community leadership model. These deliberations are essential to understanding the dynamics between leaders and the community to develop and evaluate effectiveness of Black leadership programs.

**The Bunting Neighborhood Leadership Program (BNLP).** The BNLP was developed in response to a two-fold community need (for more information, please visit the program website at <https://urbanhealth.jhu.edu/what-we-do/bunting-neighborhood-leadership/>).

First, current leadership programs did not address all leadership development needs of Black community leaders in Baltimore. Second, within Baltimore's neighborhoods, there are consistently pressing needs to address issues around education, incarceration, trauma, safety, and community health services. The BNLP is the most intensive leadership fellowship program in Baltimore with full day training per week for 36 weeks. To develop BNLP, the BNLP leadership team met with community leaders to discuss the need for Black leadership development, the structure, the topic areas for training, the type and diversity of instructors to recruit, the process for recruiting prospective fellows, and evaluating the program. Further, the program is situated in an evidence-informed framework and is conversant with existing perspectives on Black leadership. Prior research work helped the program developers see the need for the BNLP, structure and develop the program, and set goals for the program. Figure 1 provides a conceptual overview of the BNLP with more detail.

There are three ways the training offered in the BNLP extends beyond similar leadership programs: cost of programming, fellow career support, and frequency and small group intimacy within programming. In other area leadership programs serving as the gold standard, leaders must already be accomplished leaders, functioning at the executive level, and

must pay upwards of \$7,000 to participate. Not only is the BNLP focused on up-and-coming leaders who have comparatively less professional experience, participants do not face the barrier of cost and are themselves paid. The BNLP is both tuition-free and provides a 20% salary offset for fellows' year-long participation. Both these aspects of the BNLP program are critical to its success.

Similar leadership programs to the BNLP place accepted participants within established nonprofits or government agencies. The BNLP uses a different approach, instead emphasizing sustainability of talent and commitment brought by fellows within their current community-based organizations. Indeed, the BNLP either supports fellow continuation and growth within an existing organization or provides resources and skills for fellows to develop their own non-profit. Lastly, the BNLP offers greater frequency of programming relative to other programs and offers a more intimate training experience with small carefully selected cohorts. Many other leadership programs convene participants monthly or a couple evenings a month at most. The BNLP recognizes the importance of regular, sustained interactions, and convenes their cohort of fellows for a full day of training every week. Through selection of six to eight fellows, the BNLP offers an intimate leadership training experience. Sessions that span a full day allow fellows opportunities to develop strong connections within their cohort as well as with instructors and the BNLP leadership team.

The BNLP offers a unique program by integrating existing research and theory, combining a focus on neighborhoods, an extensive curriculum specific to Black community leadership, priority areas relevant to local community needs, and more inclusive yet competitive criteria for prospective fellows. Within systems, the racial composition of leadership can impact interactions between individuals in the system (Brooks & Jean-Marie, 2007) as might other intersectional identifiers (Collins et al., 2017). In response, the BNLP curriculum focuses on deconstructing racism and addressing intersectionality, uplifting Black leaders and provides

a safe and supportive environment to be vulnerable and to collectively addresses internal and social struggles to being a Black leader and a public servant. Specifically, the racial breakdown of Baltimore city, historical disenfranchisement, and current state of communities gives a holistic understanding of the leadership training that is needed to facilitate effective leadership within the context. This gives credence to the need for specific community-based leadership training, with an emphasis on black leadership. This practice occurs because there are dynamics that arise at the intersection of race, other social identifiers, and leadership impact the ways in which leaders are perceived and respond to those they lead (Collins et al., 2017; Woodson et al., 2020). Strong racial and ethnic identity also contributes to better outcomes for leaders who identify as people of color (Chin, 2013; Kodama & Dugan, 2020; Woodson et al. 2020). Thus, the BNLP incorporates conversations about racial identity, race in leadership, and racial discrimination across systems emphasizing those in which fellows work.

Among the primary offerings of the BNLP are (1) to promote better understanding of the local political and economic landscape and (2) to educate fellows about how to navigate within systems to redirect political, economic, and organizing power to bring about the necessary community development for equity among Black Americans. Inspired by work of Ospina and Foldy (2009), through BNLP, the emerging leaders strengthen individual skills and develop a conviction that contributes to better use of peer networking, fellowship, and collective organizing. The program highlights the importance of emotional intelligence and personality types in fostering teamwork (Goleman, 2004; 2006).

## Current Study

The current study used archival data and evaluated a novel and much needed novel community leadership program that focused on serving the

Black community - the BNLP. Data which were predominantly qualitative were used to address three primary research questions:

1. Who sought out – and was selected – for this community leadership training opportunity?
2. What were the practical outcomes (e.g., Black community leadership work) for fellows following BNLP?
3. What were the impacts on leadership following the COVID-19 pandemic and murders of Black civilians by police?
4. What were the skills-based outcomes following participation in the BNLP?

Blackness and Black community leadership were themes that were interwoven throughout program evaluation data and are thus highlighted in this study.

