MuseumLab for Museum Professionals: Cohort 1 Summative Evaluation Report

Rachel Madden & KT Todd
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MuseumLab for Museum Professionals:
Cohort 1 Summative Evaluation Executive Summary

About the program:

Beginning in fall 2023, Children's Museum of Pittsburgh (CMP) and the Association of Children's Museums (ACM) piloted MuseumLab for Museum Professionals (MLMP), a new approach to professional learning that aims to spark creativity and innovation in the museum field. The pilot year consisted of an 8-month program that melded personalized coaching and in-person and virtual learning — with an emphasis on prototyping and project-based, hands-on activities.

About the evaluation:

Children's Museum of Pittsburgh's Learning and Research Department surveyed and interviewed nine of the ten participants at the end of the program to investigate what the participants got out of the program and how it could be improved in future years. A summary of findings is below. Further details and quotations are in the full evaluation report.

Key findings:

- Overall impressions: In describing the program overall, participants noted how MLMP built a powerful sense of community, how the program challenged them to try new things, and how the program was fun, inspiring, and transformative.
- Supporting capacity and motivation: All survey respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that the program supported their learning, skill development, motivation, and confidence for creative innovation. 89% strongly agreed and 11% agreed that after the program, they felt better equipped to engage in creative innovation. Interviewees noted that the program was especially helpful in giving them new tools and ideas that they could use in their institutions.
- Building community: Every survey respondent strongly agreed that they formed valuable new connections through the MLMP project. 89% strongly agreed and 11% agreed that the program helped them feel like part of a supportive community, with one interviewee describing this as "off the charts, excellent."
- Programmatic strengths: All participants thought community building was the most valuable part of the program. Participants indicated that the first in-person week was an important strength of the program, with 100% of survey respondents rating it as "very valuable." All respondents reported that the process of leading their own projects was either "very valuable" (67%) or "valuable" (33%).
- Areas for improvement: The only element of the program that any respondents rated "not at all valuable" was the ACM prize money (only 22% selected "valuable" or "very valuable"). Ratings were also low for the mentorship elements of the program, with only 44% finding these "valuable" or "very valuable." Interviewees suggested having clearer programmatic goals in future years.

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About the program

Beginning in fall 2023, Children's Museum of Pittsburgh (CMP) and the Association of Children's Museums (ACM), piloted MuseumLab for Museum Professionals (MLMP), a new approach to professional learning that aims to spark creativity and innovation in the museum field. The pilot year consisted of an 8-month program that melded activity-based learning with personalized coaching. Participants addressed deep questions and practical realities —how to plan and create exhibits that promote social justice, integrate new technologies, deepen accessibility, and engage emotions — and turned those questions into actionable implementation plans. Each participant received customized support as they engaged their communities, prototyped, and developed a plan to scale an innovative idea in their museum and community. In its inaugural year, MLMP received eight times as many applications as the program could accommodate, ultimately selecting a diverse group of 12 impressive innovators based on their breadth and depth of experience and positioning for innovative work.

The 8-month pilot program consisted of:

- In-person gatherings: Two, week-long visits to Pittsburgh focused on building community while engaging in interactive learning — including fireside chats with museum experts about practical topics (coming up with ideas, prototyping strategies, making the most of small budgets, etc.); interactive workshops with artists and innovators; and gamified activities about communicating your idea or understanding your budget. Participants did scaffolded prototyping in teams and alone, with varying levels of constraint and design/build support. Field trips, reflection activities, and museum exploration supplemented the experience.

- Virtual learning: Bi-weekly, synchronous Zoom sessions offered mini-workshops about specific aspects of an action plan template (conducting empathy interviews, writing your elevator pitch, etc.), and participants submitted the individual pieces of their plan as assignments, receiving feedback from peers and project staff that they used to make revisions before submitting their final plan.

- Mentorship: Each participant was paired with a coach based on interests and learning goals. Coaches were established field leaders who met with participants monthly. Coaches attended an orientation that provided context about how to guide participants through the experience, and participants received guidance about how to best work with their coach.

- Culmination: The program ended at the InterActivity conference, where participants shared their action plans and prototypes. Soon after the conference, ACM also announced cash prizes that recognized the top innovative ideas.

About the evaluation

Children's Museum of Pittsburgh's Learning and Research Department conducted an evaluation of the MLMP program. Data collection took place throughout the eight-month period, with initial data focusing on informing changes to the program. A separate memo describes the findings from the initial program activities.

This report shares the findings from data that were gathered at the end of the year. The overall purpose of this data was to assess the program's outcomes and identify areas for improvement in future years. Five evaluation questions guided the study:

1. What were participants' overall assessment of the program?
2. To what extent did the program support participants' capacity and motivation for engaging in creative innovation?
3. To what extent did the program build participants' sense of connectedness within the museum community?
4. What were the program's greatest strengths?
5. How could the program be improved in future years?

To address these questions, the Learning & Research team conducted interviews with and gathered surveys from program participants. Appendix 1 and 2 share the exact questions that were included on the interview and survey. All ten people who completed the program were invited to participate in the data collection. Nine of the ten chose to do so. This report shares their data, organized in findings according to the evaluation questions above.

Finding 1: Overall Impressions

Participants' overall assessment of the program tended to be that MLMP fostered valuable community and that it was challenging, fun, inspiring, and transformative.

We began our interviews by asking the MLMP cohort members to describe the program in three words. Five words were mentioned multiple times: community, challenging, fun, inspiring, and transformative/transformational.

Looking at trends in similar words, people were most likely to share words related to the ways the programs supported their growth (informative, thought-provoking, impactful, empowering, validating, transformative, and development). Six of the nine interviewees shared a word related to this type of growth. The next most common trend was community or networking, which four of the nine interviewees included in their words. Three interviewees used at least one word related to the program's level of difficulty, with people describing it as challenging (two people), intense, and confusing. The person who described the program as confusing said this stemmed from the program's pilot nature and feeling like being a "guinea pig" without knowing what was coming next. Another three people used words related to positive affect (fun, joy, inspiring) and three others described the program in words related to change (dynamic, innovative, change of pace). Words that did not clearly fall into themes included opportunity, free, and prototyping.

A final question on the interviews also asked participants to share any overall thoughts they had about the program. Responses included, "I would do it again in a heartbeat," "I love them all very much and I most definitely appreciate them," "I really appreciate the philosophy behind the project," and:

> I can't sing the program's praises high enough. It was incredibly fun to be a part of. And, you know, it really got me to think about how people engage with things and how to think of program and exhibit design, not from like a one-point goal, but from creating an experience that people can explore through different avenues.

