



ADVANCING A CANADA-WIDE STRATEGY FOR BELONGING

BRIEF 5: YOUTH EMPLOYMENT AND BELONGING

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Belonging is the foundation that enables young people thrive in the workforce and build lasting roots in their communities. When young people feel connected to home, see a clear path forward, and help shape local systems, employment outcomes follow naturally.

Drawing on six years of [evidence](#) across local partners in the [Communities Building Youth Futures](#) (CBYF) network, this brief demonstrates that belonging and youth employment are deeply reciprocal. Young people who feel rooted in their communities are far more likely to pursue and sustain meaningful work, while supportive employment deepens their connection to local community life.

This brief outlines four core actions to build strong pathways for youth employment and belonging: strengthening supportive workplace conditions, making room for youth to lead local change, funding community connections, and aligning employment policy with the broader conditions that help youth thrive.

PURPOSE OF THIS BRIEF

This brief reframes Canada's youth employment conversation by positioning employment not as an isolated skills gap to be closed, but as a vital enabling condition for social connectedness, identity, and community belonging.

While traditional investments often focus on short-term job training or placement workshops, evidence shows that employment outcomes cannot be separated from the broader conditions of community life. When workforce readiness is treated as the sole responsibility of youth, wider structural factors, such as recruitment practices, workplace culture, wellness supports, and job design are easily overlooked. For young people across Canada, particularly those in rural, remote, and Indigenous communities, the absence of accessible career pathways and the erosion of local belonging are deeply interconnected experiences.

Over the past six years, the Tamarack Institute has worked alongside communities across Turtle Island to explore what it takes for young people to access promising career pathways while feeling rooted in the places they call home. The evidence is clear. When communities invest in both economic and relational infrastructure, and when they welcome young people as co-designers of the systems that shape their lives, they foster stronger, more lasting results for youth and local economies alike.

KEY FINDINGS

SUPPORTING YOUNG PEOPLE INTO MEANINGFUL WORK REQUIRES A SHARED APPROACH

Young people are ready to work, but the structures designed to receive them, such as recruitment and hiring practices, benefits and wages, entry-level job design, wellness supports, and advancement pathways, have not kept pace with what young workers need to succeed. Research from the [DEVlab project](#) shows that youth experienced notable disruptions to their education during the COVID-19 pandemic, with First Nations, Métis, and Inuit (FNMI) youth, as well as Black and racialized youth reporting the largest gaps in skill development. This points directly to structural issues within education and the workforce, rather than individual shortcomings. In [Portage La Prairie](#), a CBYF member community in Manitoba, fewer than one third of youth surveyed felt they could achieve a long-term career in their community without leaving. This figure reflects the absence of visible, accessible career pathways close to home rather than a lack of individual ambition. When workforce readiness is understood as a [shared responsibility](#) across young people, employers, and community partners, the conditions for lasting employment and belonging improve for everyone.

WHEN YOUNG PEOPLE FEEL THEY BELONG, THEIR EMPLOYMENT OUTCOMES FOLLOW

The relationship between belonging and youth employment is [reciprocal](#). Young people who feel rooted in their communities are more likely to pursue and sustain meaningful work, while young people who find meaningful work are more likely to stay, contribute, and build lasting community ties. Six years of evidence across Canada [demonstrates](#) this connection:

- 88% of CBYF youth reported a strengthened sense of community belonging, and 95% were guided to explore career options they had not previously considered.
- 89% felt more confident applying for jobs, and 79% were connected with mentors who helped them find their passions and related career paths.

- 84% reported overcoming life's challenges and seeing a clear path for their future, a direct result of belonging-centred design, not employment programming in isolation.

Belonging is not an optional addition to employment programs. It is core to the social infrastructure that enables programs to succeed. For employers, creating conditions where young workers feel belonging, purpose, and autonomy directly boosts retention, strengthens workplace culture, and drives organizational success.