## Method

**Participants and Procedures.** The current study included a preliminary program evaluation of BNLP impact and effectiveness for the 2017, 2018, and 2019 cohorts using archival data. Demographic information and information about program expectations were obtained from fellows during a rigorous application process. The application process included a written application requiring fellows define terms associated with leadership, identify their goals for the BNLP, and describe future aspirations (more details on the application process can be found in the section below). Additionally, fellows were asked to create and submit a brief 3-minute video describing the community issue about which they are most passionate or concerned and how the BNLP might help them address this issue.

Table 1 displays demographic characteristics of BNLP Fellows across the 2017, 2018, and 2019 cohorts. Fellows were asked about local community service and leadership experiences before BNLP.

Leadership positions specified by fellows included identifying as founders of non-profit organizations, chairs, board members, directors and deputy directors, CEOs, coordinators, leaders in religious institutions, and organizational presidents. Most ( $n = 14$ ) had experience working with youth; some ( $n = 6$ ) had experience with adults; and others worked with families ( $n = 4$ ). Fellows worked with vulnerable and underserved communities, immigrant populations, people with former justice system

involvement, survivors of violence victimization and witnessed violence (children and families with trauma exposure), and homeless populations.

To evaluate preliminary outcomes from the BNLNLP, quantitative and qualitative data were obtained from all fellows in each of three cohorts (2017, 2018, 2019 cohorts). Data were obtained at the beginning of the program in the BNLNLP application and at the conclusion of the

**Table 1.**

*Descriptive Characteristics of BNLNLP Fellows by Cohort*

<b>Characteristic</b>	<b>2017 (<math>n = 6</math>)</b>	<b>2018 (<math>n = 7</math>)</b>	<b>2019 (<math>n = 7</math>)</b>
	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)
<b>Male</b>	4 (67%)	6 (86%)	3 (43%)
<b>Female</b>	2 (33%)	1 (14%)	4 (57%)
<b>Years Worked (M)</b>	5.5 years	5 years	8.3 years
<b>Age</b>	--	--	33.9 years
<b>Education</b>			
Education - High School degree	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (14%)
Education - Associate's degree	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (14%)
Education - some college	2 (33%)	4 (57%)	0 (0%)
Education - Bachelor's degree	2 (33%)	2 (29%)	2 (29%)
Education - Master's degree	2 (33%)	1 (14%)	2 (29%)
Education - Doctoral degree	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (14%)
Relevant Work Experience	6 (100%)	6 (86%)	7 (100%)
Relevant Volunteer Experience	3 (50%)	2 (29%)	5 (71%)
Relevant Awards	2 (33%)	2 (29%)	2 (29%)
Relevant Grants	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Relevant Certifications	1 (17%)	0 (0%)	3 (43%)
How They Learned about BNLNLP			
<b>UHI Listserv</b>	4 (67%)	0 (0%)	1 (14%)
<b>Referral from Program Director</b>	0 (0%)	3 (43%)	1 (14%)
<b>Referral Colleague or Friend</b>	2 (33%)	3 (43%)	5 (71%)



program. In addition, employers of fellows during their BNLP experience provided some evaluation data. Five, two, and three employers participated in this process for the 2017, 2018, and 2019 Cohorts, respectively. Most recently, all 19 graduated BNLP fellows were contacted about their current community leadership work and successes. A subset ( $n = 7$ ) of these fellows were interviewed more in-depth and asked about how their involvement in the BNLP impacted their current community work.

### **The Bunting Neighborhood Leadership Program.**

The Bunting Neighborhood Leadership Program (BNLP) was initiated in 2017 within the Johns Hopkins University - Urban Health Institute to equip local community advocates with skills, tools, and knowledge to affect community-level change (see Figure 1). Applications to the BNLP are multifaceted, requiring seven steps:

1. Review and agree to the BNLP expectations and rules of engagement.
2. Share targeted details concerning their education and experience.
3. Provide references for the BNLP program.
4. Answer short answer questions and essay questions relevant to BNLP curriculum content.
5. Record and submit a video about a community issue relevant to their interest and work.
6. Upload their resume or CV.
7. Complete an Employer Approval and/or Fiscal Sponsor Form.

The BNLP provides a structured evidence-based curriculum with six core foci: 1) development of advanced community leadership skills, 2) increasing knowledge of structural racism and implicit racial bias, 3) skills for building relationships, 4) learning effective communication strategies, 5) policy and advocacy skills, and 6) building systems for change

to leverage resources, improve performance, and increase community power. Fellows accepted into the BNLP attend full-day seminars and workshops dedicated to these foci on a weekly basis for one year lasting approximately 300 hours. Each weekly a full-day meeting includes a seminar including brief lecture by guest speakers who are experts in their respective areas (local U.S. senator about how to influence policy, a senior community leader with grant funding for their non-profit to discuss grant funding), guided discussion, activities, evaluation work for the session leader, and a brief writing exercise to put new concepts into context. Those who lead sessions for BNLP do so each year and have team meetings to promote continuity of presented content and consistency in language. The BNLP leader is also present at each workshop to ensure program implementation fidelity. For more detail about the BNLP, please visit the program website.