When asked if they would be interested in being involved in future iterations of the program, all nine interviewees responded with an enthusiastic "yes!"

The next page shares additional quotations that illustrate the most commons trends in participants' overall assessment of the program.

Community

"I've been in the children's museum field for 12 years and I've only known my museum...I've only known people there. So being able to meet people out in the other realms is pretty cool."

Challenge

"I really got challenged to my own norms or ideas of what my role could be and what my goals for my work and my career in these spaces could be."

Intense, Fun, Informative

"[It was] intense in the way that kind of felt like we were on a reality TV show...or like summer camp maybe. You know, like you get thrown in with strangers and you become friends really quickly and try to do a lot of things in a short period of time. But that also made it really fun and also really informative."

Transformational, Community, Empowering

"Right before I started the program, I kinda was at a point in my life and in my career where I thought I might be done with it...and now I just can't. Like there's no way, no one is getting rid of me at any time...with the agency that has been developed, my own personal agency that has been developed over the past eight months, I really want to start planning for what's next."

Validation

"I walked away with, oh, some of the challenges that I find really almost debilitating to my work are things that other people experience [too]."

Finding 2: Capacity & Motivation

MLMP was effective at supporting participants' capacity and motivation to lead creative innovation.

Capacity

When asked if MLMP supported their capacity for leading creative innovation, interviewees felt strongly that the program had done this. Participants said that the program gave them new tools and ideas to implement with their own teams (8 of 9), it gave them steps to a process that is usable in the future (3 of 9), it built their confidence (3 of 9), and it sparked new ideas and possibilities (2 of 9). Almost all the cohort members shared that MLMP provided them with new tools and ideas that they could take back to their home institutions and share with their teams. One person appreciated the "informal professional development" and said that they would "take that back and facilitate with our own teams." A second person said the program "completely gave me a framework for [leading creative innovation]. It gave me a way of conceptualizing a process that I could share with other people and bring them in with me." Another person shared, "I've already brought back some resources that I've learned through other participants in the program and used them in our team to be able to come up with either a shared conception of a program that we're running or to create ideas that help us jump from one thing to the next."
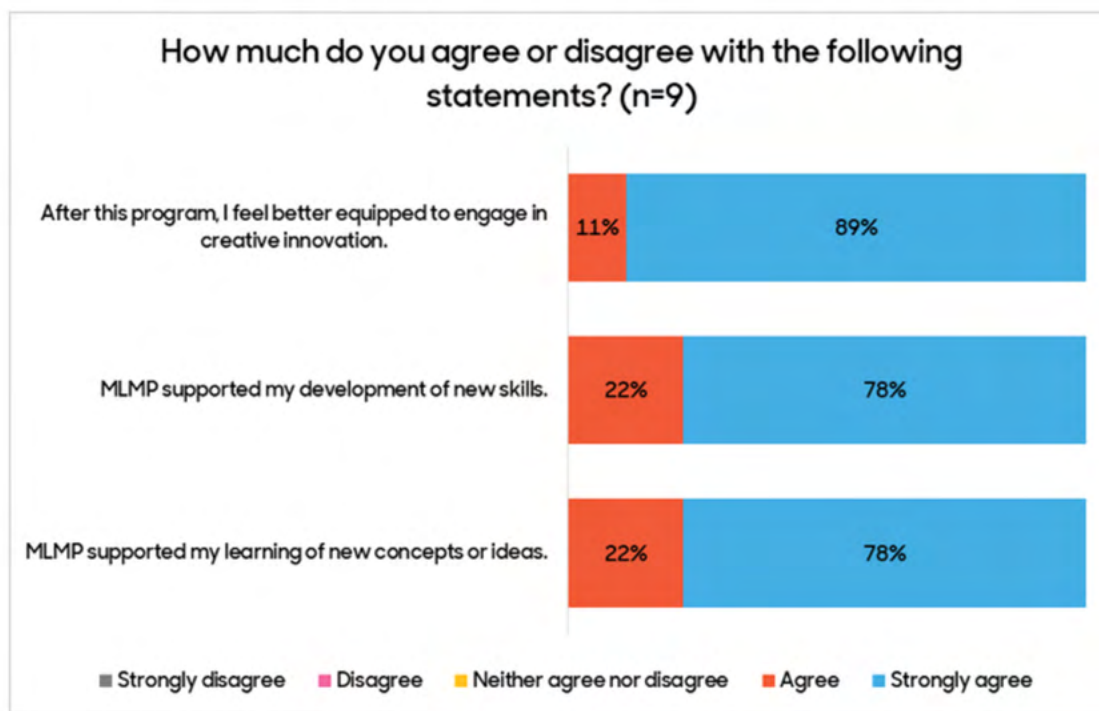
 Three participants also discussed how MLMP gave them steps to a process that is usable in the future at their home institutions. One participant described "getting to practice the steps of going through something like this" as "really, really helpful." Another participant talked about how MLMP helped them realize that their home museum doesn't have a defined exhibit design process – "So, I was like, cool, we can work on that." A third participant said that MLMP gave them a way of "figuring out how to develop a common language that I can share with people, and a process, and being able to lay out step by step what needs to happen."

> *"It gave me a way of conceptualizing a process that I could share with other people and bring them in with me."*

Three cohort members spoke about how MLMP helped them build confidence. One person said, "I came back, and I don't have a museum; I don't have a workshop. So, I was like, OK, let's go make some friends. And I was able to connect with people in my community and get into a maker space that supported me for my project. And I would not have thought to ask for help in that way without this." A second person mentioned the collaborative co-creation aspect of the program and shared that having this opportunity to branch that out and really test it with people that weren't people that I worked with at the time, and being around other people who are also just excited at the idea of ideation was really powerful for me to stretch those skills." Another person said that "it's very liberating when you're like, oh no, I can make a functional thing and it doesn't take seven months. You can do it in three days of concerted effort."

Lastly, two participants said that the program helped spark new ideas . One participant was inspired by the Kindness Gallery at the Children's Museum of Pittsburgh and credited MLMP for "sparking new ideas we wouldn't have had" at their own institution. Another participant said, "I think it's given me a picture of the kinds of projects and work I want to do, and now I'm left with the task of figuring out how to make that applicable in the reality of my current situation. So, if anything, it's made me realize what's possible."