WHEN YOUNG PEOPLE SHAPE SYSTEMS, OUTCOMES IMPROVE FOR EVERYONE

Progress on youth employment accelerates when young people contribute their lived experience directly to decision-making tables as active partners, rather than through one-off consultation steps. Across twenty communities, putting this approach into practice generated tangible results:

- 63,938 young people were engaged through educational training, employment opportunities, and youth-led community innovation projects, while over 70,000 found a welcoming space and a reason to belong.
- 2,567 youth joined local leadership tables, 2,025 secured employment, and 1,561 designed and led local projects funded through the Community Innovation Fund.
- In the Yukon, youth co-designed a Territorial Youth Strategy that engaged hundreds of young people across the territory, creating a governance structure that directs funding and decision-making for future generations.

Community innovation begins with relational trust, shared problem framing, and the confidence to learn and adapt. Communities making the most meaningful progress are those that have committed to working alongside young people as partners in shaping systems and investing the time required to make that partnership real.

KEY QUESTIONS

1 How can workforce development approaches better serve young people?

Workforce development approaches better serve young people when they move beyond individual skill training to address both sides of the employment relationship. Instead of assuming a trained young person will automatically find a responsive employer, effective models share responsibility across employers, community partners, and youth. They combine job readiness with structured workplace supports, including accessible hiring processes, early on-the-job mentorship, living wages, and pathways for advancement. When workforce programs integrate belonging and community connection directly into employment preparation, young people gain the confidence, relationships, and stability needed to thrive.

2 What changes when communities centre belonging in employment design?

When communities design employment supports with belonging as a core principle, the results extend far beyond individual job placements. For example, through the Roving Campus initiative, 100% of completing students graduated or remained on track to graduate, while 30% successfully transitioned into post-secondary education. These outcomes did not emerge from placement programs in isolation. They grew from holistic approaches that connected young people to identity, peer networks, and decision-making roles alongside their employment pathways.

3 What specific investments build lasting outcomes for youth?

Lasting change requires long-term investment across four foundational conditions that directly foster belonging:

- Structured relational infrastructure, including coaching, communities of practice, and peer learning networks.
- Holistic readiness built deliberately over time, encompassing relational, cognitive, and emotional capabilities.
- Formal decision-making roles for youth, shifting beyond advisory feedback to meaningful governance structures that direct decision-making and resources.
- Evaluation frameworks that extend beyond placement counts, measuring whether young people feel connected, see a clear path forward, and choose to stay in their communities.

When policies evaluate success solely by job placements, they miss the relational foundation that determines whether a young person stays, grows, and thrives. Workforce stability begins when we invest in the social conditions of belonging.

SNAPSHOT OF A COMMUNITY IN ACTION: IDENTITY AND SOCIAL CONNECTION IN CBYF – YELLOWKNIFE

Context: Yellowknife faces a youth exodus. Some young people leave looking for opportunity and find that the sense of community and connection they had at home is hard to replicate elsewhere. CBYF Yellowknife set out to change this by putting belonging at the centre of everything they built.

From idea to action: Working alongside The Tree of Peace Friendship Centre and bringing together diverse community partners around the idea of collective impact, CBYF Yellowknife launched Hazhǫ́ Eḻex̱è Łets'eèzhe, a phrase meaning "we are all connected" in Wìlììdeh Yatìì. The project provides youth with hands-on activities on the land, exploring culture and arts to promote wellness, leadership, and employability skills.

A dedicated Youth Committee was established, giving members full ownership and control over events and planning. Together, they designed and launched dozens of community-wide activities, including medicine walks, campfire chats, and canoe trips. At the same time, the project supported youth to explore the connections between their personal and cultural identities, values, skills, and career possibilities.

Eight youth committee members were compensated to lead, plan, implement, and evaluate the project, and 197 youth were reached through youth-led activities and workshops. Through campfire discussions, youth discovered meaningful career paths. One participant shared the aspiration to pursue a counselling career after reflecting on the joy of listening to and supporting peers, while another expressed their goal to become a pilot, leading them to secure a job at the airport as a vital first step.