There are at least six unique aspects of this Black community leadership program. First, fellows are provided with a stipend to offset lost salary support from working one day less weekly. Second, fellows are recruited to be a part of a small cohort of 6 or 7 fellows. Third, the BNLP recruits and retains instructors who are leaders in their respective fields. Fourth, fellows are matched with mentors based on their leadership interests and needs. Fifth, the BNLP includes a self-care component in that fellows are provided with quarterly therapy sessions; the costs of these and any additional sessions based on fellow interest and need are covered by the BNLP. Finally, the BNLP includes a retreat focused on discussing implicit bias and racism. In addition to these advantages of the BNLP, fellows also have the opportunity to network with each other over lunch and special meetings and events.

### **Measures**

Program evaluation materials were modified based on feedback from previous cohorts. Thus, question content differed somewhat across cohorts. Most

data were qualitative. Fellows from each cohort wrote responses to the following general prompts: (a) professional and leadership growth (b) what aspects of BNLP worked (c) what aspects of BNLP didn't work (d) recommendations for strengthening the program.

In addition to these prompts, additional noteworthy information was obtained from the 2017 and 2019 cohorts. The 2017 Cohort completed a measure of their perceptions of personal growth in knowledge related to the BNLP over time after the program had ended (see Table 2). BNLP fellows in the 2019 Cohort answered questions at baseline and post-BNLP about

their experiences to date that were relevant to the BNLP curriculum. At pre- and post-BNLP, fellows were asked whether they had engaged in select activities relevant to the BNLP (see Table 3). Fellows in the 2019 cohort were also asked two Likert scale questions about knowledge gained during the BNLP. The first question asked about knowledge regarding the history of Baltimore pre-BNLP to post-BNLP. The second question asked how knowledgeable fellows were about the history of race, racism, and segregation in Baltimore. Items were measured on a scale of 1=not at all knowledgeable to 4=extremely knowledgeable.

**Table 2.**

*Seven themes in skill development desired among incoming BNLP fellows*

Skill Category	Sample Quotes	n
Personal growth or self-awareness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>“advancing my emotional intelligence”</li> <li>“better understanding of my own marketability”</li> </ul>	5
Leadership skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>“enhance my skills as a community leader”</li> <li>“learn some best practices which will help make me a more effective leader”</li> <li>“successful leadership techniques”</li> <li>“be molded into a strong culturally competent leader”</li> </ul>	8
Technical skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>“experience and technical skills to create dynamic, empowering communities”</li> <li>“enabled to navigate resources”</li> <li>“technical knowledge and strategic planning skills”</li> </ul>	3
Problem-solving skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>“ability to assess a problem”</li> <li>“learn new skills and perspectives for tackling community issues”</li> </ul>	4
Effectively communicate about race in their work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>“[I hope to] learn how to communicate about race to different audiences”</li> </ul>	3
Building capacity as a community leader	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>“build systems for change”</li> <li>“increase my abilities to build a solid programmatic foundation”</li> <li>“capacity building, resource development”</li> </ul>	8
Improving communication skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>“improve affective [sic] communication across multiple disciplines”</li> </ul>	3

For each of the BNLN cohorts, each fellow's employer was contacted and asked to field three questions. These questions included, "What expectations did you have from BNLN for fellow [the fellow]?", "What impact did BNLN have on [the fellow]?", and "What additional assistance/mentoring or support do you think would be helpful to further build her/his leadership skills?". Employers provided written, non-numeric, responses to these questions.

Finally, community leadership activities were measured over time by the BNLN leadership team. Former fellows were interviewed and asked about current work and how the BNLN impacted their community leadership work. These data were collected following the COVID-19 pandemic and recent murders of Black civilians by police like Breonna Taylor and George Floyd to evaluate whether and how fellows are addressing resultant community needs.

**Table 3.**

*Changes Over Time in Perception of Knowledge Growth 2017 Fellows (n = 5)*

Knowledge Content	Pre-BNLN	Post-BNLN	Change Scores
Building Relationships	5.8	8.2	+2.4
Communication	6.0	8.0	+2.0
Deconstructing Racism Knowledge	5.2	7.6	+2.4
Systems Change Knowledge	5.2	7.6	+2.4
Policy & Advocacy Knowledge	4.0	7.4	+3.4
Identifying Communication Challenge	7.0	9.3	+2.3
Engaging in Community	6.6	8.6	+2.0
Identifying the Issue (Problem-Solving)	7.0	8.8	+1.8
Deconstructing Issue (Problem-Solving)	6.4	8.4	+2.0
Developing Outcomes for Change	5.6	8.0	+2.4

*Note.* Items were measured on a scale of 1-10.

## Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics were used for quantitative data. Qualitative data were analyzed using grounded theory (Knapp, 2017; Strauss & Corbin, 1997). More specifically, a codebook was developed based on emerging concepts and common patterns identified after reviewing a random sample of written responses to question stems. Categories and subcategories were modified as needed to ensure that the coded content accurately reflected the assigned category. The resulting codebook included operational

definitions of categories and subcategories to increase coders' reliability and aid in the coding process. Interrater reliability in coding was assessed by having two researchers independently code a randomly selected individual interview and compare codes assigned for each segment. During this process, disagreements on code assignment were discussed and, if needed, definition of coding categories was refined. This process was deemed complete once the two-person research team had agreement above 80% (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Researchers then



completed the remaining coding of the individual interview transcripts using Dedoose software independently (Dedoose Version 8.1.10, 2018).

## Results

Who is Selected to be a BNLP Fellow?

*Community leadership goals among new BNLP fellows.* Successful applicants to the BNLP demonstrated clear goals for skill development, takeaways from the BNLP curriculum, and career aspirations in their program applications. Such goals provided a more tangible metric of success in meeting desired outcomes. There were seven types of specific skills that fellows wanted to develop or improve upon mentioned within participant responses (see Table 2). Additionally, fellows envisioned three clear takeaways from the BNLP curriculum. First, fellows expressed interest in expanding their knowledge, naming constructs associated predominantly with technical assistance/knowledge, tools, and networking. Second, most fellows were especially eager to expand their professional network through the BNLP. For instance, two fellows described interacting with instructors (e.g., “listen and learn from expert faculty”), and one fellow described looking forward to unique mentorship opportunities with other Black leaders through the BNLP, saying, “mentorship from individuals who look like me, have a similar background and are just as passionate about... research, promotion and engagement”.

Three fellows mentioned the opportunity to engage with a cohort as desirable, “The opportunity to learn in/with/from a small cohort that actually works on the ground the ground [sic] is invaluable”. Finally, ten fellows made broad statements about expanding their network through their participation in the BNLP. Examples of these statements include “expand my network”, “further develop my network of resources”, “gain many connections”, and “network and engage with like minded [sic] people, who have a passion for change and advocacy”.

*BNLP fellow anticipated contributions to the community.* Fellows were asked how their career goals would improve wellbeing of community members in East or West Baltimore. Five themes emerged in their responses: 1) bring resources to the community, 2) help community members build skills, 3) offer opportunities for economic development, 4) education and research, and 5) advocacy/policy work.

Five fellows suggested their careers would better the lives of Baltimoreans through provision of resources (e.g., “bring resourcestothe community”, “providingthe support and resources that young people need to live healthy, empowered lives”, “developing resources”). Four fellows described worker skills training and “teaching life skills”. Six fellows recognized a need to offer opportunities for economic development to improve the health and wellbeing of East and West Baltimore. For example, fellows mentioned their careers would, “[foster] economic development of their community”, “help with food access”, and “[focus on] strategic planning, fundraising”.

Seven fellows incorporated the need for furthering education among community members in East and West Baltimore. Some of these fellows indicated that they hoped to educate through “workshops, seminars, programming” and “education workshop series”, and “spreading awareness”. One other fellow indicated a desire to learn more about Black community needs through community-based research.

Five fellows mentioned advocacy and policy work. Three explicitly mentioned advocating in the Black community saying things like, “advocate for the Black urban community” and “advocate for services, policies and procedures that are equitable”. Two fellows described impacting policy through their future careers, saying they would, “drivepolicythatcreatesreal change” and “create the policies that change the way communities are governed to better serve them all”.

*Black community leadership.* On their applications,

fellows defined community leadership and what it means to them. Additionally, they were asked to describe someone they know who epitomizes community leadership work. All fellows described Black women and men as exemplifying leadership practices. This is particularly noteworthy given that the BNLP focuses on creating a safe space for development of leadership skills among Black leaders. It appears that beyond teaching leadership skills, the BNLP offers fellows a safe space to be Black in the room, and the fellows also have that in common with others – this is a clear strength of the BNLP and one of the only places that many professionals get to learn and grown in a space that pushes and pulls others to their potential. From fellows’ responses, it appears that they respect that aspect of the BNLP. Accordingly, it is fitting that fellows look to other Black leaders as examples.

**BNLP Outcomes.** During individual interviews, fellows were asked about their work in the community and how their participation in the BNLP influenced that work. In responding to this question, fellows described how: their community work was directly connected with the BNLP, connections with other BNLP fellows informed their work, and described future aspirations for their work. such descriptions emphasize meaning-making from participants, and at times illustrate BNLP’s efficacy in meeting both the stated goals of the program and the community leadership goals identified by BNLP fellows.