Survey results mirrored the strong interview responses described above. As shown in the graph below, all participants agreed or strongly agreed that MLMP supported them to develop new skills , learn new concepts or ideas, and that they feel better equipped to engage in creative innovation after the program. In an open-ended question where respondents could describe their responses, one person wrote, "I am forever changed by this program and will carry the concepts, skills, and community with me for the rest of my life." Another shared, "I walked away feeling more confident about what we can be making and doing internally at our museum and I feel personally more motivated and able to learn new skills." A third write-in response was: "I feel more competent and qualified to lead creative innovation and provide insight and leadership to partners and peers in my own museum community."

How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements? (n=9)

After this program, I feel better equipped to engage in creative innovation. — 11% Agree, 89% Strongly agree

MLMP supported my development of new skills. — 22% Agree, 78% Strongly agree

MLMP supported my learning of new concepts or ideas. — 22% Agree, 78% Strongly agree

Legend: ■ Strongly disagree ■ Disagree ■ Neither agree nor disagree ■ Agree ■ Strongly agree

Three cohort members spoke about how MLMP helped them build confidence. One person said, "I came back, and I don't have a museum; I don't have a workshop. So, I was like, OK, let's go make some friends. And I was able to connect with people in my community and get into a maker space that supported me for my project. And I would not have thought to ask for help in that way without this." A second person mentioned the collaborative co-creation aspect of the program and shared that having this opportunity to branch that out and really test it with people that weren't people that I worked with at the time, and being around other people who are also just excited at the idea of ideation was really powerful for me to stretch those skills." Another person said that "it's very liberating when you're like, oh no, I can make a functional thing and it doesn't take seven months. You can do it in three days of concerted effort."
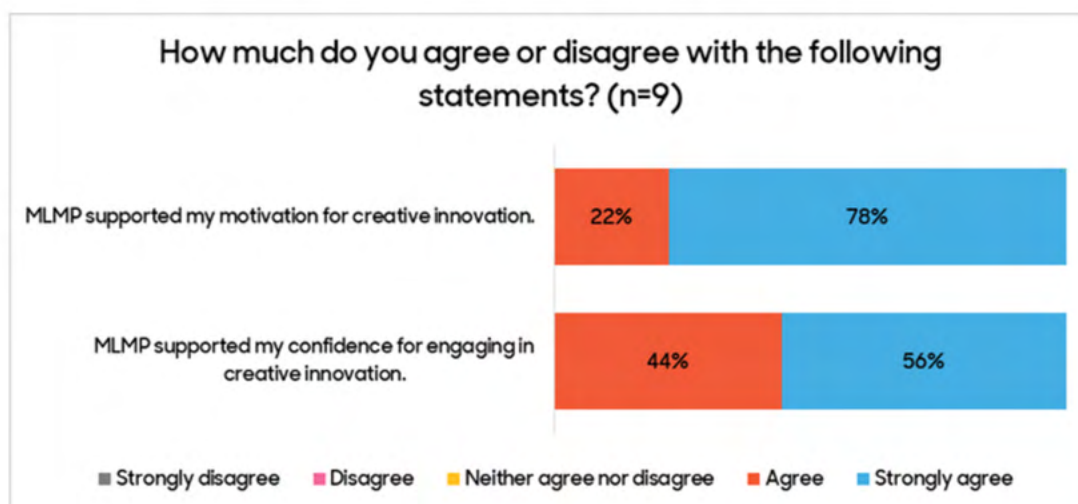
Motivation

In addition to asking about how participants' ability to lead creative innovation changed during the program, the interviews inquired about participants' motivation for creative innovation. Most interviewees felt that the program had been effective in building their motivation. When we asked about how participants' motivation for creative changed, they responded that they were inspired in three different ways: some said that the program inspired creativity and new perspectives (5 of 9), one person said that it inspired them to learn new skills (1 of 9), and another said that it inspired them to align their career to do more things like what was achieved through MLMP. Three other participants said that their motivation for creative innovation was unchanged but that they felt validated by the program (2 of 9 people), and they were excited to take more risks (1 of 9).

Five cohort members shared that MLMP inspired creativity and new perspectives. One person said that the program helped them "realize that my personal inclination is that the phenomenon can be enough. It's that invitation, creating an experience that caused people to wonder, can be enough." They continued, "I think it's opened up for me. It's a little bit freeing in thinking about how I can approach exhibits from something slightly less rigid than your standard Science Center."

One person said that the program inspired them to learn new skills and another person was inspired to align their career choices to do more of what MLMP achieved. The first person said, "Being exposed to different types of makers and creative people has made me want to learn new stuff." The second person shared, "I got really attached to the work and the ideas that we got to produce through the program, and it made me realize how what we were doing, it didn't feel like work."

Three participants felt that their motivation for creative innovation was largely unchanged, but they felt either validated by the program or excited to take more risks. One participant stated, "It doesn't feel impossible or like I'm doing something that's way too ambitious and out of reach anymore." Another participant answered that "by starting the process from beginning to end, it's proven to myself that I'm able to do it, and I don't know that I would have done it as thoughtfully before having gone through this experience."

The survey responses further demonstrated the program's success in fostering a sense of motivation and confidence for engaging in creative innovation. As illustrated in the graph below, all participants agreed or strongly agreed that the program supported their motivation and confidence for engaging in creative innovation.

How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements? (n=9)

Statement	Agree	Strongly agree
MLMP supported my motivation for creative innovation.	22%	78%
MLMP supported my confidence for engaging in creative innovation.	44%	56%

■ Strongly disagree ■ Disagree ■ Neither agree nor disagree ■ Agree ■ Strongly agree

Finding 3: Community & Networking

The program successfully fostered a very strong sense of community within the group of participants and provided useful networking beyond the group.

In the interviews, the cohort members shared that they thought MLMP did well at providing opportunities for networking and nurturing a supportive community. One participant said that MLMP did an "off the charts, excellent" job of fostering their networking. Feelings from other participants were that "the cohort was the biggest take-away from the experience" and that their "favorite part was the people." One person specifically mentioned that the "virtual connections to break off into brainstorming groups and talk about challenges that were being experienced is something that was really, really helpful." They also mentioned that they "appreciated the resources that were given around reaching out to community members and doing those empathy interviews."