LEARN MORE

PUTTING IDEAS INTO PRACTICE

To galvanize collective action around youth employment and belonging, four core actions are worth immediate consideration:

Invest in workforce conditions, not just workforce readiness. Meaningful youth employment requires investment on both sides of the employment relationship. Expanding funding models to include the conditions that help young people succeed once hired, such as living wages, structured mentorship, flexible scheduling, wellness supports, clear pathways for advancement, and hiring practices that recognize potential alongside formal experience, creates stronger outcomes for employers and young workers alike. Policy frameworks that recognize retention, mentorship, and career progression alongside initial job placement numbers better reflect what sustainable employment actually looks like.

Make room for young people in the design of the systems that serve them. Young people bring invaluable lived knowledge of what works, what gets in the way, and what their communities actually need. Creating space for youth to contribute this knowledge, while ensuring local partners and backbone organizations carry the operational weight alongside them, leads to more responsive and effective programs over time. Meaningful participation requires more than an open invitation. It requires the formal structures, dedicated time, and financial resources that make shared governance genuinely possible.

Invest in the relational infrastructure that makes lasting change possible. The most durable outcomes emerge not from short-term isolated programs, but from the sustained relational infrastructure that supports them. This includes local backbone coordination, peer learning networks, national communities of practice, and ongoing coaching support. Across six years of the Communities Building Youth Futures network, this collective relational tissue proved just as essential to long-term employment and belonging outcomes as any individual training program.

Long-term, flexible funding for relational infrastructure gives communities the sustained capacity to innovate and maintain momentum beyond a single funding cycle.

Align employment funding with the broader conditions that make belonging possible. The most effective employment approaches recognize and address the broader social conditions that shape a young person's ability to participate, including healthcare, digital access, cultural connection, housing stability, and access to community gathering spaces. Funding frameworks that create space for localized, integrated approaches generate stronger and more lasting results. Evaluation frameworks that measure sense of belonging alongside placement rates provide a far clearer picture of whether young people are supported to thrive over time.

DISCUSSION GUIDE

The questions below are designed to foster dialogue within your team, network, or community planning table.

- **Part 1: Setting the Stage** offers general prompts to set the stage, break the ice, and get people talking about the intersections between belonging and youth employment.
- **Part 2: Deep Dive** provides questions to help you reflect further on the ideas outlined in this brief.

PART 1: SETTING THE STAGE

1. What was the first opportunity that opened a door for you as a young person, and who or what made it possible?
2. When you think about youth in your community, what does meaningful work look like to them? How do you know?
3. Where in your community do belonging and youth employment already reinforce each other? Where are the key gaps?

PART 2: DEEP DIVE

1. The brief argues that belonging and youth employment are mutually reinforcing conditions. How does this show up, or not show up, in the programs and investments your organization currently supports?
2. What would it look like in practice to make room for youth as co-designers of the systems that serve them in your community or network?
3. What would your team or organization need to shift to measure belonging alongside job placement in your evaluation frameworks?
4. Where do you currently invest in relational infrastructure, such as coaching, peer learning, and backbone support? Where are the gaps, and what would it take to address them?

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TAMARACK INSTITUTE'S RESOURCES:

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- Article (2026): [*Rethinking Youth Workforce Development: When "Job Readiness" Meets an Imperfect Labour Market.*](#)
- Blog (2026): [*Blueprinting Belonging: How Local Efforts Spark a Canada-wide Movement.*](#)
- Case Study (2026): [*A Hidden Asset: The Power of Emerging Youth Leadership in Community Innovation.*](#)
- Case Study (2026): [*Supporting Youth Innovation in Canada's North.*](#)
- Case Study (2026): [*The Hidden Work of Community Innovation: Building Readiness.*](#)
- Resource Page (2026): [*Advancing a Canada-wide Strategy for Belonging.*](#)
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- Report (2025): [*CBYF Community Innovation Fund Overview.*](#)
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OUR APPROACH TO ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

Tamarack uses artificial intelligence thoughtfully to support aspects of our work while maintaining human oversight, community voice, transparency and accountability. We are committed to being transparent about how we use AI, where we choose not to use it, and the tensions we are navigating as these technologies evolve.

LEARN MORE ABOUT HOW TAMARACK USES AI