*BNLP contributes to more community leadership work.* All fellows made impressive strides in their community leadership work as a result of their involvement with the BNLP. In fact, one fellow received a promotion saying, “I actually, I started the fellowship as the deputy director of the program I was at, and by the end of the fellowship, I had been named the executive director”. Two other fellows described how the connections they made through their

participation in the BNLP impacted opportunities to do their work and obtain funding for their work, saying, “through [one of the instructor’s] connections and things like that, I was able to now get this job [where I can do meaningful community work]” and:

“connections... I would not have been able to connect to [the Baltimore City Comptroller], had it not been for the BNLP, you know. I would not necessarily have reached out to Jews for Justice [a non-profit funder], you know, so different things like that, making you think outside the box”.

One fellow indicated their current work derived from the final BNLP project saying, “my program has a community action network, and so we were trying to find that the issue that we all had in common, and so housing is the thing that bubbles at the top. And so I used the housing thing as my project with BNLP... to get some legislation passed in the city that would be beneficial for all moms”.

Experiences in the BNLP also contributed to new leadership roles and training for graduated fellows. Said one fellow, “I serve as a program director of a nonprofit called [redacted for confidentiality]. I... just finished a fellowship with the Center for Urban Families, the Practitioners Leadership Institute”. Taken into context alongside self-described aspirations and goals for community leadership skills development and outcomes, such findings highlight how the BNLP transformed experiences and opportunities to help fellows meet those goals.

*BNLP training improves current work.* Fellows further indicated the BNLP provided training unavailable in their workplace that allowed them to better engage in community leadership work. One fellow described this phenomenon directly saying, “I work management side very much day-to-day on the ground... I saw [the BNLP] as an opportunity to get leadership skills in a way that I didn't feel like I was getting at work”. A second fellow emphasized how lessons learned through the BNLP were applicable to all aspects of their current

community work, "I was able to take [what I learned in the BNLP] back and apply it to what I was doing, whether it involved organizing, correspondence or anything. [BNLP] just served as a learning base for me". Two fellows described how their experiences in the BNLP changed their mindset, which impacted the way they approach their community work: "[due to my experience in the BNLP] I created a digital strategy for my business". The other fellow said, "Talking about the work that we do... I really went back to my organization to think about the why in a very different way. Not just to understand why I am doing the work that we do but like why the organization is doing the work that we do".

Finally, content from the BNLP curriculum continues to serve past fellows well:

"I'm in a process of putting my board together right now for my independent, nonprofit youth development program called [redacted]... And I found myself going back to the PowerPoint that [redacted] presented and... pointers and strategies off of that".

*Ongoing community collaborations.* While many fellows engaged in independent community work, there was a clear sense that collaborations between fellows are ongoing even after graduating from the BNLP. A statement made by a fellow broadly recognized such collaborations, "A bunch of people in our cohort have done work together like different projects. I'm currently doing a project with two of my cohort members right now." A second fellow described how they developed a partnership with another BNLP fellow that mutually benefitted their community work while uplifting other Black professionals:

"Now, [they're] executive director of the center and I'm like, 'Okay, well, I used to train. How do we get together? And I can give you a curriculum on how do you train people on technology, because you've got a computer center that you're not using.' We have a relationship with Microsoft - Black engineers, Blacks at Microsoft, the employee resource group. And I'm like,

'Okay, well then, they're always looking to put their products into community organizations.'... It's like, okay, I have something. I know [they] can benefit from it and [they are] a good person. So why not give [them] something that I know that [they] may not know?"

Another fellow mentioned a widely discussed and highly revered collaboration between two fellows from different cohorts that is discussed more in depth below: "And like I said, even across cohorts, um, because just recently two fellows connected, two different cohorts, but they connected to get Wi-Fi up in the Sandtown-Winchester community. Free Wi-Fi".

### **BNLP community leadership activities over time.**

*Activities since BNLP graduation.* All 19 fellows from the 2017, 2018, and 2019 cohorts reported on concrete outcomes following their participation in the BNLP. Eleven fellows described employment relevant to community leadership work, with one fellow being promoted to Executive Director in their workplace. Most such positions were specific to leadership in the Black community, but there were several fellows whose work was at a city-level and so served all community members regardless of racial background. Two of these fellows worked for the city health department and one for city public schools.

Two fellows reported continued training relevant to their work, and one fellow was recently nominated for an Impact Leader of the Year award. Seven fellows described initiating new programs and projects in the Black community. As examples of these efforts, one fellow began a program to bring more resources into underserved communities and one program focuses on supporting Black women's leadership training and work.

New organizations were developed by 14 fellows following their graduation from the BNLP. All organizations were focused on serving the community and 10 specifically serve the Black

community. Such organizations offer opportunities for youth development, provide health-focused youth after school programs, promote physical wellness, and provide access to healthy foods.

Fellows also reported benefitting from BNLP involvement through new leadership appointments, advocacy work, funding success, and some fellows even received publicity for their work. Two fellows were appointed as leaders – one as President of a community association and another as a member of a legislative advisory committee. Three fellows described engaging in advocacy work resulting in the passage of legislation relevant to their community leadership work (Council Bill 18-0185, COMAR 10.68.01, and COMAR 10.68.02). Grant and contract funding was secured by four fellows. Finally, two the community leadership work of two BNLP fellows was publicized through radio interviews, on national and international television programming, in a local publication, and was featured at a national sporting event.