Two interviewees said that they "loved the in-person connections" and one called the in-person sessions a "10 out of 10" experience. Two other interviewees had such positive feelings that they got emotional during their interviews. One said about the program, "It not only supported a network and community for me, it created some pretty deep connections that I don't think any of us were expecting going in. Not only with my fellow cohort members, but all of the Children's Museum of Pittsburgh staff and the ACM staff. It was very, very well thought out and it created a very supportive environment and a very close-knit group of people." Another person recalled their time spent in Chroma Maze with the group and described, "that vivid point of us...inside of that space, just laying down and taking everything in having a joyful experience – like that reminder that that's why we're here. That's why we're here as experienced professionals, to create those moments of joy and wonder and curiosity."
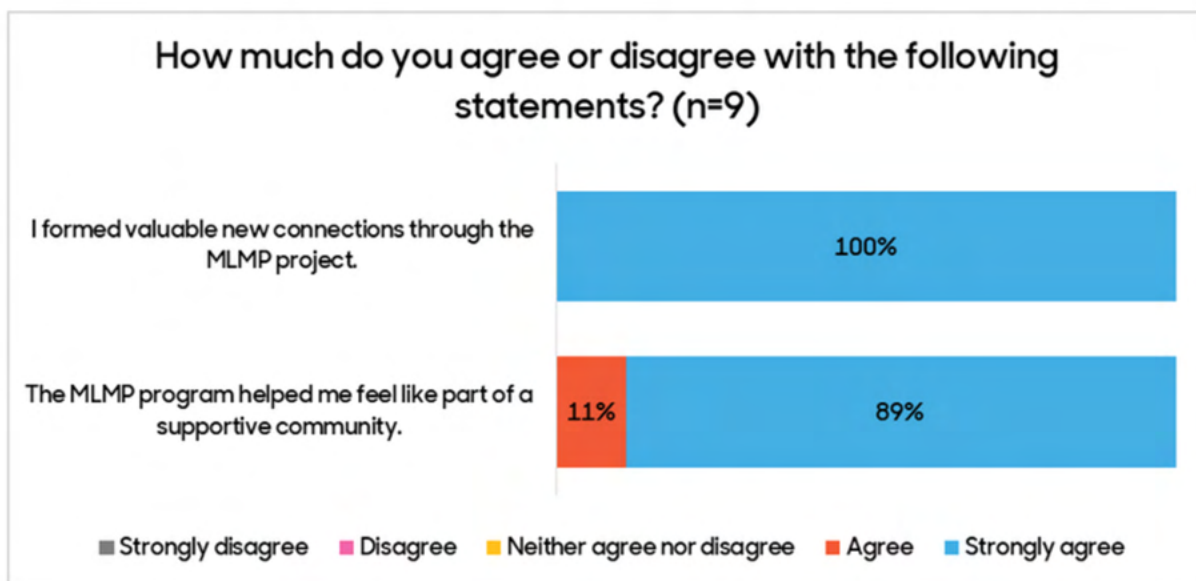
Two participants recalled the positive culture created by MLMP and the CMP staff and said that people "complemented each other" and that "everybody was so supportive." One person said, "I think the culture around our meetings and the culture that you all have in your museum also felt like I could walk up to anybody who worked there and try to ask them a little bit of what their job was like, or talk about the field, and everybody would lend an ear and have really thoughtful conversations."

"It not only supported a network and a community for me, it created some pretty deep connections that I don't think any of us were expecting going in."

Two participants also felt the program positively influenced their networking . One person shared, "that was maybe the single biggest difference the program made, both within the cohort and just meeting other people and talking to them. I think it's really good creatively to have those contacts and make things like conferences not just a chore." Another participant specifically mentioned attending the most recent ACM conference and feeling, "I actually know people here. The first time I went to ACM, I didn't know anybody. But this time around, it's like, oh, I can say I know this person and I can introduce people and connect them to different people in the field." One person felt that MLMP did well in the area of networking but added, "I think with anything, it's dependent upon what the person puts into it. I think we had to have a certain level of assertiveness to really get the most out of having access to the support. It was there and available to us, but it wasn't knocking down our door. We had to knock down that door."

 As shown in the graph below, the survey responses show similar trends to the interviews, with strong evidence that the program did an excellent job building people's connections and fostering a supportive community. All participants strongly agreed that they formed valuable new connections through the project and 89% strongly agreed the program helped them feel like part of a supportive community, with the additional 11% agreeing with that same statement.

How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements? (n=9)

I formed valuable new connections through the MLMP project. — 100%

The MLMP program helped me feel like part of a supportive community. — 11% | 89%

■ Strongly disagree ■ Disagree ■ Neither agree nor disagree ■ Agree ■ Strongly agree

Finding 4: Valuable & Memorable Elements

The data indicate that some of the program's greatest strengths include the community-building, the in-person week (particularly the guest speakers and prototyping), and the process of having participants lead their own projects.

Most valuable elements

Data about the program's greatest strengths come from several different sources, each portraying strengths in a slightly different light. The first data source was an interview question that asked participants what they found most valuable about the program. Out of nine interviewees, all said that the community and connections they made were valuable (9 of 9). They also valued the group prototyping process (3 of 9), personal growth and learning new perspectives (3 of 9), and the work study aspect of the program (2 of 9). All interviewed participants said that the gained community and connections were valuable to them. One participant said, "I think it's been really valuable to have a whole new group of people to throw ideas to and connect with." A second participant mentioned, "a huge difference is having the networking. I feel way more connected within the industry. I have more resources; I have both this peer group and other people that we met through the program." A third person answered, "Most valuable was the time that we got to spend with other museum professionals and share – like have them as thought partners with no strings attached."

Three participants found the group prototyping process to be valuable. One person shared that "the people who brought all the components together I think was the most valuable thing for me, because it created a model for me of like, OK, this how things work together. This is how the prototyping process works together with all these different people." Another person recalled, "At any turn that anybody had an idea or decided to make a plan for whatever their exhibit was – literally every single person involved or even remotely in breathing the same air found a way to be like, 'OK, yes,' and 'Yeah, I can do this' or 'I've done this before.' Or 'maybe you could loop this in' or 'I can help you with that.' And I think that made quite an impression throughout every other part of this process."