*Impact of COVID-19 and killings of Black civilians by police.* Since the COVID-19 pandemic and recent rise in racial tension after the murder of George Floyd, BNLP Fellows are currently partnering within and across cohorts to quickly respond and address community needs.

Two fellows from one cohort spearheaded an effort to engage all BNLP Fellows, both past and present, in a virtual meeting in May; 19 fellows participated. Fellows used the meeting to establish a bimonthly networking session to improve opportunities for collaboration on community-engagement projects across Baltimore City. Also as a result of these efforts, three fellows established the BNLP Community Impact Initiative. This effort prioritizes housing development in an area of need – specifically West Baltimore.

Recent work across cohorts is no less impressive. Fellows from two separate cohorts are setting up free WiFi hubs in communities that lack access to such resources, such as Sandtown-Winchester where

Freddie Gray, Jr grew up. Two other fellows from separate cohorts lead efforts to distribute food and set up handwashing stations across Baltimore. Another pair of fellows launched a racial equity community education program since the death of George Floyd. Their committee focuses on increasing community awareness of existing resources and challenges, and on exploring opportunities for addressing disparities. Finally, two other fellows are currently collaborating on a project that will increase youth employment opportunities in relevant work to their communities – namely, construction and waste removal work.

**Fellow self-reported BNLP outcomes.** All five fellows in the 2019 cohort said they felt they were “much more knowledgeable” about the history of Baltimore following completion of BNLP and “much more knowledgeable” about the history of race, racism, and segregation in Baltimore at the end of the BNLP. Next, BNLP Fellows were asked, “With your knowledge of Baltimore history and structural racism, how would you develop a racial equity framework to help address your community concerns or program challenges?”. Most fellows (all but one) had difficulty responding to this question. The fellow who addressed the question wrote, “I would

**Table 4.***Participation in Advocacy Activities Pre-Post BNLFP Fellowship for 2019 Cohort*

Advocacy Area	Pre-BNLP 2019 (n = 7)		Post-BNLP 2019 (n = 5)		Change Score
	n	%	n	%	
Studied the history of Baltimore	5	71.4%	5	100.0%	28.6%
Attended training on communications	4	57.1%	5	100.0%	42.9%
Attended training on policy development and organizing	3	42.9%	4	80.0%	37.1%
Attended training on deconstructing racism	3	42.9%	5	100.0%	57.1%
Attended training on community economic development	3	42.9%	3	60.0%	17.1%
Presented at a neighborhood or community forum	6	85.7%	3	60.0%	-25.7%
Presented at City Council State Legislature or Congress	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0.0%
Met with a legislator regarding an issue of yours	1	14.3%	4	80.0%	65.7%
Written an op-ed for a newspaper	1	14.3%	3	60.0%	45.7%
Been interviewed on radio or television	5	71.4%	2	40.0%	-31.4%
Used social media to communicate your views on an issue	7	100.0%	5	100.0%	0.0%
Given a 1-minute "elevator speech"	6	85.7%	5	100.0%	14.3%
Been part of an organized campaign to influence policy	4	57.1%	2	40.0%	-17.1%
Led an organized campaign to influence policy	1	14.3%	2	40.0%	25.7%
Run for political office	0	0.0%	1	20.0%	20.0%
Worked on a political campaign	4	57.1%	2	40.0%	-17.1%
Analyzed community data for grant, presentation, or program planning	4	57.1%	4	80.0%	22.9%
Organized or served on a community coalition	5	71.4%	3	60.0%	-11.4%
Led a community focus group	4	57.1%	4	80.0%	22.9%
Developed a business plan for an organization or initiative	4	57.1%	4	80.0%	22.9%
Currently supervise others in your work	5	71.4%	4	80.0%	8.6%
Did project management and strategic planning	6	85.7%	NA	NA	NA
Develop a budget for a grant or project	6	85.7%	4	80.0%	-5.7%
Successful conflict management	7	100.0%	4	80.0%	-20.0%
Served on a board or developed a board	3	42.9%	4	80.0%	37.1%
Conducted community-level data and asset mapping	3	42.9%	5	100.0%	57.1%
Collect Data	4	57.1%	NA	NA	NA
Wrote a winning proposal	5	71.4%	4	80.0%	8.6%
Developed a fundraising plan	3	42.9%	3	60.0%	17.1%
Managed staff	7	100.0%	4	80.0%	-20.0%

*Note.* BNLFP = Bunting Neighborhood Leadership Program; Successful conflict management = successfully worked with someone whose position you fundamentally disagreed with.

produce a workshop presentation to educate exactly how much structured racism has played a part in our livelihood. Then create solutions for how to tackle these problems". Table 3 displays changes in reported

knowledge over time for 2017 BNLFP fellows. Table 4 presents an overview of participation in advocacy skills for the 2019 cohort at pre- versus post-BNLFP.



Seven fellows wrote about their own personal growth in skills specific to leadership. For example, “learning who I am [sic] as a person that’s pertinent to my leadership style”, “gain tremendous insight into my personal leadership style”, and “BNLP helped me to learn my style of leadership”. These responses reflected a key mission of the BNLP. Twelve fellows mentioned personal growth beyond leadership skills. For instance, one fellow said, “The Bunting Neighborhood Leadership Program has provided me with a year-long developmental and supportive ecosystem...BNLP has allowed me to be unapologetic in my belief, that although I may or may not be the one who changes the world, but I will spark the minds of those who will change the world!”.

Thirteen fellows mentioned the opportunity to network with and be mentored by established leaders (BNLP instructors, mentors, and program staff) as an important outcome following participation in the BNLP. Fellows were also appreciative of structured mentoring opportunities through the BNLP: “I have been extremely fortunate to develop deeper relationships with BNLP mentors”.

An unexpected outcome for many BNLP fellows was the strong connection they developed with members of their cohort, who serve as a resource for feedback, accountability, and collaboration upon graduating from BNLP. Fourteen fellows named their cohort as a source of support: “The fellows were a support for me”, “We had great conversation and great camaraderie among the fellows—it was elevating”, “We had a pretty good vibe the entire time especially when we each needed emotional support during challenging times”, and “For the most part we always maintained a safe space to be vulnerable & were always able to talk things out”. Two fellows described their cohort as family writing, “I felt the support of my BNLP family” and “The camaraderie [sic] and support among the fellows was great---we are family now”.

Many fellows mentioned gaining clarity about and progress toward their leadership and career goals because of their participation in the BNLP. As an example of greater clarity about career goals, a

fellow wrote, “[the BNLP] helped refine my policy issue and gave clear outlines on how to move the sentiments forward [sic]”. Eight fellows named specific actions toward their career goals in which they engaged during the BNLP. A fellow wrote, “I had a promising meeting with a city council member to discuss the potential of introducing legislation of this kind... during BNLP”; another fellow stated, “I’m currently utilizing a few instructors who are mentoring me to successfully launch my independent nonprofit youth development pilot program”.

Other takeaways from the BNLP were mentioned. Three fellows specified developing knowledge specific to a) policy work: “learning how to write policy”, b) needs in Baltimore “I’ve gained a deeper understanding of community issues in Baltimore”, and c) communication “learning how to tell my story”. Another fellow said the BNLP helped them reaffirm “why I do the work I do”.

**Employer evaluations of fellow outcomes.** Fellows’ employers were provided with surveys to evaluate BNLP fellow outcomes. Four themes indicating areas of growth were observed, and one perceived weakness of BNLP participation. The first area of growth was in communication – responses from three employers fit in this theme. More specifically, employers said they noticed “[an] increase in the ability to express [the fellow’s] thoughts in a logical & cohesive manner”, “[the BNLP is] forcing [the fellow] to become more assertive, and “[the fellow is now] more confident in talking to community residents ... [the fellow’s] communication style has definitely changed”.

Five employers noted growth in knowledge. For example, one employer said a fellow had demonstrated “Improvement and awareness not just of the east Baltimore community but overall Baltimore City...[the fellow] many now be more aware than I am”. Another reported a fellow’s “knowledge base is exemplary”. In response to growth following their involvement in the BNLP, two employers increased responsibilities for fellows in their workplace. One employer stated, “in our meeting last week where I general make the

presentation, I told [the fellow] to go ahead and do it. I pretty much turned it over to [the fellow] and I'm a resource to [the fellow]". Finally, the most common form of growth mentioned by employers was growth in fellow's confidence. Ten employers noted this in their responses. Related statements included, "I see an increased confidence in [the fellow]", "[BNLP] is certainly building confidence", and "[the fellow] feels more and more confident in [their] work".

## Discussion

The current study was a formative evaluation of the Bunting Neighborhood Leadership Program (BNLP). Individual interviews with seven former BNLP fellows demonstrated multiple themes. Importantly, the following themes emerged: characteristics of those who seek a community leadership training opportunity like the BNLP, outcomes – namely Black community leadership work) – for fellows following BNLP, and skills-based outcomes for fellows following BNLP. Data further indicated community leadership activities changed following the COVID-19 pandemic and murders of Black civilians by police. Blackness and Black community leadership were also interwoven in the main themes that emerged.

The process to apply and be accepted into the BNLP is competitive, yet after three cohorts, there are still plenty of eligible and strong candidates. Fellows bring a wealth of experience relevant to community leadership work from volunteer to paid positions. Applicants who were accepted into the BNLP also had clear goals for skills and future career aspirations outlined within their application materials. Put another way, successful applicants had the best fit with the focus of the BNLP.