Three cohort members noted that they valued personal growth and learning new perspectives. "Being able to help each other out...so that we can all grow in our respective fields" was a valuable take-away from one participant. They continued to say, "[MLMP] is letting us see these different realms of how we can grow to work together and be together and then take these back to our organizations and pass that on." A second participant said the program "gave me a different perspective of programming and how things can happen in a museum...so being able to have those different perspectives has started to guide a little bit about how I'm intending to operate within my team structure." A third participant shared, "I have been in the exhibit side for a while now but haven't been as heavily involved in fabrication. So, I got to grow those skills both on site and working on my project. It pushed me to actually get my hands dirty in a way that maybe I don't always do."

Lastly, two participants valued the work study aspect of the program. One person mentioned the value of "having a space outside of my museum to be able to brainstorm and prototype and come up with ideas." Another person said, "[MLMP] did create this sort of institutional justification for me to work on something that I thought was somewhere between a personal project and professional exhibit project... [it] created that ability for me to deep dive and explore and play around with something that I thought was really interesting and valuable in the long run, hopefully, for museums."

Most memorable elements

A second data source about the program's greatest strengths was an interview question about the most memorable aspects of the program. In response to this question, people most often talked about the guest speakers (7 of 9 interviewees), prototyping (5 people mentioned), the in-person elements and the connection amongst cohort members (4 people each), field trips (2 people), and the tone-setting on day 1 (2 people). While some people spoke generally about the guest speakers and their workshops, others mentioned specific ones: Two people remembered Theda Sandiford's workshop, 2 people recalled Michelle King's session, one person spoke about Bill Strickland, and one person discussed the sound holograms. Participants described these sessions as "so impactful," "amazing," and "really, really memorable." One person shared, "it felt like they sort of fast launched a sense of community that I think stuck with us throughout the program."

> *"On the first day we were all kind of sharing our vulnerabilities and our insecurities and had a good cry within the first couple of hours of knowing each other."*

Prototyping was another memorable aspect of the program. One person shared, "doing the prototyping with the pre-Ks was super cool." Another described, "The final prototyping on the first session is very memorable for me. I remember having all the different groups of people come through and try out the prototype. I remember chatting with different professionals at Children's Museum of Pittsburgh and talking to the kids that were there. And just like the joy that was really felt in that room was really palpable." Two people talked about the group prototyping, with one sharing, "Where you may not have thought you were going to end up with something, [you got to see] how it came out and feel good about like, oh, we can do this. We can pull it through."

Overlapping with the guest speakers and prototyping, four people specifically mentioned that being in-person was memorable. One person noted that there had been "really profound conversation during the first week, and shared, "[we] left that first week feeling really like you've been through something incredibly special." Another person described the first week as "pretty magical, I think because we were all kind of new and inspired and in the moment." A second person used similar language for the second week, saying "the second meeting when we got back together, it was just, I mean, magic and we all stopped question of why we were there...like, why did y'all choose us...and we kinda just stopped asking that question the second time around. And it was just like, we are here for a reason and a purpose."

Value ratings of program elements

To complement the interview data shared above, the post-survey also asked MLMP participants to rate how valuable different programmatic activities had been. Similar to the data above, respondents indicated that the first in-person week was particularly valuable, with 100% of the participants rating it as "very valuable." One person described their response to this question by saying, "The in-person sessions helped remove me from my normal settings and burden of responsibility to really immerse myself in the program." Another shared, "I really liked the sound projection thing, and meeting with artists and makers working on cool and interesting projects was really wonderful. Ultimately that creative inspiration and collaboration was really valuable."

All participants found the process of leading their own project and the InterActivity conference as either "very valuable" (67% for the projects and 56% for InterActivity) or "valuable" (33% for projects and 44% for InterActivity). One respondent described their responses by writing, "InterActivity attendance and presentations provided an additional level of validation and confidence in the work we accomplished over the course of the MLMP program. The process of leading my own project helped me feel confident, competent and comfortable in the innovative process." Another participant spoke of the importance of funding for the conference, saying, "It made a huge difference that the program paid for the trips to Pittsburgh and InterActivity registration, because otherwise I would not have been able to go to either."

A majority of respondents (67%) found the Zoom sessions "valuable," with an additional 22% rating these "very valuable" and 11% finding them only "a little bit valuable." The write-in responses shared both positives and negatives about the Zoom meetings. One person wrote, "The Zoom sessions kept me accountable and on-track." Another added:

> The Zoom sessions only ever felt right when we broke out into smaller groups. I feel like if you wanted to have more content session style zooms like some of the in-person trainings and artist engagements, earlier on, that might be more valuable. I think zoom as a connection point was the most valuable but not necessarily as a check-in point.

Most MLMP participants (56%) thought the second week in Pittsburgh was "very valuable," with 22% rating this "valuable" and another 22% selecting "a little bit valuable." Only one person wrote in a description of their rating to this question, but this person provided valuable insight into what was more and less useful and how they would have liked to spend their time differently:

> I got less out of the second Pittsburgh trip than the first, mostly because it was heavily focused on budgeting/fundraising, which isn't very relevant to me...the budgeting and fundraising seemed like something I could figure out on my own if I needed to. I also would have liked to spend more time on the second trip developing my project. Even though I could also have worked on it without going to Pittsburgh, I think it would have been really productive to work on it in the collaborative environment of the cohort and away from the diversions and competing responsibilities that arise during my normal workday.

More than half of participants (56%) found their interactions with mentors "a little bit valuable," whereas one-third of participants found these interactions "very valuable." In providing a rationale for their response to this question, one person shared, "I didn't really take advantage of my assigned mentor, which is my fault." Another participant wrote, "My mentor was fantastic and supportive and really validated the path that our museum is on." An interview question probed further about the mentorship experience; these findings are shared below.

Finally, the prize money was the only program element that anyone found "not at all valuable" (22%); most people (56%) found it "a little bit valuable" and 22% noted it was "very valuable." In describing their response, one person shared, "I strongly support the prize money, but it wasn't a big motivation for me personally in the end." Another shared, "In regards to the prize money, it wasn't a motivator for participation, and I'm not sure it would be useful in implementation of my final project." A third participant wrote:

> Concerning the prize money, is it a motivator? For some... yes, for me... I was enjoying the experience so much that I honestly forgot about the prize money a couple of times during the journey. Some might consider it a fault, but I am not motivated by money or things. I am motivated by experiences, community, and duty. I think the utilization of some of those funds would be better spent early on to increase accessibility in prototyping your project, like a stipend at the beginning of the program, or supplementing travel expenses for the cohort members that have less resources than others.

How valuable did you find the following program aspects? (n=9)
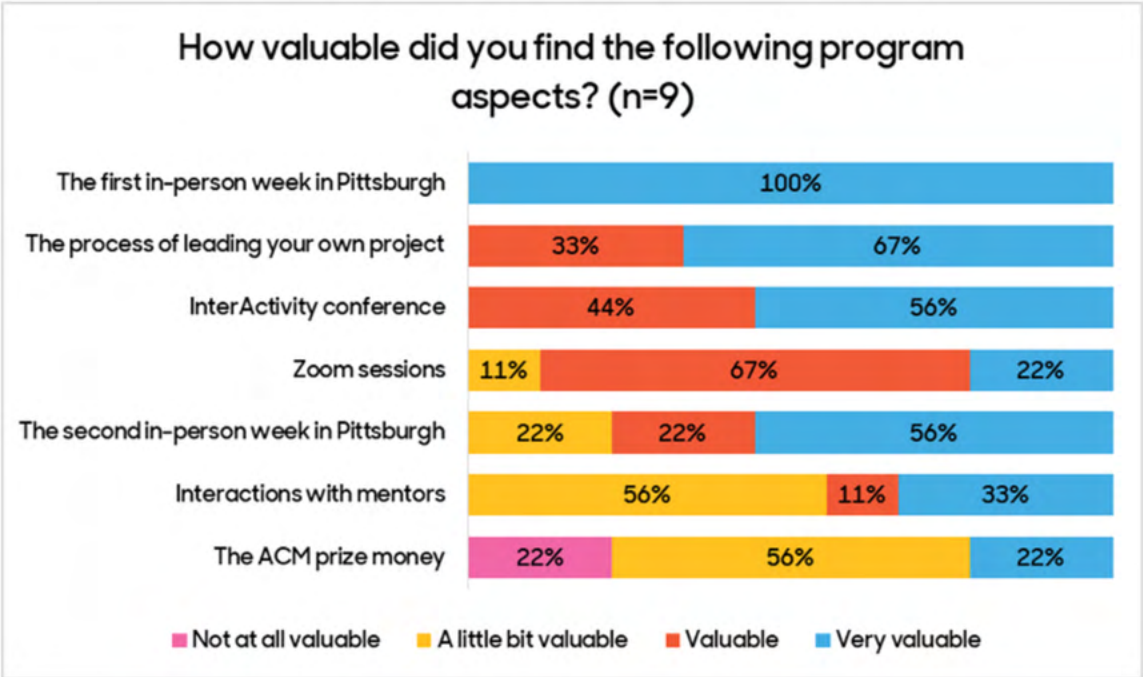
In addition to asking about the individual elements of the program, the evaluation asked how participants felt about the overall length of the program. All cohort members felt that the length of the timeline felt just right. One person said eight months was a good length, but suggested further consideration of when those eight months fall during the year, taking holidays into consideration. Another person felt that any timeline given is good if the project's scope is clearly defined from the beginning. A third person also felt that the timeline was good, but setting general milestones would be helpful to future cohorts.

Finding 5: Challenges & Advice

Areas for future program enhancement could include revisions to the mentorship process, rethinking the prize money, and providing clearer goals and expectations for the program, particularly around navigating the project work between cohort sessions.

As in the prior section, there are several data sources that shed light on the question of how the program could be improved. The survey data above about how valuable participants found the different programmatic elements showcase many strengths but also illuminate areas for growth, particularly the interactions with mentors and the ACM prize money. Three interview questions provide additional insights.

Challenging aspects of the program

The first of these interview questions asked participants what was challenging about the MLMP program. While challenge is not necessarily a bad thing – and numerous participants shared that the challenging elements of the program were part of what made it so transformative – the responses to this question offer some insight about how the program could smooth some struggles and allow participants to navigate challenge in areas that will be most productive. When asked what they found to be most challenging about the program, participants most often discussed the additional workload (6 out of 9 people), the diverse backgrounds and needs in the cohort (3 of 9), being a part of a pilot program (3 of 9), the group work (3 of 9), choosing a project that existed outside of their day-to-day job (2 of 9) and translating what they learned to fit the reality of their jobs (2 of 9).

For several people, the additional workload was difficult to balance with their existing workload. One person said, "it was easier when we had dedicated time and we were there in Pittsburgh to get some of those things done. And it was much more difficult once I got back and...trying to manage that time myself." Another participant shared, "When you go back to reality and you have to kind of slot in this idea of work around your normal personal and professional responsibilities – that felt a little lonely sometimes." They continued to say, "it was challenging for me to figure out how to make a project happen on my own, away from the space where I could focus on it full time."

The diverse backgrounds and needs of the cohort also proved to be a challenge. One cohort member said, "I'm not an exhibits person...one of the things that I felt going into the first week was like, oh, am I not supposed to be here? Because it was a really exhibits-focused time." Another member mentioned, "I didn't think of it as being so process-driven that we were going to specifically focus on skill sets. I thought there would be a little bit more of career mentorship happening." A third member shared, "I think especially the second session was really focused on fundraising and creating a budget, and you know, all the stuff that...doesn't concern me that much day-to-day." They also said, "I didn't really need that particular kind of professional development."

Three people felt that being in a pilot program was a challenge. One person said, "It felt like there was a lack of understanding on the part of the participants of the goals of the program. I remember having a lot of conversations with other participants and us being like, 'what do they want?' So it almost felt like we were kind of shooting in the dark a little bit. And that made it a challenge to fully engage." Another person likened the cohort to "guinea pigs" and said that they "felt like there wasn't necessarily clarity going into something ahead of time. You kind of showed up and you had to roll with...like some days we were getting our agenda the morning of." Another person said that the cohort was "a prototype in and of itself" and that questions came up like, "Why are we doing, what are we [doing], where are we going to? And I think that is just, you know, the bumpy road of a new path more than anything else."

Group work was also mentioned as challenging for three people. One person called it "a throwback to elementary school." Another participant said about the group project, "you learn about your cohort members and it's like, OK, we all work differently." A third participant recalled, "I think the second week session where we were trying to do the team prototyping – it felt like there was a lot that we were trying to slam in there. And while we were friendly with each other, it's a lot different to be familiar with [them] and then to also work with them on a team. So that felt like a little bit of challenge with not a ton of support that was behind it."