Who are fellows in this community leadership development program? Broadly speaking, BNLP Fellows include leaders from all stages of the career path, from college students and recent college graduates to persons with well-established careers. Fellows are also dedicated and engaged in their

community. As one 2019 fellow stated, "My time here in Baltimore can be defined by my commitment to community service and leadership". Those who are accepted into the BNLP bring a wealth of experience, knowledge, and drive to grow personally and professionally as a leader. The dedication to community leadership work that incoming fellows present with carries over following graduation. All BNLP graduates are currently employed and engaged in work that meaningfully contributes to the Black community.

The BNLP is a remarkable success from the perspective of fellows, instructors, and employers. Through fellows' narratives, we observed that BNLP was believed to be the primary factor which led to desired outcomes for fellows, that the fellows were aware of the outcomes of the program and found them valuable, and that fellows felt they and the program met the goals they set out to achieve at the beginning of the program. Positive comments were made about the BNLP curriculum, instructors, director and staff, and creation of a small and specialized cohort of current and future leaders in Baltimore City. Each person completing an evaluation had kind words of praise for the BNLP at large, and words of admiration for those involved in the program – from fellows to the director. Altogether, the BNLP benefitted all fellows. Through dedicated staff and a consistently rigorous curriculum relevant to the current zeitgeist, the BNLP attracts and retains successful fellows.

During their individual interviews, fellows described changes in responsibilities at work and also named getting new community leadership positions. Fellows also described how some of them are collaborating on community leadership efforts – including across cohorts. Data obtained from fellows since they graduated from the BNLP demonstrated impressive work of fellows focused on community leadership. Many fellows developed their own non-profit and several received grant funding. Fellows attributed such successes to the BNLP.

Even several years after completing the BNLP, future aspirations for community work remained high for fellows. To adequately encompass the overarching

experience of fellows in the BNLP, it is important to use their own words. Fellows said, [the BNLP was] “one of my most valuable learning experiences”, “an invaluable experience”, and “excellent for emerging leaders”. Beyond leadership skills and knowledge about community leadership, fellows described additional strengths and takeaways from the BNLP. Some fellows wrote about how fortunate they were to be integrated into a cohort that could be described as “a network of people doing amazing work throughout the city”. Others described how the BNLP allowed them to “gain powerful knowledge”. Finally, the BNLP encouraged fellows to either realize new career goals or make progress toward them; for example, one fellow wrote, [following my participation in the BNLP, I am now] “adjusting my business model to be more community centric”. Words such as “grateful”, “supportive”, and “challenging us” resonated throughout fellows’ responses. Yet, the words of employers may be the best to externally evaluate the BNLP. Two employers said that they were so pleased with the effects of the BNLP that “We would like to hire BNLP graduates because we trust that they will be well prepared” and “[I] would certainly recommend this opportunity to others”.

**Program Implications.** No one geographic, cultural, or temporal context is the same as any other, but there are leadership lessons educators or developers could take away from the novel, innovative, or community-based approaches of BNLP. One of the lessons learned from the BNLP is that conducting regular program evaluations that incorporate quantitative and qualitative data is essential. Such data can not only demonstrate clear, tangible, and desirable outcomes, but will also improve recruitment and retention of fellows through identified outcomes and incorporation of participant voice. It is also worth noting that covering tuition and offering a stipend allows leadership training programs like the BNLP to select fellows or participants based on demonstrated promise and promotes equity in program participation and completion.

Another strength of the BNLP that should be incorporated into other programs is that it addresses blackness and racism. These topics should not be exclusive to leadership training programs for Black professionals but should extend across trainings and leaders (DiAngelo, 2018). Existing and new community leadership development programming should address race and racism through curriculum and through exercises to promote self-awareness about experienced – or involvement in – discrimination and microaggressions. Further, inclusion of intersectionality as a topic in the curriculum and in creating cohorts could improve outcomes further, but this practice remains underexamined (Collins et al., 2017).

**Limitations and Future Directions.** Given the success of the BNLP, continued evaluation of the remarkable impact on fellows is clearly warranted. Rich qualitative data were obtained from fellows and their employers. However, surveys changed year-to-year and did not include standardized quantitative measures. Analyses using quantitative information were limited due to the low sample size – continued collection of standardized information will make a quantitative and fully mixed-methods BNLP evaluation a real possibility in the future. Accordingly, continued collection of qualitative data could be informative, given that the BNLP has changed somewhat from year to year based on fellow feedback. Additionally, use of a standardized questionnaire that could evaluate pre-post changes in future cohorts is needed to better understand key outcomes of BNLP and other community leadership programs such as knowledge gained.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, data were collected using an online interview format (Daniels et al., 2019). While our team used best practices in this work, in-person interviews would have likely provided more opportunity for rapport building and may have elicited different information. As such, it is recommended that follow-up or future research use an in-person format for interviews in the future when possible.

Results may not generalize to other community leadership programs, given the unique nature of the BNLP. Further, the BNLP is geographically situated in Baltimore, MD and included only Black community leaders. This emphasis is appropriate, given that 63% of Baltimore residents identify their race as Black and the majority of community leaders also identify as Black. Still, future programs and research might consider collecting data from other demographics and may develop a program similar to BNLP that could be run in another location.

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