Two people shared that one of the program challenges was choosing a project that existed outside of their daily job. The first person shared, "The piece I was working on isn't a great fit for my institution. So I was doing a lot of work outside of normal work hours and trying to fit it in around things and didn't – I'm a one-person department, so I didn't feel like I had maybe some of the access and support that I would have had if I were at a different type of museum." The second person said, "as the project wore on and other responsibilities cropped up, it was a little extracurricular at times, you know, like the choosing between my more ordinary, day-to-day stuff and this project that really didn't have any bearing on what I ultimately needed to do for my job."

One last challenge two cohort members found was translating what they learned to fit the reality of their job. They said, "For me, my individual challenge was, I'm coming from a very small Science Center and this was geared more towards Children's Museums. So there was that lens. I appreciate that lens but it wasn't always directly applicable to the realities of my daily job. So there were definitely times where you're like, 'oh, look at all of this wonderful stuff that I don't get to do when I go back to the real world.'" The second person felt similarly and recalled, "I remember walking away from the first session and feeling like, OK, but none of the stuff would really be feasible in my museum in the real world because I don't get funding for anything I do, like it's if you can make yourself, have at it. We don't really have the processes in place for that."

Mentorship

The second interview question that illuminates insights about potential areas for improvement of the MLMP program asked participants to describe their experience with their mentors. Participants' responses to this question were mixed. Most people were generally happy with their mentors but had challenges arise such as scheduling issues (4 of 9), lack of structure (2 of 9), and unclear expectations (3 of 9); however, two participants had nothing but positive things to say. One person felt that their mentor pairing was "a really good, thoughtful match" and that their mentor was "very upfront and honest with me." They also mentioned their mentor was "so supportive and had tons of ideas." Another participant said their experience was "really phenomenal" and that they talked to their mentor "every two weeks." They shared about their mentor, "[He] kept me grounded" and that "[he] was good at checking me in, sending me different things, articles, introducing me to people that I've never heard of to read about so that I can grow off of my project."

Four participants called out scheduling issues as a negative influence on their mentor experience. One participant acknowledged, "The thing is they're sought after for their talents and that means they're likely very busy themselves. And so that combination means you have to work even that harder to make that connection and really get something out of the relationship." Another participant said, "there were a lot of scheduling conflicts – she seems pretty busy and it took a lot of coordination to set up. I would actually probably say this gave me a reason to reach out to other experts and have those conversations." They specifically mentioned meeting Greg Witt and said, "I think we have a similar sort of mindset and it's nice to know somebody like that and that I can reach out to. So, the official mentorship I didn't do great on, but the unofficial stuff I think worked really well." A third participant said that "we just didn't communicate very much. And that is not on my mentor, but I just across the board it's so easy to get caught up in our day-to-day lives. I'm not at all saying that was a bad situation or a bad match. It just felt like it was a lot harder to have that conversation when it's also a person on the opposite coast."

Two participants said that the lack of structure with mentors was also a challenge. One person shared, "I think that because it was new for them as well, I just feel like there needed to be a little bit more structure and guidelines. I think a little bit more guidance even for the participants on like, what are some questions you should be asking your mentor? What are the types of things that are appropriate for you to seek from them?" They added that "it would been nice to have received [our mentors] earlier on so that we could have perhaps even met them and sat down with them, maybe had coffee, to make that connection in person. I think that might have helped to build the bridge a little bit better with the mentors as well." A second person said about their mentor, "he was very helpful in terms of thinking a little bit about my project in the early stages. And then after we submitted our first report, it felt weird figuring out how to re-engage him in the process." They continued on to say, "I guess I had also hoped that in a mentor relationship, I'd be able to talk about things other than just the project, and that's kind of where he focused. So, for me, part of this program, what I had hoped for was that there would some level of career mentorship and that just wasn't my experience. And so, I won't say I ghosted him, but we just stopped connecting after a period of time."

Lastly, three participants said that unclear expectations were a challenge to their mentor experience. One person felt that their mentor "didn't really understand what their goal was as a part of the project. I think when we first met...I don't really know what I'm doing or what I'm supposed to do. And that was after orientation, too. So, I was like, OK, I'll be honest, I don't really know what to use you for." Another person said, "I think that the mentors didn't really have training. I know [my mentor] said as much, like they didn't necessarily have as much of an understanding of what the expectation for them was."

Participants' advice for the program

Finally, an interview question asked participants to share their advice for future iterations of MLMP. A common theme in the responses was that participants would appreciate clearer definition in the goals and scope of the program (5 of 9). Another common feeling was that the background diversity of the group was beneficial and that the program should continue to involve people from different institutions and areas of expertise (3 of 9). A third piece of advice the participants had was to have more opportunities to socialize and connect with other cohort members (2 of 9). One person even suggested that the program lean into more of a "museum camp" experience. Lastly, one participant suggested that the program give the participants a small stipend for their projects.

Five people said clearer guidelines and definitions in the program's goals would help future cohorts. One participant shared, "Something I learned through chatting with people that were in different points of the program – they all had really different opinions about what the program was trying to do." Another participant acknowledged that "it did feel like a pilot program. I know they're still sort of figuring it out. So, at times it was a little aimless. You could tell they were like, what is this and what is the purpose of this." They continued, "It would have been useful to have something more like a syllabus in one document at the beginning. I think there were a few times where I was like, it would be nice if they just said, 'here's what we need from you.'" A third participant discussed how the end of the program was "confusing" in relation to the financial awards. They suggested "clear guidelines because people can be motivated based on, first of all, just having clear expectations about it. It would have been nice to know before we left."

> *"I think letting everyone know about exhibit design is cool. No matter what field you're in. They tied it all together so well."*

Three participants advised that MLMP should continue to involve people from diverse backgrounds and areas of expertise . One person said, "I think it was really, really helpful for me as an emerging museum to be part of this program. I think it changes the perspective of the group of people working in [the cohort]." A second person said, "I hope that they keep the mix of people. I think letting everyone know about exhibit design is cool. No matter what field you're in. They tied it all together so well. We met with the Pittsburgh CFO, we met with different people who have different parts in the museum. So, it all came full circle for everyone. I think it just brings it back to what we all do day in and day out, no matter what your job is. We're here for the community. We're here for the kids."

Two participants mentioned that it would be beneficial for future iterations to have more opportunities to socialize and connect with other cohort members. When discussing the in-person sessions, one participant said, "I think the maybe the days were pretty intense, and so maybe ending a little earlier during the days and then having one or two nights scheduled when we could come together as a group to gather and break bread might have been nice." A second participant "loved everything about the first week" but felt like during the second week, "it would have been really helpful if we were working on our projects...I feel like I could have gotten a lot done there and had more time to connect with other people in the cohort about what we were working on."

One final piece of advice from one participant was, "I think it would be really good to give the participants a small stipend for the project before they start. I work for a prestige institution. Money kind of exists and I, to put it blatantly – I have resources that other members of the institution do not, other members of the cohort did not. And so, even if it's $100-200 bucks on a gift card at the start, I think it would go a long way into alleviating some of that stress of the prototype creation situation."

Conclusion

This report summarizes the results of surveys and interviews with MLMP participants after the conclusion of the program's first pilot year, which took place in fall 2023 through spring 2024. Nine of the ten people who completed the program participated in the evaluation and shared a range of perspectives. Overall, people found the program to be highly impactful. They described it as a community, a challenge, and as fun, inspiring, and transformational. Participants felt the program had been effective in meeting its goals of supporting participants' networking and building their skills and confidence for leading creative innovation projects in museums. The program was especially effective at fostering a sense of community between the participants and people valued the in-person time in Pittsburgh and the ability to lead their own projects. In future years, the project may wish to consider revising the approach to mentorship and prize money and giving participants clearer guidance and expectations for the program. Ultimately, the data in this report portray very strong results of an initial pilot program that promises to have lasting and deep impacts on the museum field for years to come.
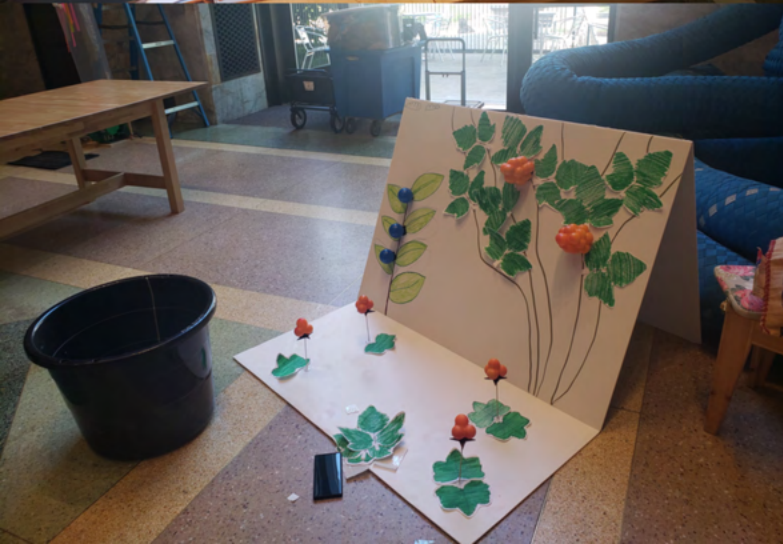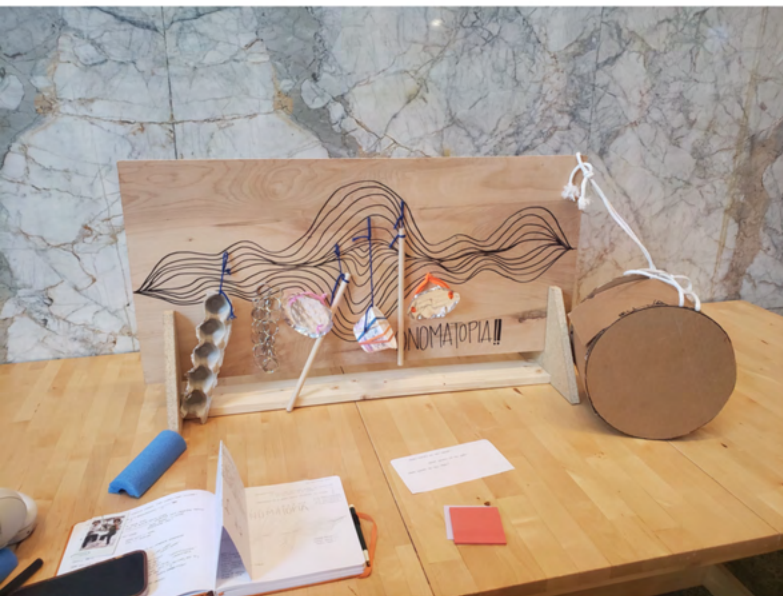
Appendix 1

Interview Questions

1. Now that you're about at the end of the program, if you could describe MLMP in three words, what words would you pick, and why?
2. What are the most memorable aspects of the program?
3. What was challenging about the program?
4. What did you find most valuable?
5. How, if at all, did this program support your capacity for leading creative innovation? Probe if not mentioned above: Did the MLMP program feel relevant to your daily work, or have the two seemed very separate?
6. How has your motivation for creative innovation changed since you started this program?
7. One of the program's goals was to support networking and a supportive community. How do you think MLMP did with respect to that goal? Probe if not mentioned above: Could you share about your experience with your mentor?
8. As you know, this year was a pilot program. What advice do you have for future iterations of the program? Probe if not mentioned above: Did the project timeline feel too short or too long to you? Probe if not mentioned above: How could the CMP team better support future participants?
9. Would you be interested in being involved in future versions of the program as an advisor, speaker, mentor, judge, or in some other capacity?
10. Is there anything else you'd like to share?

Appendix 2

Survey Questions

The following survey was collected online using the Survey Monkey platform.

Your responses to this optional, anonymous survey will help inform changes to the MLMP program in the future. We appreciate your input!

1. How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
MLMP supported my learning of new concepts and ideas.					
MLMP supported my development of new skills.					
After this program, I feel better equipped to engage in creative innovation.					
MLMP supported my motivation for creative innovation.					
MLMP supported my confidence for engaging in creative innovation.					
The MLMP program helped me feel like part of a supportive community.					
I formed valuable new connections through the MLMP project.					

2. If you would like to provide context to any of your responses above, please do so here:

3. How valuable did you find the following program aspects?

	Not at all valuable	A little bit valuable	Valuable	Very valuable
The first in-person week in Pittsburgh				
The second in-person week in Pittsburgh				
Zoom sessions				
Interactions with mentors				
InterActivity conference				
The process of leading your own project				
The ACM prize money				

4. If you would like to provide context to any of your responses above, please do so here: