

IFN 2026 Impact Study

A study on the impact of fellowship experiences and the role of programs that support leaders in driving change.



Abstract

This study brought together 23 fellowship programs to examine the strategies, structures, and learning approaches that influence leaders' ability to contribute to change at every level of society. In total, this study engaged 1,630 fellowship alumni and community partners across 141 countries through surveys, interviews, focus group discussions, and facilitated learning exchanges. Broadly, the findings from this study illustrate how fellowship experiences provide a unique value for leaders in advancing their work by bringing together a wide range of opportunities that balance the development of skills, relationships, and professional opportunities in a collaborative environment. This study also highlights the value of shared spaces for evaluators to strengthen how programs can better capture impact and learn from fellowship experiences to improve programming. In doing so, fellowship programs support the development of mission-driven communities that reinforce how leaders can contribute to change. This report is intended to inform opportunities for practitioners to strengthen fellowship experiences and communities as a force for positive social change. Written and facilitated by IREX, this study was funded by the generous support of the W.K. Kellogg Foundation.

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About the Impact Fellowships Network (IFN)

IFN brings together fellowship leaders, designers, and practitioners from across sectors and regions – united by a shared belief: that bringing people together to bridge divides, investing in opportunities for them to learn and grow, and supporting their development as leaders can change the world. At the heart of IFN's mission is a commitment to strengthening the fellowship ecosystem by facilitating innovative community events, fellowship impact research, and supportive network engagement. Learn more: <https://www.irex.org/impact-fellowships-network>.

About IREX

IREX partners with communities and institutions in the United States and around the world to cultivate leaders, create employment opportunities, and expand access to education, delivering measurable, cost-effective results. For nearly 60 years, IREX has been committed to creating value for individuals and communities through practical, enduring impact. For more information, visit www.irex.org.

About WKKF

The W.K. Kellogg Foundation (WKKF), founded in 1930 as an independent, private foundation by breakfast cereal innovator and entrepreneur Will Keith Kellogg, is among the largest philanthropic foundations in the United States. Guided by the belief that all children should have an equal opportunity to thrive, WKKF works with communities to create conditions for vulnerable children so they can realize their full potential in school, work, and life. Learn more: www.wkkf.org.

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Fellowship Programs or Organizations

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Bush Foundation

Civic Action Project

Community Solutions Program

Education Pioneers

Fulbright Teacher Exchange

German Marshall Fund

Gratitude Network

Justice Outside

Kansas State University

Library Aid Africa

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Mescripts Data and Research Center

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New Sector Alliance

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List of Acronyms

CCR – Code Co-Occurrence Rate

FANS – Fellowships Alumni Network Study

IFN – Impact Fellowships Network

IFS – Impact Fellowships Summit

MEET-Ups - Monitoring & Evaluation Exchange Talks for Understanding and Progress

MERL – Monitoring Evaluation Research and Learning

REM – Ripple Effects Mapping

UASP - University Administration Support Program

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Executive Summary

Within the fellowship sector, a core and long-held belief is that bringing people together to bridge divides, investing in opportunities for them to learn and grow, and supporting their development as leaders can have a transformational impact on their broader community and system. Programs that practice this belief and support leaders in achieving these types of outcomes are known as Impact Fellowships. The Impact Fellowships Network (IFN) serves as a key node in this global ecosystem – hosting the annual Impact Fellowships Summit (IFS) and advancing research that reflects the broad range of fellowship programs in the sector. Building on the 2023 Fellowship Alumni Network Study (FANS), in 2025, IFN launched the year-long Impact Study – funded by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation and facilitated by IREX – to examine how fellowship strategies, structures, and learning approaches shape leaders’ ability to contribute to change at every level of society.

Building off the successful engagement model with FANS, IFN adopted a similar collaborative research model to work with 23 organizations that facilitate fellowship programs. In total, this study reached 1,630 fellowship alumni and community partners from 141 countries and 19 distinct programs through 20 survey campaigns, 88 interviews, 28 focus group discussions and an 8-part discussion series.

Broadly, the findings from this study illustrates how fellowship experiences – across regions and thematic areas – provide a unique value for leaders in advancing their work by bringing together a wide range of opportunities that balance the development of skills, relationships, and professional opportunities in a collaborative environment. Access to these opportunities help leaders overcome barriers that hold them back from contributing to meaningful change. This study also highlights the value of shared spaces for evaluators to strengthen how programs can better capture impact and learn from fellowship experiences. In doing so, fellowship programs support the development of mission-driven communities - groups of people or organizations united by a shared purpose – that reinforce how leaders advance their work.

Understanding the trends: Code Co-Occurrence Rate (CCR)

Several parts of the findings highlight a concept known as “Code Co-Occurrence” – the presence of two or more qualitative categories (i.e. codes) in the same segment of data (e.g. transcript excerpts and open-ended survey responses). How codes overlap can reveal underlying connections between themes to provide a more nuanced understanding of large qualitative datasets. While there are several ways to analyze qualitative codes, this study will simply explore the Code Co-Occurrence Rate (CCR) noted as a percentage of frequency that one code is referenced within a total segment of another code (e.g. referencing **TABLE 1**, peer-learning code appears in 52% out of all excerpts coded with the individual level change code). It is important to note that the limitations of this study and CCRs presented in these findings do

not test correlation or causation of associated codes. Rather, they illustrate trends in connections between themes from non-experimental (i.e. exploratory) research methods.



How Fellowships Support Leaders in Contributing to Change

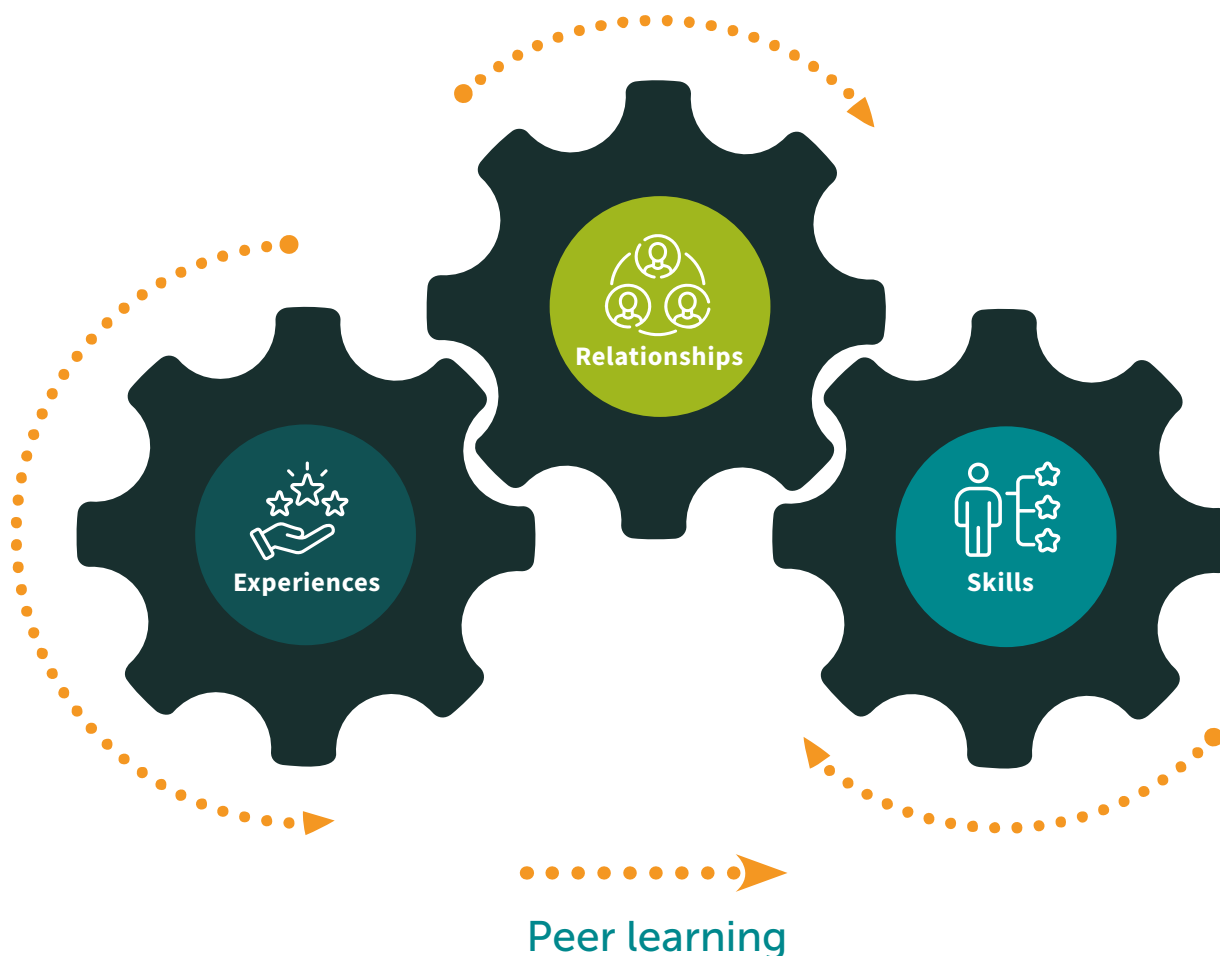
Fellowships support leaders in contributing to changes at the individual, institution, community, and system-levels of society by bringing together opportunities to develop skills, relationships, and experiences to grow personally and professionally with peers. **TABLE 1** provides a comprehensive overview of the fellowship experiences that alumni credit (whether fully or in part) in supporting them contributing to change.

TABLE 1: CCRs of fellowship experiences by level of change

Program	Individual	Institution	Community & System
Peer-learning	52%	70%	28%
Networking and relationship building	28%	39%	57%
Alumni engagement	21%	24%	41%
Professional opportunities	25%	9%	41%
Skills and knowledge development	22%	24%	28%
Leadership development	17%	6%	26%
Mentorship and coaching	11%	<5%	11%
Financial support	<5%	<5%	13%
Workshops and training	<5%	<5%	9%
Cultural exchange and dialogue	<5%	<5%	5%



While individual parts of the fellowship experience may be more valuable to certain leaders than others, interviews and focus group discussions emphasized that no single component stands out in isolation to another – highlighting that these elements are inextricably connected, making fellowships valuable and meaningful opportunities. **FIGURE 1** illustrates this point with Peer learning – the most frequently referenced and cross cutting fellowship experience – advancing each element.

FIGURE 1: Illustration of key fellowship experiences supported by peer learning

Individual & Institution-level change

Peer learning stood out in two distinct ways at the individual and institutional levels of change.

At the Individual-level – that is changes in an alumnus’s personal or professional life - peer-learning stood out in CCRs with other experiences like professional opportunities (91%), workshops and training (87%), alumni engagement (76%) and mentorship or coaching (66%) – each of which do not have significant co-

occurrence with any other fellowship experience. **This trend suggests that peer-learning within cohorts is a valuable compliment to other elements of a fellowship experience that support changes at the individual-level.** Findings from a control study conducted by Global Insight and research partner University Administration Support Program (UASP) support this trend by identifying an increase in individual outcomes based on the critical mass and number of joint activities among fellowship participants that work at the same institution (see the Partner Showcase in the individual-level change section for more details).

At the Institution-level – that is changes in organizations, government, or other entities with structured procedures and norms – peer learning stood out by its own right (i.e. CCR of 70% in **TABLE 1**) with a consistent trend of alumni valuing those opportunities to help them build reliable relationships with people growing in a similar professional network. **Alumni frequently referenced the relationships built in peer-learning environments as enablers to the mission-driven work of their organization – serving as supportive sources for knowledge, opportunities, and encouragement.** Findings from a Network Mapping activity facilitated by research partner Mountaintop International illustrates this dynamic through the fellowship journey of Esther Aiudeonu from Nigeria (see the Partner Showcase in the institution-level change section for more details).

Building on FANS – Relationships

In line with findings from FANS, 94% of alumni in this study indicated building meaning relationships during their fellowship experience – 70% of which built between 1-10 relationships (49% building 1-5; 21% building 6-10). Among all relationships built, 88% indicated their relationships included personal friendships, and 70% were multiplex – personal and professional in nature indicating a more sustainable connection over time. In the IFN 2026 Impact Study, **57% of fellowship alumni indicated building a relationship with a mentor, coach or another leader that shares their development goals.** While not exclusive to peer learning environments – distinguished by people being in the same status or role within a program – these types of relationships reflect strong knowledge sharing and growth elements.

Community & System-level change

A strong trend across the types of changes at the community and system-levels was incorporating fellowship values and experiences into how leaders approach or advance their work. In addition to the several specific fellowship experiences (highlighted in **TABLE 1**) that supported their ability to contribute

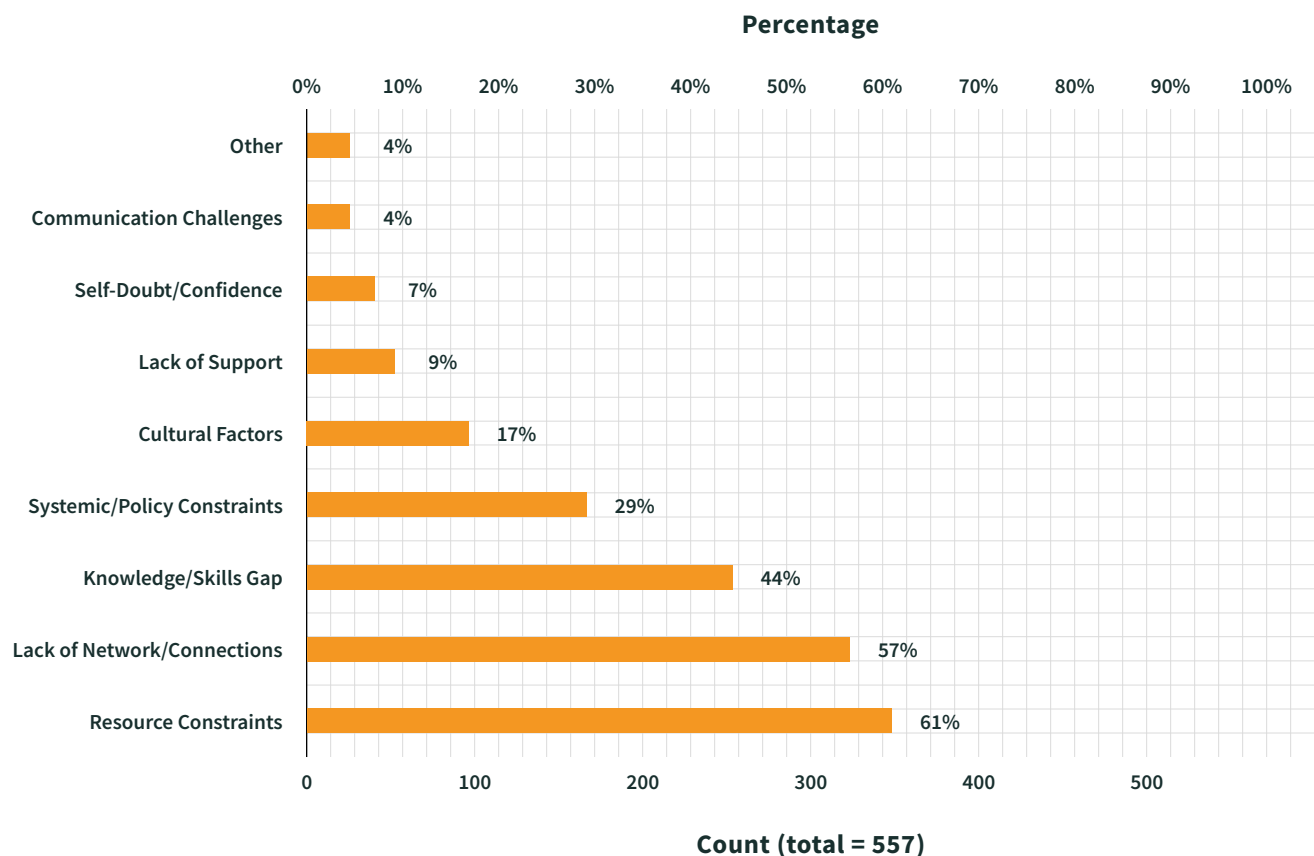


to change, **85% referenced replicating the values and these specific fellowship experiences (i.e. engagement structures and/or strategies) they felt empowered them as individuals and furthered their work.** Network and relationship building, alumni engagement, and professional opportunities stand out in CCRs for changes at the community and system-levels – frequently referencing continued inspiration from their peers and fellowship community over time as motivation for staying committed to their work. However, this larger trend suggests that even less frequently referenced experiences like mentorship and coaching, workshops and training, and cultural exchange and dialogue, can have a meaningful influence at the community and system-levels. Findings from a Ripple Effects Mapping (REM) exercise conducted by research partner New Sector Alliance support this trend and suggest that the structures and strategies embedded in their program – including cohort-based learning, structured mentorship and coaching, hands-on placements and projects, and sustained alumni engagement - not only shape what participants learn but also shape the kinds of change participants are positioned to create over time.

How Fellowships Support Leaders Addressing Barriers to Change

Barriers to change reflect elements leaders face that negatively influence the contribution to change they are seeking to make. **FIGURE 2** highlights the barriers identified with resource constraints, lack of network or connection and knowledge or skills gap standing out as the most common. Among these top categories, lack of network or connections saw consistently strong CCRs with lack of support (92%), self-doubt and confidence (89%), and a desire for an improved sense of belonging (87%). **This suggests that a lack of network or connections is often connected with more interpersonal barriers to change like support, confidence and belonging.**

FIGURE 2: Barriers to change before joining a fellowship program



Among survey respondents who indicated facing barriers to change before joining their fellowship program, **86% indicated their fellowship experience or community helped them mitigate the influence of barriers to change.** When asked how in an open-ended response, the following fellowship experiences stood out in **TABLE 2.**

TABLE 2: Fellowship experiences that mitigated barriers to change

Fellowship experience	Mitigated Barriers
Professional opportunities	70%
Networking and relationship building	67%
Knowledge and learning environments	45%
Technical skills development	44%
Cultural exchange and dialogue	41%
Leadership development	32%
Financial support	30%
Alumni Engagement	24%
Mentorship and coaching	8%

The common theme across these responses was that fellowship programs provide a space to address several barriers to change through a well-rounded, practical, and foundational experience leaders can reference as they grow professionally and personally. The top motivations for joining the fellowship – professional opportunities and networking and relationship building – match the top fellowship experiences that helped mitigate barriers to change. However, when analyzing their CCRs of each fellowship experience, professional opportunities or networking and relationship building were referenced in at least 90% of each categories total segment of responses. **This suggests that the value of improved access to professional opportunities, networking, and relationship building support other fellowship experiences in mitigating barriers.**

This study also explored motivations for joining a fellowship program, and, surprisingly, skills and knowledge development was referenced the least in survey responses to motivations for joining their fellowship program (10%). This is a striking contrast to the high rate of references to it as a barrier to change and valuable fellowship experience in mitigating barriers to change. **This suggests that, in isolation, building skills and learning opportunities are not what drives leaders to participate in fellowship programs, rather it is the desire for a broader range of opportunities.** It also strengthens the evidence in this study that suggests fellowship experiences support leaders in creating impact by bringing together opportunities to develop skills, relationships, and experiences to grow personally and professionally with peers.

Fellowship Experiences that Leaders Value

Building off the fellowship experiences identified as supporting leaders in contributions to change and mitigating barriers to change - highlighted in **TABLE 3** - this study also explored what alumni valued in the facilitation of those experiences and what they gained in the process.



TABLE 3: References of valued fellowship experiences by contribution to change and mitigating barriers to change

Valued fellowship experience	Contribution to Change	Mitigating Barriers to Change
Networking and relationship building	42%	67%
Professional opportunities	38%	70%
Skills and knowledge development	35%	45% / 44%
Peer-learning	62%	<5%
Alumni engagement	38%	24%
Leadership development	22%	32%
Financial support	10%	30%
Cultural exchange and dialogue	<5%	41%
Mentorship and coaching	11%	8%
Workshops and training	6%	<5%

Building on FANS – Valued skills & experiences

The top three experiences indicated in figure 3 align with the findings from FANS followed by peer-learning as a key element – emphasizing the value of collaborative environments in fellowship experiences. **Cohort-structured engagement and in-person programming stood out as common characteristics valued in how fellowship engagement was facilitated, receiving CCRs of 85% and 81% respectively among all references of strategies and structures.** A theme among these references is that cohorts provide a safe entry point into a new and vulnerable experience that makes it easier to build relationships and a sense of belonging through shared experiences.

Also, in line with findings from FANS, the three top career readiness skills gained from fellowship experiences – although in different order – are consistent with the top three skills referenced in FANS. This includes Communication (63%), Leadership (48%) and Career and self-development (46%). This highlights consistent areas of growth from fellowship experiences across years and populations.

How Fellowships Capture Impact

The collaborative research model of this study provided a space for the IFN team and research consortium to explore the practical challenges and opportunities of fellowship practitioners in capturing the impact and learning of their programs with leaders. In this study, the IFN team looked inward – working with and collecting feedback from partners at every stage of the research process – and looked outward – working with the Salzburg Global Seminar to facilitate a virtual series of workshops to learn from other MERL professional internationally across the fellowship sector.

Looking inward – IFN Consortium

Similar to fellowship experiences, many partners expressed value for the community and collaborative research process which provided an opportunity to learn from other practitioners – not just about advanced or creative methods of data collection, but also the distinct practical challenges in implementing certain activities. The mid-point survey among partners indicated 63% having an increased ability to develop monitoring, evaluation, research, and learning (MERL) resources for their programs – noting being in community while conducting their data collection activities as something they valued.

Looking outward - Salzburg Global

To explore challenges outside of the consortium, the Salzburg Global Seminar launched a community of practice for MERL professionals by implementing an 8-part workshop series of fellowship MEET-UPS (Monitoring & Evaluation Exchange Talks for Understanding and Progress). During these workshops practitioners came together to identify and explore the following challenges and opportunities:

- Open engagement & networked accountability
- Measuring intangible & long-term impact
- From evidence to influence
- Building a learning culture & internal buy-in to explore alumni impact





Next Steps and Considerations

These findings leave us with practical questions to consider in the design and management of fellowship programs to improve the impact and value for leaders:

- *How can we leverage peer learning as a resource to enhance other elements of the fellowship experience — like relationship building, professional opportunities, and developing skills?*
- *How can we improve access to fellowship experiences that mitigate barriers to change – like resource constraints, lack of network/connection and knowledge and skills gaps?*
- *How are we modeling our values in fellowship experiences to empower leaders and support their contributions to change?*



At the same time, more research is needed to capture the influence of fellowship experiences to support practitioners in identifying improvements. This study was exploratory in nature by using non-experimental methods of research – underscoring the importance of building from and testing these findings to improve our understanding and approach to fellowship programming. IFN is committed to accelerate innovation in the fellowship sector by bringing research, community, and action together. The collaborative research model that made this study possible is itself a reflection of the commitment across the sector to learn and grow together – sharing what works, discussing what does not, and exploring approaches that advance the field. The IFN team looks forward to continuing this work with the fellowship community and encourages all leaders and practitioners in the impact fellowships sector to engage with these findings, share their own experiences, and contribute to the growing body of knowledge that strengthens fellowships as a force for positive social change.





Introduction and Background

For decades, fellowship programs have served as a critical lever for institutions seeking to develop leaders. Across academic, professional, and community settings, organizations of all sizes in the United States and worldwide invest in fellows, anticipating that these individuals will go on to influence and enhance their fields, institutions, communities, and broader systems. Within the fellowship sector, a core and long-held belief is that bringing people together to bridge divides, investing in opportunities for them to learn and grow, and supporting their development as leaders can have a transformational impact on their broader community and system – for example: starting and scaling a new organization to address an emerging issue, running for office to drive policy improvements, strengthening citizen engagement to hold governments accountable, or providing opportunities for the next generation of leaders to be successful. Programs that practice this belief and support leaders in achieving these types of outcomes are known as *Impact Fellowships*. The Impact Fellowships Network (IFN) is a key node in this global ecosystem – accelerating innovation and providing a trusted space for fellowship practitioners to learn, share, and grow.

Each impact fellowship program has their supporters and an inherent belief in the value they bring to the individuals, institutions, communities, and systems they impact; however, fellowship experiences can be expensive to facilitate and difficult to scale in a rapidly changing world. Despite this, fellowship practitioners continue to grow and evolve, bolstered by a robust community of support that understands their value but often has difficulty capturing the ripple effects of their impact beyond the participants as individuals. More research is needed to better understand and articulate the essential role of fellowships and fellowship communities in creating systemic impact.

While impact fellowship programs have broad thematic focus areas, target participant groups, and geographic scopes, they also have certain unifying features, challenges, and best practices. Since 2016, the annual Impact Fellowships Summit (IFS) has worked to foster a dynamic and collaborative community of fellowship practitioners that build fieldwide understanding of what makes fellowship programs thrive. IFS started as an engaging learning and sharing space for individuals who work on social impact programs, and, over the years, participants have consistently articulated two key needs:

- **Shared learning in community/convenings, and**
- **Further research that pulls in and benefits from the extraordinary range of impact fellowship facilitators and participants.**

This has evolved into a community that is engaged beyond IFS itself, facilitating continuous learning opportunities, fieldwide research, and collective action that elevates the impact of fellowships. This overlap of community, research, and action drove the development of the Fellowship Alumni Network Study (FANS) – a first of its kind collaborative research initiative that was shaped and driven by the IFN community.



The Fellowships Alumni Network Study (FANS)

Published in 2023, FANS explored the changes that fellowship alumni make in their work, activities that contribute to those changes, and the role that networks play in the process. To conduct FANS, a consortium of partner organizations designed and launched surveys, interviews, and focus group discussions that reached 17 distinct fellowship networks and engaged over 1,000 alumni from 102 countries. Broadly, this study highlighted the type of impact fellowship networks can have on alumni and the characteristics of a network that alumni value in improving their work. Key findings from FANS included the following:

- Changes were identified at every level of society (i.e. individual, institution, community, and system), and advanced levels (i.e. community and system) commonly referenced **sustained relationships** as a factor in that change
- **Personal friendships** are an essential part of sustained engagement in a fellowship network – providing a trusted source of connection as lives and careers change over time
- Alumni engage in a fellowship network for **3 key reasons** – to build relationships, share knowledge and experiences, and access new professional opportunities



Importantly, the findings from FANS were actively shared and discussed with the IFN community, serving as the centerpiece resource for IFS 2023 as well as in-person and virtual activities over the next two years – an example of how IFN accelerates innovation in the sector by bringing research, community, and action together. The key considerations FANS helped advance within the fellowship sector include the following:

- How can fellowship programs build or strengthen relationships between alumni and provide space to develop friendships?
- How can fellowship programs elevate alumni experiences to support sharing and learning from one another?
- How can fellowship programs improve alumni access to professional development opportunities?



Building on FANS

While the findings from FANS have provided valuable insights across the fellowship sector to strengthen networks and alumni programming, the exclusive focus on alumni engagement left questions about the influence of the broader fellowship experience and the practical challenges practitioners face in capturing that influence. To address this gap, IFN launched an ambitious year-long collaborative research initiative in January 2025 called the *IFN Impact Study*. Funded by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation and facilitated by IREX, the IFN Impact Study applied a similar collaborative research model to FANS by bringing together over 20 partners to form a research consortium. This consortium built on the insights from FANS in 2 important ways.



First, the consortium **expanded the scope of two topic areas** explored in FANS to capture the influence of a broader range of fellowship experiences. These topics included the following:

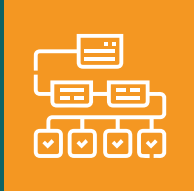
- How fellowships support leaders in contributing to change
- Fellowship experiences that leaders value

Second, the consortium **added two new topics** that were not explored in FANS to capture the practical challenges fellowship participants and practitioners face – and how to mitigate those challenges.

- How fellowships support leaders in addressing barriers to change
- How fellowships capture impact

Throughout this report, the IFN team will describe how this study builds on the FANS experience and findings. By exploring these four topics, the IFN team and the research consortium hope to gain a more nuanced understanding of fellowship impact can continue to move the needle in how fellowship programs across the sector support leaders in driving change.





Methodology

Collaboration is at the heart of IFN's approach to research and learning. Over 10 years of engagement with the IFN community, common challenges have emerged: managing long-term engagement within limited timelines, balancing staff capacity across diverse activities, and providing responsive participant support in changing environments. These challenges highlight the value of collaborative research, where organizations or communities unite around a shared goal. Through collaborative research, partners gain the benefit of exploring the ripple effects of their own programs while referencing similarities with others to inform practical improvements. What distinguishes collaborative research from traditional research driven by an individual organization or community is the advancement of three key activities:

- Developing a shared mission
- Convening broad expertise
- Building sustainable partnerships

Building off the successful engagement model with FANS, IFN adopted a similar collaborative research model. This model prioritizes developing activities and resources that are relevant, responsive, and replicable for program practitioners. These three “Rs” shape how the IFN research team at IREX (which will be noted simply as “the IFN team” moving forward) facilitated each activity within this model for this study – recognizing the common interests and priorities within the consortium while being flexible to the distinct environments each partner navigates. In doing so, this collaborative research model serves a dual purpose: generating valuable knowledge about fellowship impact and building the capacity and cohesion of the partners engaging with the research.

The following sections provide details on how the IFN team executed this methodology. This includes how the consortium was recruited and engaged with the IFN team across activities; the data collection design and framework that was applied to the study; the analysis process used by the IFN team; key limitations identified from this process; and the representation of fellowship alumni, donors and partners that contributed to this study.

Consortium Recruitment & Selection

To ensure thoughtful collaboration, IREX approached the consortium recruitment and engagement process with the understanding that members have a broad range of needs and limitations that influence how they can contribute to activities. One key consideration was that fellowship programs often operate on a recurring cohort cycle – whether annually or multiple times a year – with peak periods of engagement that make certain times of the year challenging for teams to coordinate or contribute to research activities. This required transparency from the IFN team on the engagement process and flexibility in how consortium members can contribute to activities. Another key consideration was

that most fellowship programs do not have designated research personnel on their teams or the space to proactively evaluate their alumni network. This required clear discussion framework and timeline of the process and how they can contribute, resources to reference as they shared information with their team, and direct support from the IFN team to ensure that all consortium members were able to meaningfully contribute to the study. With these considerations in mind, IFN promoted the opportunity to join this consortium to fellowship programs that met the following eligibility criteria:

- Manage a currently active fellowship program
- Have a mission that includes creating positive social change
- Have at least 3 years of implementation experience for respective fellowship program(s)
- Willing and available to commit to a 1-year period of engagement starting May 2025

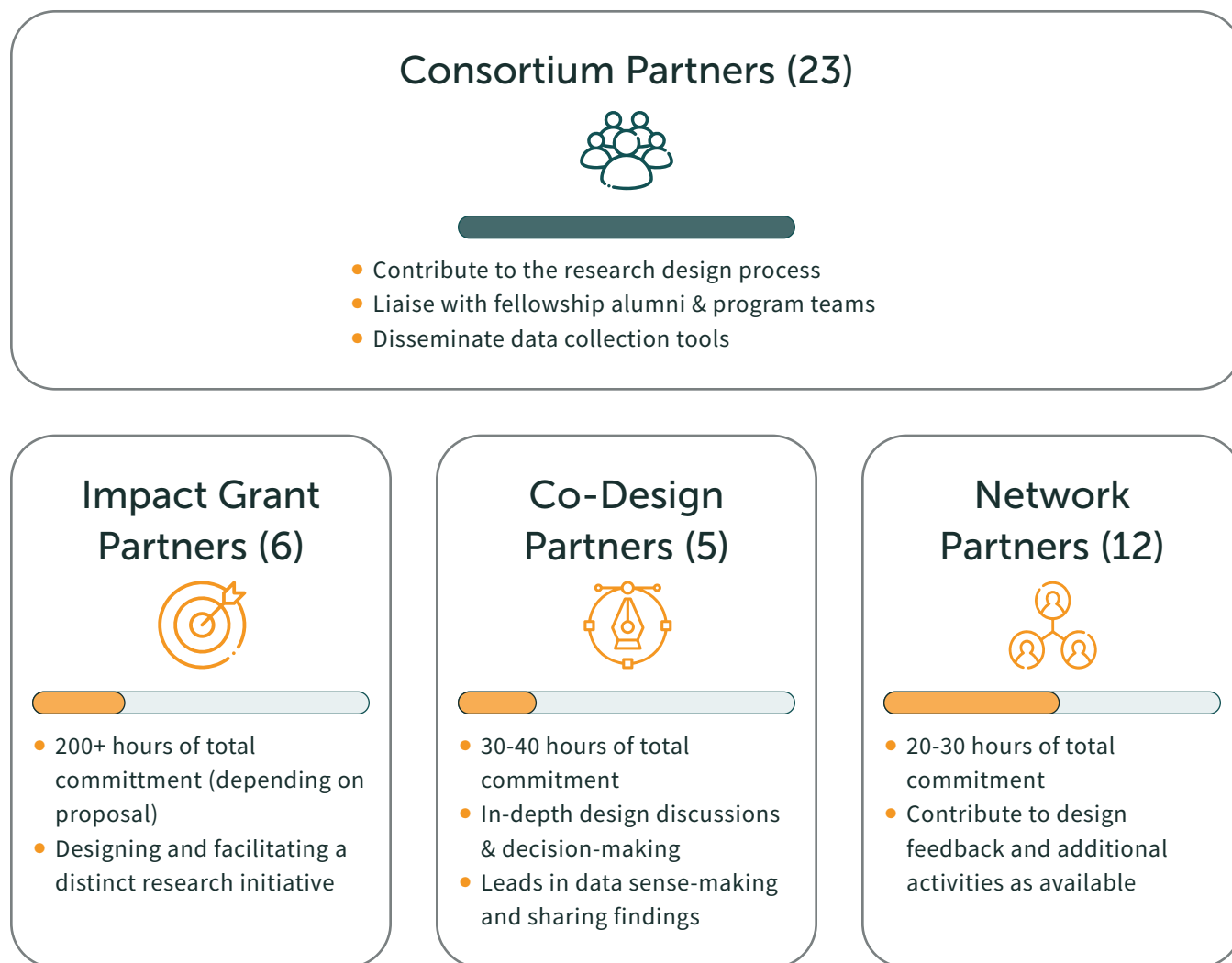


In addition to the above criteria, applicants were offered three options to apply for based on their availability and interest over the research period. **FIGURE 3** illustrates the engagement expectations of these options – the standard engagement option being the Network Partner, and the more involved options being the Co-design Partner and Impact Grant partners. All partners contributed their experiences and feedback to each consortium activities and engaged with their network to support this study; however, Co-Design Partners volunteered additional time to support shaping the focus of discussions and activities with the IFN team, and

Impact Grant partners received up to \$15,000 (USD) to explore distinct topics and/or research approaches that would not be possible to facilitate across the broader consortium. In appreciation for their commitments, Network and Co-design partners were offered a \$1,000 and \$1,500 honorarium (per organization). In total, the IFN team selected 23 fellowship program teams from 19 distinct organizations from the IFN community that reflect the wide range of donors, implementers, and educational institutions that facilitate impact fellowships.



At-large consortium selection criteria	Impact Grant selection criteria
• Contribution to the research agenda • Centering belonging and community engagement • Representation and perspective • Capacity and commitment	• Research relevance & potential for contribution • Community-building approach • Unique perspectives & practices • Feasibility & capacity

FIGURE 3: Consortium engagement tracks and commitments

Consortium Engagement

The IFN team engaged consortium partners through a series of 8 convenings, 3 training workshops and one-on-one consultations. Together, these spaces supported consortium partners in contributing to and shaping every phase of the research to achieve the following:

- Guided activities to develop a research design & resource that reflects the broad interests and perspective within the fellowship sector
- Support and facilitate research that reaches a broad community of contributors across the global fellowship ecosystem (i.e. participants, donors, partners)
- Build a sustainable knowledge-sharing community that can turn insights into action and invest in continuous learning

Most convenings were open to the full consortium (i.e., Impact Grant, Co-Design, and Network Partners), but some were exclusive to Co-Design Partners in the Research Design phase. During the Data Collection phase, the IFN team also conducted one-on-one consultations with each partner as needed to provide direct support and guidance, inform technical workshop topics based on common needs/interests, and monitor progress of all research initiatives. The details below highlight the various phases of the IFN Impact Study.

Phase of engagement	Details & objectives
Research Design May - July, 2025	Consortium partners convened 5 times to inform the design framework and implementation process of the study. The discussions facilitated and outcomes achieved in this phase included the following: • Aligning the research questions with our collective work • Identifying the “who”, “what”, and “how” to explore • Mapping practical challenges against our research design • Developing data collection templates for partners to adapt and disseminate to their fellowship communities
Data Collection July, 2025 – February, 2026	Consortium partners engaged in one-on-one consultations with the IFN team as needed to inform adaptation and dissemination of data collection tools to their fellowship communities. Consultations also served as a resource for the IFN team to identify research training needs or interests and support the capacity development of partners across the consortium. The IFN accomplished this by building off a series of self-paced learning resources designed during the FANS research that covered topics like avoiding bias, collecting and cleaning data to host 3training workshops on different research methods – interview and focus group facilitation, Social Network Analysis (SNA) and arts-based, creative methods. Towards the end of this phase the consortium convened 1 time to reflect on the data collection process, share lessons learned and identify areas for continued growth.
Data Analysis & Sense-Making January – March, 2026	Consortium partners convened 2 times to provide feedback to the IFN team on the analysis process and draft reports findings. This phase concluded with lessons learned from the consortium about the research process and practical considerations for fellowship organizations to consider.
Promotion & community engagement April, 2026 and beyond	Following the publication of the study, IFN and consortium partners will promote findings in their networks and professional spaces (notably IFS 2026 where it will serve as a central piece of content shared with attendees) to encourage continued learning, discussion and improvements among fellowship funders and implementers to support leaders in driving change at every level of society.

Despite the modest financial support, consortium partners went above and beyond in volunteering their time to advance this study. The time to contribute to discussions and facilitate data collection activities with their respective fellowship communities is a major commitment, and it was important for the IFN team to ensure partner engagement was not burdensome to their existing program commitments. The IFN team worked closely with each partner throughout the design and data collection periods to ensure an open line of communication and support. This flexibility was important to facilitate meaningful research that did not conflict with their existing program commitments and priorities. For most, this included consultations on adapting and launching their data collection tools and sharing standard training resources for their teams. However, in some cases, modest stipends were provided for program teams to facilitate in-person data collection for communities that had limited access to the internet. This was particularly important to ensure each partner had what they needed to fully participate in the study. Further, any data collection activities facilitated directly by the IFN team with partner communities (i.e. focus group discussions) provided participants with a modest honorarium for their contributions. This continuous communication and flexible support provided a mutually beneficial experience for consortium partners that could justify the time their program teams and communities contributed to the study.

Leveraging Artificial Intelligence (AI)

Over the course of this study, the IFN team has recognized a dramatic improvement in the security and quality of many AI tools and have thoughtfully integrated two specific tools into certain workflows. These tools included **Kolab AI** which supported virtual convenings and enterprise-level **Microsoft Co-pilot** which supported data management and cleaning processes of documents stored in IREX's secure SharePoint server. The integration of each of these tools came after specific workflows had already been finalized by the IFN team and manual processing was already underway. **FIGURE 4** illustrates this process, with AI integration complimenting the established manual processing tasks. Integrating AI at this stage of a workflow ensured that the IFN team had a clear technical process established that could **validate AI outputs** to ensure they align with manual processing expectations. Importantly, this allowed the IFN team to be AI-responsive rather than AI-forward in their integration – investing in tools that work within an established process rather than adapting the process to streamline workflows.¹

FIGURE 4: AI integration into IFN workflows



1. Recognizing the environmental impact of AI usage, the IFN was thoughtful about the models applied in workflows and the associated task's burden on token usage (e.g. avoiding generating visuals or continuous tasks). This is an area the IFN team is committed to learn more about and respond to accordingly within the parameters of IREX's AI policy.



It is important to note that, per IREX's internal AI policy, moderate² and high-risk³ data were shared exclusively within the secure Microsoft Co-Pilot environment. Personally identifiable information (PII – i.e. participant demographic and contact details) had 2 levels of guardrails from being incorporated into AI integration. First, in line with the IFN data management policy, consortium partners reserved the right to withhold any PII from data shared with the IFN team through IREX's secure SharePoint site. Second, the IFN team developed model instructions for Co-Pilot accounts that restricted the review and analysis of PII – defined as names, contact details and demographic information. The following are the workflows the IFN team incorporated AI in to support manual processing.

IFN workflows with AI integration

- Consortium convenings & training workshops:** The IFN team used a virtual meeting platform called [Kolab](#) for 11 convenings and training workshops with the research consortium. Kolab AI was explored in the last half of those sessions to draft activities, agenda structures and session summaries based on established facilitation norms and structures. Microsoft Co-pilot (GPT-4; GPT-5.2) was also leveraged to translate screenshot images of session contributions into a structured document for team reflection & learning.
- Grant management:** The IFN team distributed 6 grants with Impact Grant partners to conduct research initiatives associated with this study. Microsoft Co-pilot (GPT-4) was used to draft grant agreements based on IREX compliance requirements, partner applications and team feedback from the review and selection process.
- Data cleaning & management:** The IFN team used Co-pilot (Claude Opus 4.5) to support cleaning steps of interview and focus group transcripts to improve their review format in [Dedoose](#) – a non-AI powered digital platform for mixed method research. Co-pilot was also used to develop excel formulas and dashboards that supported the cleaning of anonymized survey responses and transcripts; however, all categorization and qualitative coding remained a manual review process across all data sources.
- Content development:** The development of AI in this report was restricted to copy-editing support throughout the draft development process using Co-pilot (Claude Opus 4.5). Following the finalization of the report, the IFN team used the same model to develop initial drafts of summary documents for consortium discussions and presentation material.

2. Illustrated as partner communication, research or analysis outputs, policy or strategy drafts.

3. Illustrated as PII, financial details, and other program-sensitive data.

Data collection design & approach

The following research questions and learning objectives guided the co-design and development of 6 data collection instruments. These instruments included a survey, interview and focus group template for alumni and community partners (i.e. hosts, mentors, funder, or other partners in a fellowship community). While research questions were established before the

consortium was selected, consortium members directly informed the learning objectives through the research design phase convenings. The co-design process of the learning objectives ensured that the data collected was relevant to the priorities of consortium members, and the tools were replicable to their unique fellowship community.

Research Question #1:

To what extent do strategies facilitated by fellowship programs support alumni in contributing to changes at different levels of society (i.e. individual, institutional, community, systems)?

- What barriers to change do alumni mitigate by participating in a fellowship network?

Research Question #2:

How does the design of fellowship programs influence administrators' ability to effectively support alumni in contributing to changes at different levels of society?

- What organizational structures are effective in providing ongoing support to alumni?
- What strategies within fellowship programs are effective in responding to the distinct perspectives of alumni?

Research Question #3 (Cross-cutting):

What are effective resources and approaches to evaluate the impact of fellowship programs in supporting alumni contributions to change?

- How do fellowship programs leverage evaluation efforts to inform learning and improvements?
- What barriers do fellowship programs face in facilitating evaluation efforts with their alumni networks?

By exploring each of these research questions over multiple convenings, the consortium identified the following learning objectives that guided the design of the data collection tools.

Learning Objectives

- Understand what motivates fellows to pursue change in their environments
- Identify the barriers fellows face in creating change and the role of fellowships in helping them mitigate or overcome those barriers
- Understand how fellowship strategies and structures empower leaders
- Identify fellowship strategies and structures that support engagement and opportunities to pursue change
- Understand challenges and opportunities administrators face in capturing the impact of fellowship experiences

While all partners were invited to facilitate data collection with each tool, they were only required to conduct either the survey or interviews. Separately, however, the IFN facilitated focus group discussions with participants across different fellowship programs represented in the consortium. To meaningfully explore potential distinctions between alumni based on the time since their initial fellowship, IREX separated focus group participants between alumni who joined their fellowship network before 2018 and those who have joined since 2018.

Key Limitations

- The data collected for this study is limited to the perceptions of fellowship alumni and community partners shared through surveys, interviews, and focus group discussions. Response bias – particularly social desirability bias for questions that explore accomplishments – likely exist, and respondents' perceptions may not consider additional factors that influenced their experience. The IFN team aimed to mitigate this limitation with the scale and mixed-method approach of the data collection process.

- Each partner had discretion on how they disseminated their data collection tools and non-probability sampling methods were used across all programs that contributed data to this study. Most partners applied convenience sampling while some partners applied purposive sampling. In either case, non-probability sampling cannot test a hypothesis or infer causation. Rather, it is limited to exploratory use to understand under-researched populations – the common purpose of this study.
- Due to limited access to demographic details in the data collection and sharing process, disaggregation by common factors like gender identity, region, age, and more were not conducted across questions and interview/focus group discussions. Therefore, it is possible that certain responses may be skewed in overall representation. Additionally, except for nationality, gender identity, and fellowship year, the IFN team did not collect enough demographic details in other categories to capture the overall demographic representation of the study.

Study participants and representation

From July 2025 to February 2026, IFN consortium partners facilitated 20 survey campaigns, 88 interviews, 28 focus group discussions and an 8-part discussion series. In total, these activities collected feedback from 1,630 fellowship alumni and community partners (1,326 being alumni) from 141 countries and 19 distinct programs. The following is a breakdown of each of the key demographic details collected from participants that inform the reach and representation of the subsequent findings.

TABLE 4: Total participants & community partners by program breakdown

Fellowship Organization	Alumni/Fellows	Community Partners
Civic Action Project	48	
Community Solutions Program	119	
Education Pioneers	36	
Fulbright Teacher Exchange	15	
German Marshall Fund	123	
Gratitude Network	69	
Justice Outside	41	
Kansas State University	49	
Library Aid Africa	61	8
Mescripts Data and Research	63	11
Mountaintop International	38	128
New Sector Alliance	60	5
Rotary Peace Fellowship	426	4
Salzburg Global		32
Stoneleigh Foundation	5	
United Nations Association of the National Capital Area	14	
University Administration Support Program	148	21
W.K. Kellogg Foundation	11	
Young Leaders of the America Initiative		95

FIGURES 5 AND 6 highlight the representation of fellowship alumni who contributed to the study by gender identity and region. Broadly, the majority of fellowship alumni who contributed to this in this study identify as female (56%), and a plurality of are from countries in Sub-Saharan Africa (40%). However, the country with the largest representation is the United States, making up 26% of all fellowship alumni in this study.

FIGURE 5: Total fellowship alumni by gender identity

Total Fellows/Alumni by Gender Identity

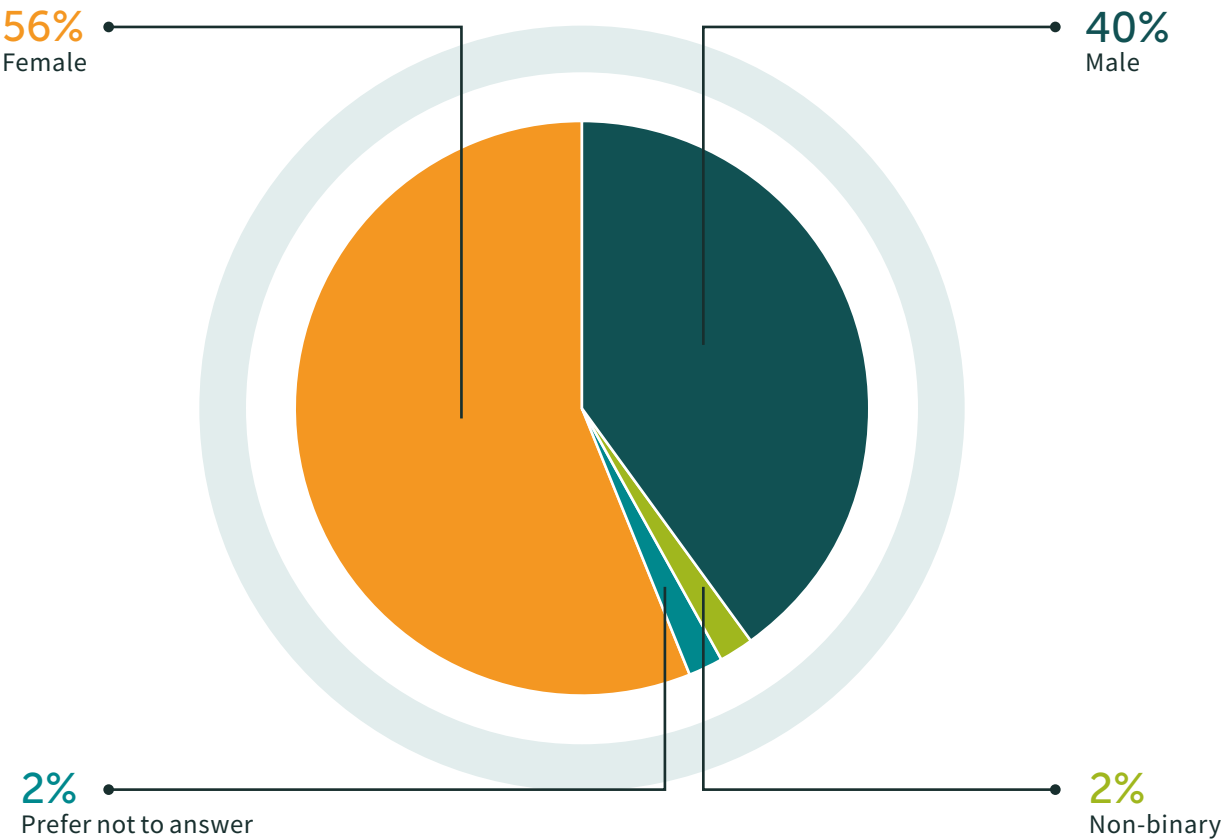
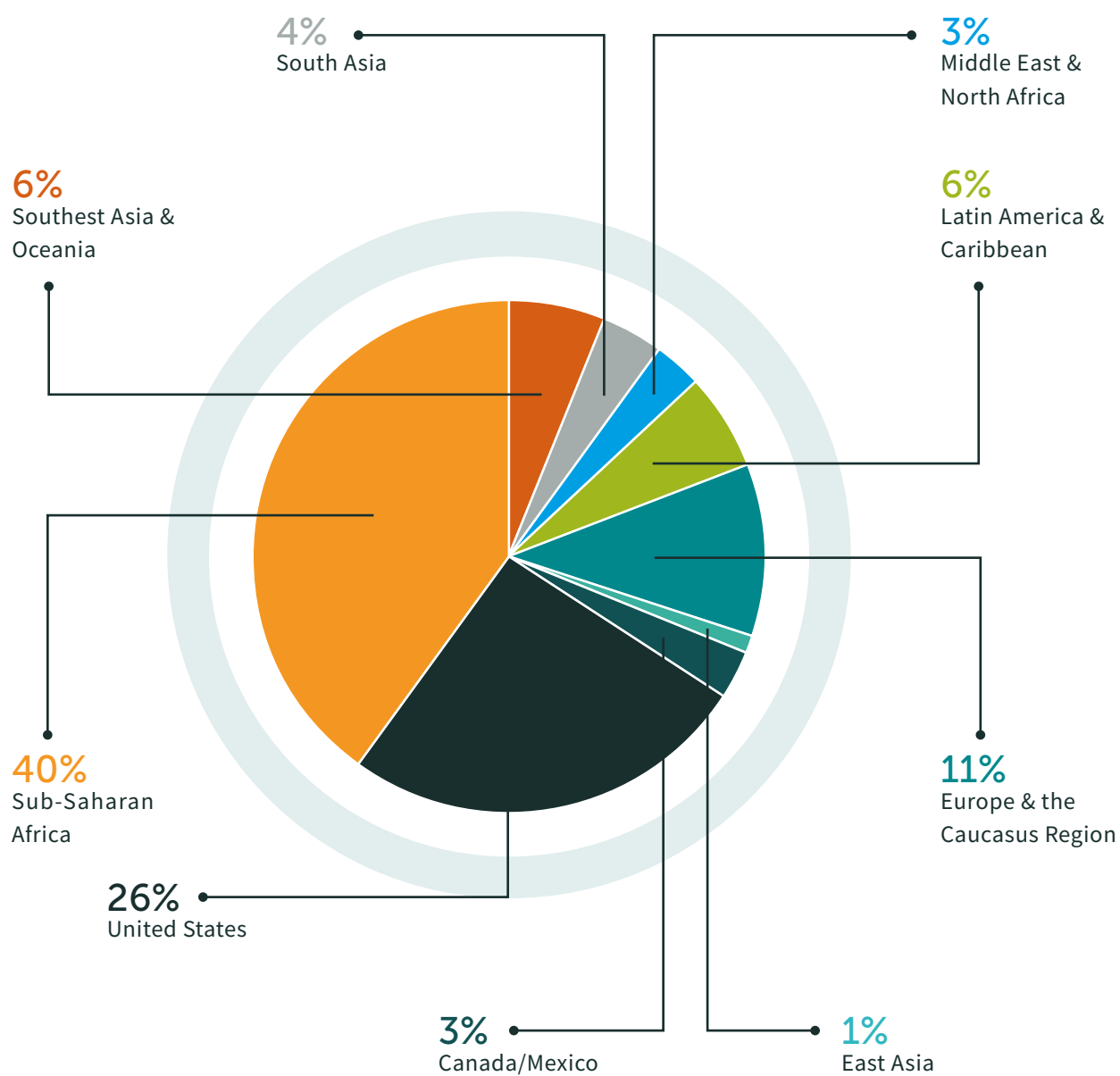


FIGURE 6: Total fellowship alumni by region

Total Fellows/Alumni by Region





Findings

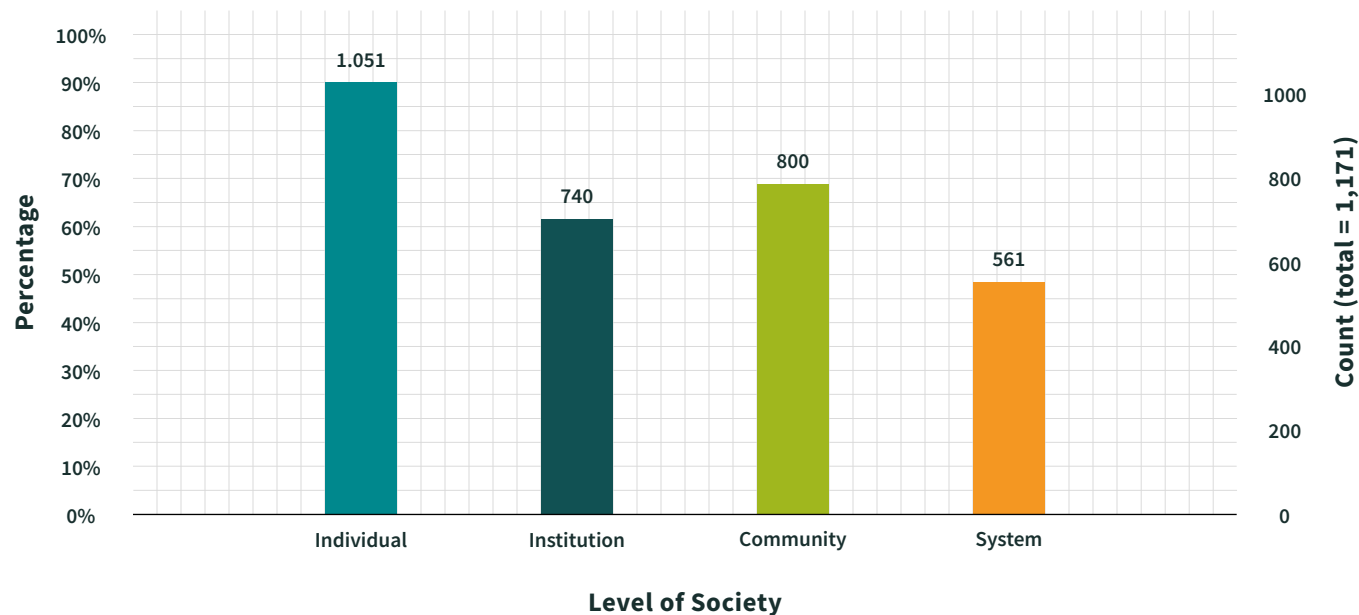
How Fellowships Support Leaders in Contributing to Change

This study explored the contributions to change leaders make at every level of society which they credit (whether fully or in part) to their experience or connection to a fellowship program. The levels of society explored in this study mirror the categories applied to FANS and include the following:

- Individual-level – changes in personal or professional lives
- Institution-level – changes within organizations, governments, or other entities with structured processes and norms
- Community-level – changes that influence groups of people within a larger society
- System-level – changes to underlying influences that shape how larger networks of individuals, groups and institutions across a society function

Contributions to changes were captured in every data collection tool disseminated in this study with **91% of alumni (1,171)** sharing some experience that aligns with one or more of the above definitions. Since changes can be interconnected, participants may have identified contributions across multiple levels. **FIGURE 7** highlights the frequency of those references captured in surveys, interviews, and focus group discussions.

FIGURE 7: Fellowship alumni contributions to change by level of society

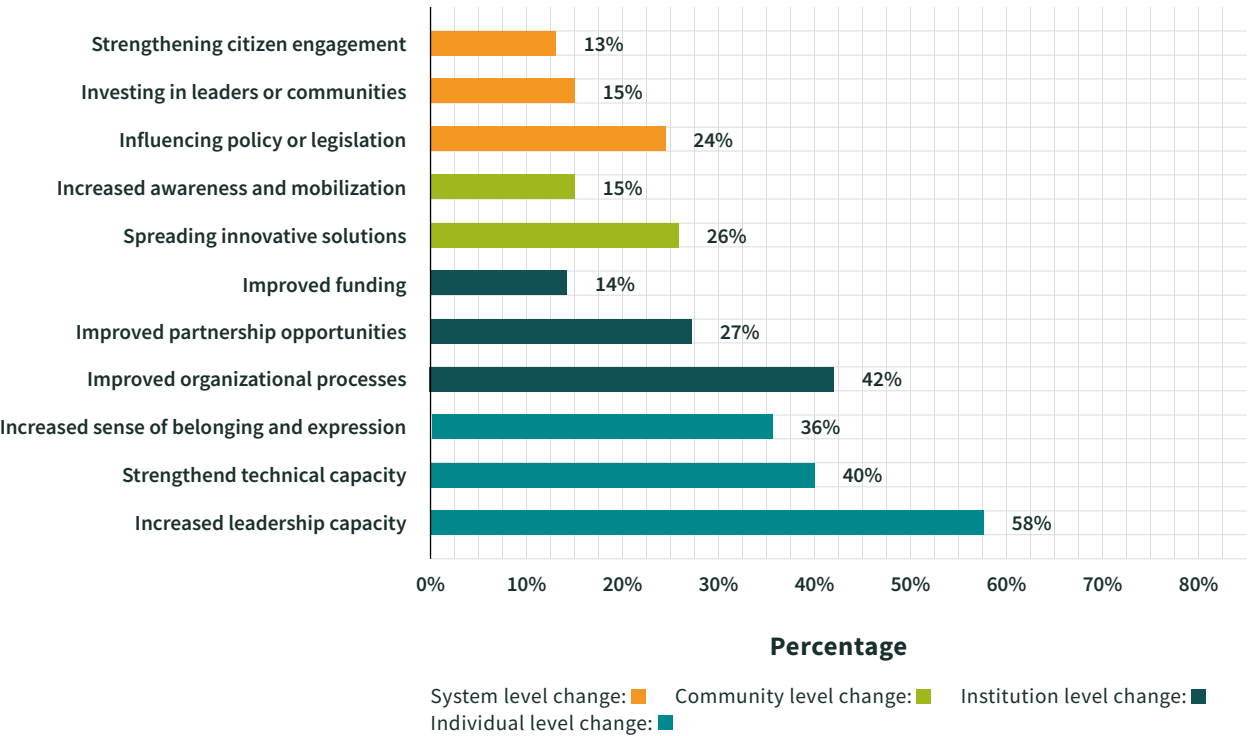


Building on FANS

The rates indicated in **FIGURE 7** are in line with what was identified in FANS, with a high number of changes referenced at the individual level, comparable representation between the institution and community levels, and a lower representation at the system level. However, this study expanded our understanding of the types of change being accomplished and the specific fellowship experiences that supported those changes at each level. This was done by creating and using sub-codes under each level of change based on the initial contribution to change findings in FANS (e.g. Strengthening citizen engagement emerged in FANS and created as a sub-code under System-level change) as a basis to analyze the data while still allowing trends to emerge (reference Annex: Qualitative code directory for full codebook). Notably, increased technical capacity, improved sense of belonging, spreading innovative solutions, and improved organizational processes are types

of changes identified in this study that were not captured in FANS. Additionally, while changes at the community and systems-levels are distinct accomplishments, the experience from FANS suggested some common trends and considerations in evaluating these more advanced levels of society. First, changes at the community-level often have influence within a system that is not realized in self-reported assessments. And second, community and system-level changes often share common underlying contributing factors from fellowship experiences – this was validated during the initial review process. For these reasons, the IFN team analyzed the types of change at the community and system levels independently but the fellowship experiences that contributed to those changes together. **FIGURES 7 AND 8** highlight the frequency of these references based on surveys, interviews, and focus groups.⁴

FIGURE 8: Contributions to change by type & level



4. Fellowship experience captured in figure 8 only referenced interviews and focus group discussions.

Code Co-Occurrence Rate (CCR)

Table 1 provides the first example in this report of a concept known as “Code Co-Occurrence” – that is the presence of two or more qualitative categories (i.e. codes) in the same segment of data (e.g. transcript excerpts and open-ended survey responses). How codes overlap can reveal underlying connections between themes to provide a more nuanced understanding of large qualitative datasets. While there are several ways to analyze code co-occurrence, this study will simply explore the Code Co-Occurrence Rate (CCR) noted as a percentage of frequency one code is referenced within a total segment of another code.

Using table 1 as an example, peer-learning has a CCR of 70% among contributions to change at the institution-level – meaning 70% of all references of institution-

level change also include a reference to peer-learning as a valued fellowship experience that contributed to the change. The rest of table 1 provides CCR for each Fellowship experience against the whole segment of contributions to change at each level of society.

It is important to note that the limitations of this study and CCRs presented in these findings do not test correlation or causation of associated codes. Rather, they illustrate trends in connections between themes from non-experimental (i.e. exploratory) research methods.⁵

TABLE 1: CCRs of fellowship experiences by level of change.

Program	Individual	Institution	Community & System
Peer-learning	52%	70%	28%
Networking and relationship building	28%	39%	57%
Alumni engagement	21%	24%	41%
Professional opportunities	25%	9%	41%
Skills and knowledge development	22%	24%	28%
Leadership development	17%	6%	26%
Mentorship and coaching	11%	<5%	11%
Financial support	<5%	<5%	13%
Workshops and training	<5%	<5%	9%
Cultural exchange and dialogue	<5%	<5%	5%

5. Definitions for each fellowship experience are included in Annex: Qualitative code directory

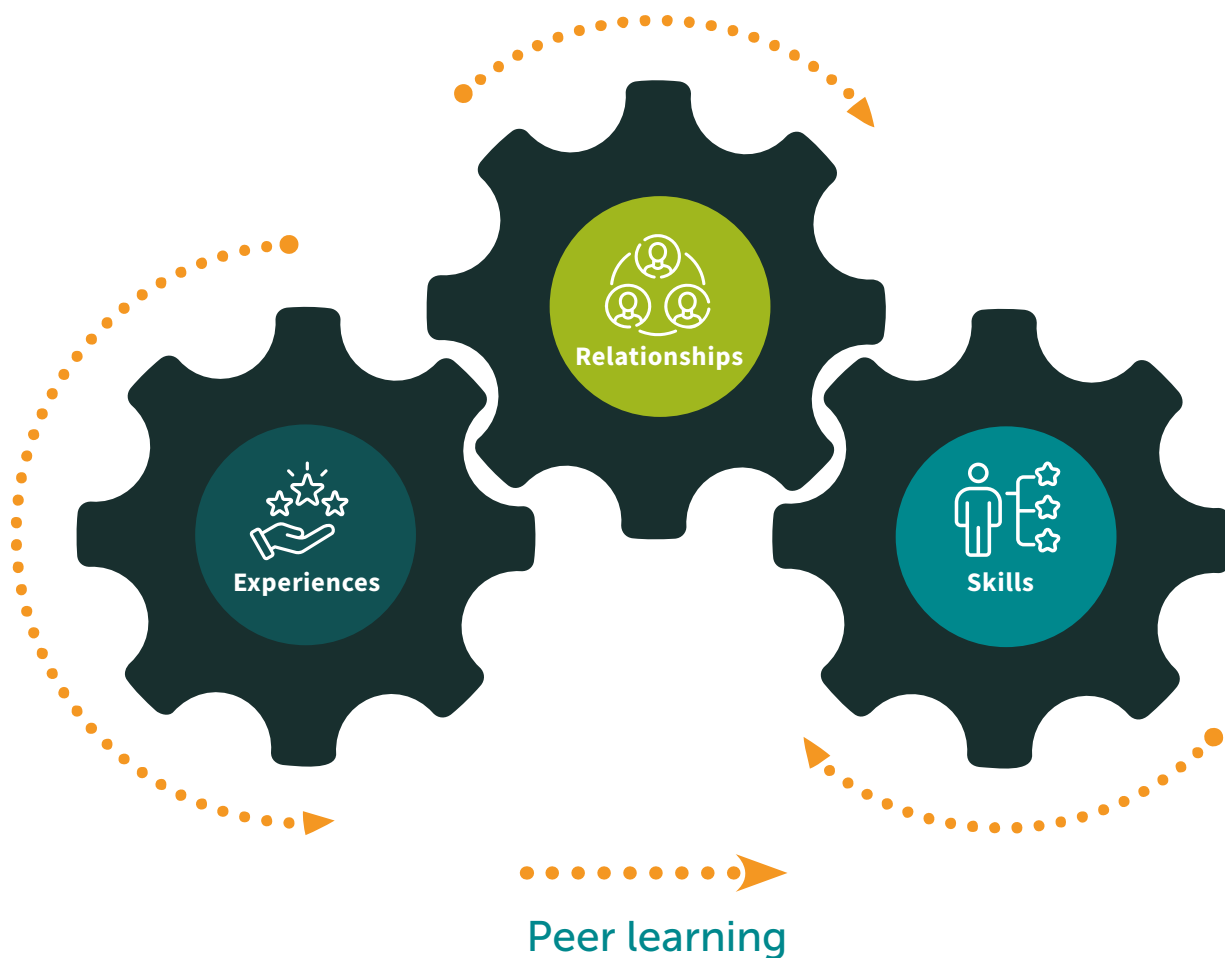
Key findings

The details shared across these figures highlight a broad scope of experiences and influence fellowship programs have on leaders contributing to change. However, there are some key insights we can gather that are valuable to keep in mind.



- 58% of fellowship alumni indicated an increase in their leadership capacity, yet leadership development experiences (or any other individual experience) did not stand out as something that was frequently referenced in supporting that type of change. This suggests that many alumni gain increased leadership capacity through other experiences or opportunities from their fellowship program.
- Peer-learning, networking and relationship building, alumni engagement, and professional opportunities stand out as the most frequently referenced fellowship experiences that supported contribution to change; however, their frequency varies dramatically between levels of society. In contrast, skills and knowledge development are consistently referenced at approximately 25% across each level. This suggests that skills and knowledge development experiences may have a similar influence supporting change at every level of society, while other fellowship experiences may contribute more strongly at specific levels.

The following sections provide a deeper review, synthesis, and illustrative examples of the types of change and fellowship experiences that support change at each level of society. Overall, the findings in this section suggest that fellowships support leaders in contributing to change at every level of society by bringing together opportunities to develop skills, relationships, and experiences to grow personally and professionally with peers. **While individual parts of the fellowship experience may be more valuable to certain leaders than others, interviews and focus group discussions emphasized that no single component stands out in isolation to another – highlighting that these elements are inextricably connected, making fellowships valuable and meaningful opportunities.** **FIGURE 1** illustrates this point with peer learning – the most frequently referenced and cross cutting fellowship experience – advancing each element.

FIGURE 1: Illustration of key fellowship experiences supported by peer learning

Individual

Change at the individual-level references changes in an alumnus's personal or professional life – including career advancement, achieving a personal milestone, overcoming a meaningful challenge, or other accomplishments. The most common types of changes identified at the individual-level include the following:

- Increased leadership capacity
- Strengthened technical capacity
- Increased sense of belonging and expression

Together, these 3 types of change are represented in 80% of all references to fellowship contributions to change at every level - emphasizing the strong connection changes at the individual have with all other levels.

TABLE 5: Fellowship experience that supported individual-level changes

Fellowship experience	Individual
Peer-learning	52%
Networking and relationship building	28%
Professional opportunities	25%
Skills and knowledge development	22%
Alumni engagement	21%
Leadership development	17%
Mentorship and coaching	11%
Workshops and training	<5%
Financial support	<5%
Cultural exchange and dialogue	<5%

The fellowship experience that stood out as a key contributor to references of individual change in interviews and focus group discussions was **peer-learning**. Alumni frequently referenced the value of having a safe space to come together with a community of like-minded individuals to share new experiences and grow collectively. Peer-learning also stood out in CCRs with other experiences like professional opportunities (91%), workshops and training (87%), alumni engagement (76%) and mentorship or coaching (66%) – each of which do not have significant co-

occurrence with any other fellowship experience. **This trend suggests that peer-learning within cohorts is a valuable compliment to other elements of a fellowship experience that support changes at the individual-level.**

Illustrative quotes

“The sessions were somehow strategic, human centered, and by then being a student, it expanded both my professional confidence in the library and my ability to contribute meaningfully... I gained guidance that helped refine my leadership voice and align my career trajectory from the institutional set up to our broader continental priorities in terms of information access. From then we built a mutual connection across the board with deep engagement from the small group discussions, peer learning circles, cross country project sharing.”

MOSES NGELI, LIBRARY AID AFRICA ALUM

“Being part of the Mountaintop Fellowship helped me grow both personally and as a young leader. What supported me most was the community of peers who understood my journey, my challenges, and my hopes. Hearing their stories made me feel less alone, and their encouragement motivated me to keep pushing forward. The fellowship gave me a space where I felt seen and supported. My peers challenged my ideas in positive ways, celebrated my progress, and reminded me that my work for rural and indigenous communities matters. Their support helped me build confidence, stay grounded, and continue believing in the impact I can create.”

BOCHOLA SARA ARERO, MOUNTAINTOP INTERNATIONAL ALUM

“I had the pleasure of being the regional lead for the Summer Fellows here in New York City ... I was blown away about how accomplished, how educated, how much potential they held as a group. So not only did I feel invested as their leader in that space, but I felt invested to make sure that the network was activated and providing for them what they needed so they could make the impact that they wanted to make.”

JOEL SCOTT, EDUCATION PIONEERS ALUM

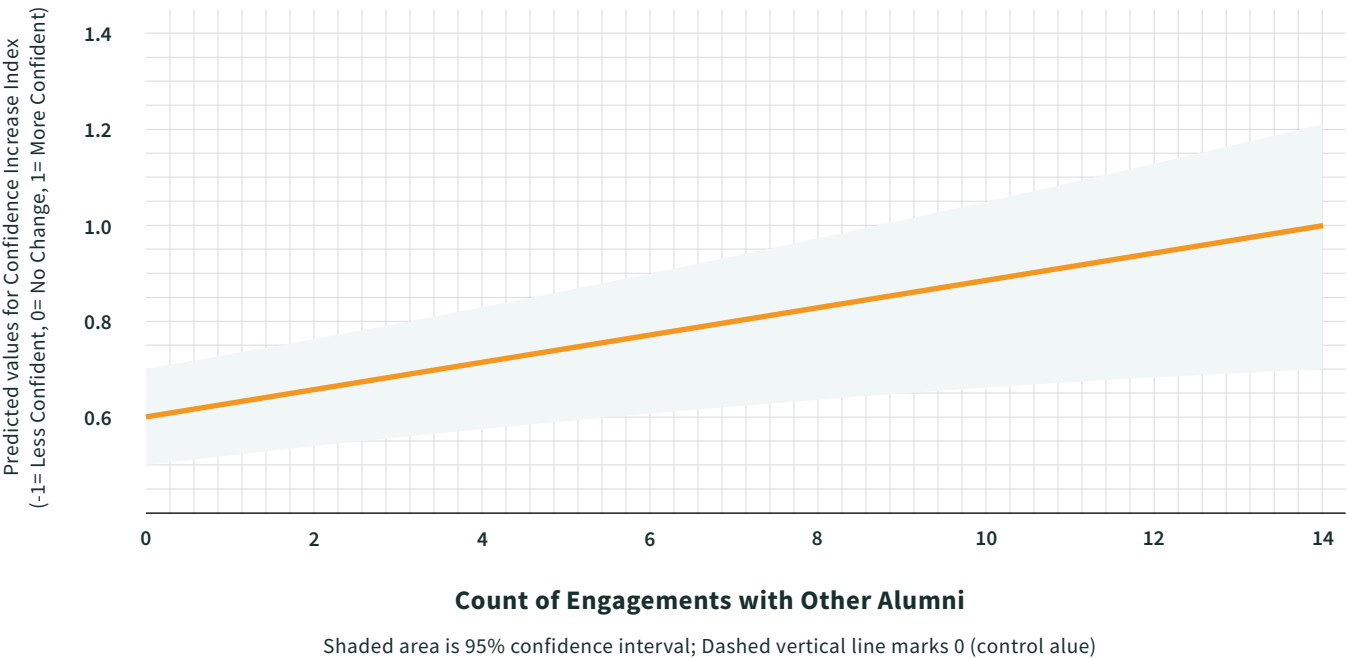


Partner showcase – University Administration Support Program (UASP)

The theme of peer learning being a strong contributor to changes at the Individual-level extends beyond the initial fellowship experience. Consortium partners like UASP worked with Global Insight to explore the role of critical mass at the individual level – that is the influence of more participants working at the same institution against improvements in personal and professional development. UASP focused on strengthening research management ecosystems across institutions of the African Research Universities Alliance by supporting mid and senior level academic and administrative professionals. The program model combined applied research management and leadership training, peer learning, exposure to international best practices, coaching, and small grants to help participants implement practical, institution-level reform.

This evaluation applied a control group model to capture statistical significance of the UASP program on their alumni. The evaluation found that the number of participants at an institution is associated with higher scores related to individual improvement. Specifically, they identified a direct correlation between the number of joint activities (i.e. collaboration with other participants) and individual improvement scores. **FIGURE 9** illustrates this correlation with participants who have done 10-14 joint activities together averaging a response that reaches “more confidence” (0.8-1.0).

FIGURE 9: Confidence in tasks increases by engagement in joint activities with alumni





Institution

Change at the institution-level reference changes in organizations, government, or other entities with structured procedures and norms - this could include improving processes, developing new solutions, changing the institution's workplace culture or approaches, or other specific examples of influencing their institution or advancing its work. The most common types of change identified at the institution-level include the following:

- Improved organizational processes
- Improved partnership opportunities
- Improved funding

TABLE 6: Fellowship experiences that supported institution-level changes

Fellowship experience	Institution
Peer-learning	70%
Networking and relationship building	39%
Alumni engagement	24%
Skills and knowledge development	24%
Professional opportunities	9%
Leadership development	6%
Mentorship and coaching	<5%
Workshops and training	<5%
Financial support	<5%
Cultural exchange and dialogue	<5%

Peer learning stood out among in references to change at the institution-level. Among those co-occurrence references, there was a consistent trend of alumni valuing those opportunities to help them build reliable relationships with people growing in a similar professional network. Alumni frequently referenced the relationships built in peer-learning environments as enablers to the mission-driven work of their organization – serving as supportive sources for knowledge, opportunities, and encouragement.

Building on FANS

In line with findings from FANS, 94% of alumni in this study indicated building meaningful relationships during their fellowship experience – 70% of which built between 1-10 relationships (49% building 1-5; 21% building 6-10). Among all relationships built, 88% indicated their relationships included personal friendships, and 70% were multiplex – personal and professional in nature indicating a more sustainable connection over time. Additionally, **57% of fellowship alumni indicated building a relationship with a mentor, coach, or another leader that shares their development goals.** While not exclusive to peer learning environments – distinguished by people being in the same status or role within a program – these types of relationships reflect strong knowledge sharing and growth elements.

Partner Showcase – Mountaintop International

The theme of relationships serving as enabling factors that contribute to change at the institution-level strongly align with connecting leaders that share a common mission – which fellowships serve a valuable role in facilitating. Partners like Mountaintop International explored this idea through a Network Mapping approach that gathered perspectives from alumni and community members in surveys, interviews, and focus group discussions to triangulate the scope and influence relationships made and connection to the Mountaintop Fellowship had in contributing to change. The following analysis of one fellows' experience identified through the Network Mapping process illustrates this connection.

Illustrative quotes

“[Another alumni], is also from my cohort and we’ve been collaborating a lot this year. The way that we get into communities is through some partners or organizations that are already there. And by knowing her through the fellowship opens up some trust. Our values came out into this conversation, and that just opened opportunities for us to collaborate.”

MARTHA LIDIA OXI CHUY, GRATITUDE NETWORK ALUM

“The experience provided practical insights I wouldn’t have accessed elsewhere. I’ve applied these lessons directly in running my organization, becoming more attentive to detail and more intentional in my leadership.”

BERYL MUNGAI, MOUNTAINTOP INTERNATIONAL ALUM

“The fellowship deepened my commitment to accessibility, community care, and equity in nature-based spaces, and those values now shape how RINT operates. It strengthened my leadership in ways that show up through our ecotherapy approach, our emphasis on sustainability for both people and planet, and the way I build relationships with clients, partners, and community networks.”

JENNY LOPEZ, JUSTICE OUTSIDE ALUM



Esther Aiudeonu, Nigeria

Before the fellowship, Esther already had a busy life. She was organizing youth-focused events in Lagos and, eventually, built the African Futures Summit, which brought together more than 1,400 participants online and in-person. Around her, there was a cluster of young people who attended her events, a handful of local collaborators and speakers, and some visibility on social media. These relationships were essentially Lagos-centric. She had few ties to peers doing similar work in other countries, limited institutional backing from universities or large NGOs, and no global fellowship community attached to her work. When she applied to Mountaintop, she wanted both deeper leadership development and a genuine community of peers who were serious about collaboration, not just a logo on their CV.

Through the fellowship, that picture changes quickly. One of the first shifts is the way the program introduces Esther to other Fellows who become genuine co-creators. A clear example is her relationship with Itunu Bamidele, who runs Giddy2School in Nigeria. The two of them meet through Mountaintop's fellowship programming. Later, Esther invites Itunu to co-organize an event in Lagos. He brings his own students and youth community into her space, and also serves as a speaker. In network terms, a link that started as "co-participant in a fellowship" becomes a multi-layered tie: Itunu

is now a partner, a speaker, and a bridge to a distinct youth community.

A similar pattern emerges in her relationship with James Otai, a Ugandan Fellow working on women's economic empowerment through Imagine Her. Again, the initial connection is the cohort itself: they go through Mountaintop training together, get to know each other's work, and develop trust. Over time, Esther begins inviting James to speak at her virtual and hybrid events, exposing youth in Lagos to a pan-African social enterprise story and giving James a platform with a new audience. What starts as a peer relationship becomes a Nigeria–Uganda bridge at the level of young leaders and entrepreneurs.

If we zoom out from Esther's story, her personal network now includes not only the young people and local partners she started with, but also other Fellows and their communities, Mountaintop staff, and a range of second-order connections. The alumni survey suggests Esther's experience is typical rather than exceptional – aligning with what many say motivated them to join. Beyond leadership growth, a large share chose Mountaintop because they were looking for community, mentorship, and a sense of belonging to a broader ecosystem rather than a one-off program.



Community & System

Changes at the community-level reference changes that influence groups of people who share a common interest or experience within society. This could include raising awareness on issues, facilitating cross-cultural exposure and dialogue, spreading innovative solutions and approaches, or other specific examples of actively supporting the efforts of others outside of the leader’s immediate network or institution. The most common types of changes identified at the community level include the following:

- Spreading innovative solutions
- Increased awareness and mobilization

TABLE 7: Fellowship experiences that supported community & system-level changes

Fellowship experience	Community & System
Networking and relationship building	57%
Alumni engagement	41%
Professional opportunities	41%
Peer-learning	28%
Skills and knowledge development	28%
Leadership development	26%
Financial support	13%
Mentorship and coaching	11%
Workshops and training	9%
Cultural exchange and dialogue	5%

Changes at the system-level reference changes that influence how larger networks of individuals, groups, and institutions in society function. This could include influencing policies, advancing thought leadership, scaling a solution to address a wider challenge, or other specific examples of efforts to address challenges influencing the larger society. The most common types of changes identified at the system-level include the following:

- Influencing policy or legislation
- Investing in leaders or communities
- Strengthening citizen engagement

A strong trend across the types of changes at the community and system-levels was incorporating fellowship values and experiences into how leaders' approach or advance their work. In addition to the several specific fellowship experiences that supported their ability to contribute to change, 85% referenced replicating the values and these specific fellowship experiences they felt empowered them as individuals and furthered their work. **This suggests that fellowship structures or strategies themselves can have a strong influence on how leaders approach driving change at more advanced levels of society, like the community and system-levels.** Network and relationship building, alumni engagement and professional opportunities stand out in CCRs for changes at the community and system-levels – frequently referenced continued inspiration from their peers and fellowship community over time as motivation for staying committed to their work. However, this larger trend illustrates that even less frequently referenced experiences like mentorship and coaching, workshops and training, and cultural exchange and dialogue, can have a meaningful influence at the community and system-level.



Illustrative quotes

“Being around all those bright, capable, determined people, seeing what it looks like when people who want to get the job done put their minds to it, and there’s a meaningful effort to solve the issues that people are facing – it was very inspiring. So, in taking that experience and coming back here was revitalizing in a way that I did not anticipate. It’s made me much more ambitious in what I’m willing or what I’m advocating for in my work and what I think people deserve.”

CHRISTOPHER-ROBIN MILLICAN, CIVIC ACTION PROJECT ALUM

“My work on transatlantic approaches to technology governance - drawing on GMF networks and experiences - contributes to bridging different policy cultures. I speak at conferences, publish research, and try to make these connections visible to practitioners and academics who too often work in separate silos.”

SEBASTIAN SEIDEL, GERMAN MARSHALL FUND ALUM

Illustrative quotes

“So those sessions I was part of really helped me understand how to better structure my [library] advocacy campaign and organize the resources I needed to implement it. It also helped me think beyond my immediate audience to see which other stakeholders would be involved in the campaign or in whatever library program that we want to organize in the future.”

BUKOLA JAMES, LIBRARY AID AFRICA ALUM

“After finishing my fellowship in 2022, I used the academic research from my social change initiative to form an NGO with another peace fellow and Rotarian women in Uganda supporting gender-based violence work. During that process all of the connections I made during my peace fellowship with the Peace Center came together. From the professors, hosts and local Rotarians. So, I really feel like I maximized the opportunities and connections when I was on-site that year. I spend a lot of time now presenting to global rotary clubs and speaking at Rotary conferences. Some of that is necessary to generate resources for the NGO, but I also value partnering with and giving back to Rotary whenever I have the chance.”

JENNIFER MONTGOMERY, ROTARY PEACE FELLOWSHIP ALUM

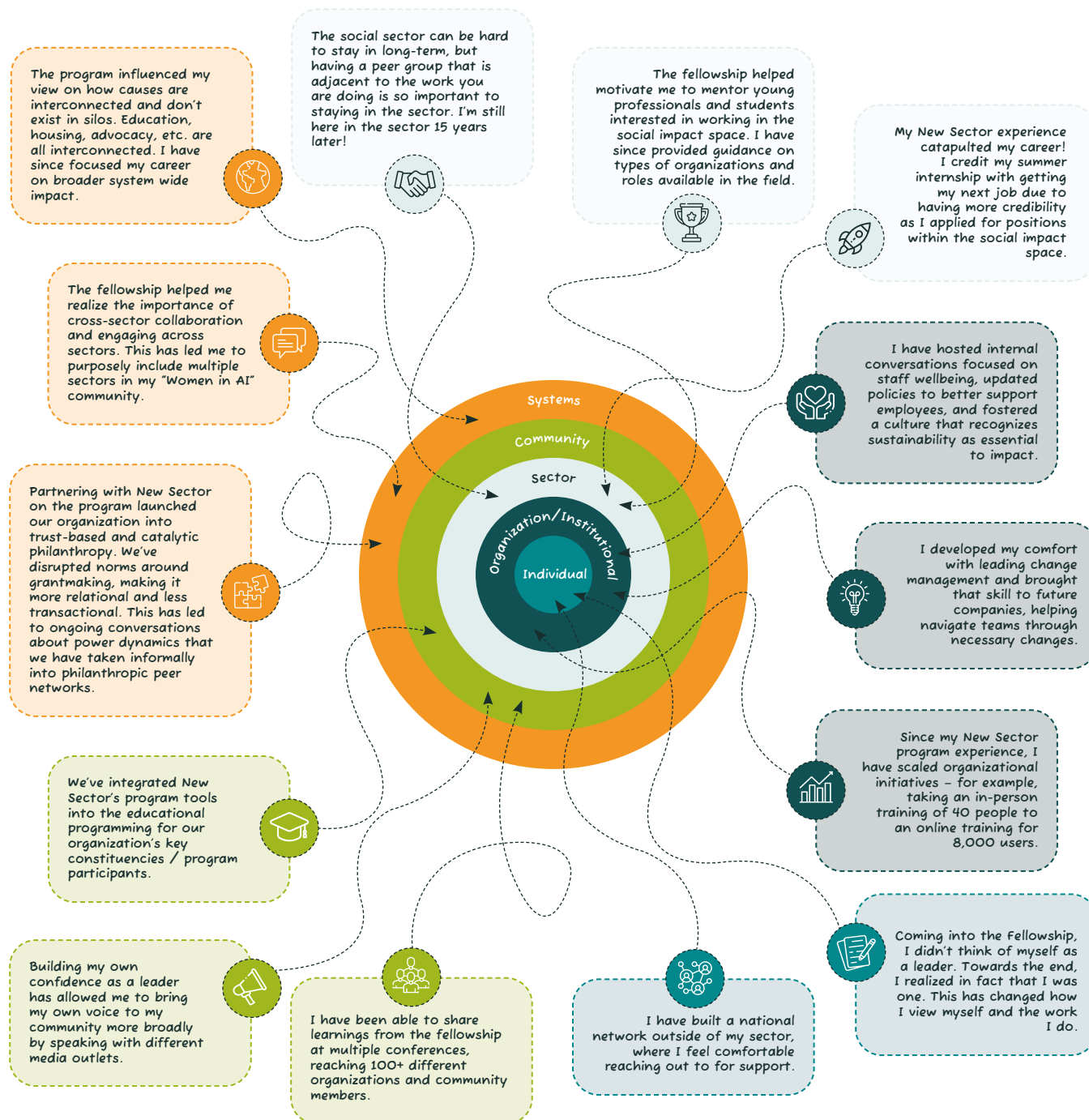


Partner Showcase – New Sector Alliance

The theme of broad investments coming together to support leaders at more advanced levels of society emphasizes the value of the fellowship mission and the ecosystem of staff, partners and communities that support that mission. Partners like New Sector Alliance explored this idea by facilitating a Ripple Effects Mapping (REM) exercise which combines a set of qualitative methods - appreciative inquiry, group interviewing, mind mapping, and thematic data analysis – to discover the impacts of community projects or programs in a creative and energizing environment. **FIGURE 10** summarizes and illustrates the collective ripple effects that New Sector’s programs have had on its alumni, community partners, and funders.

FIGURE 10: Illustration of Ripple Effects Mapping (REM) discussion

Collected during REM data gathering activities, the surrounding text boxes in Figure 10 feature direct quotes from New Sector Alliance alumni and partners.





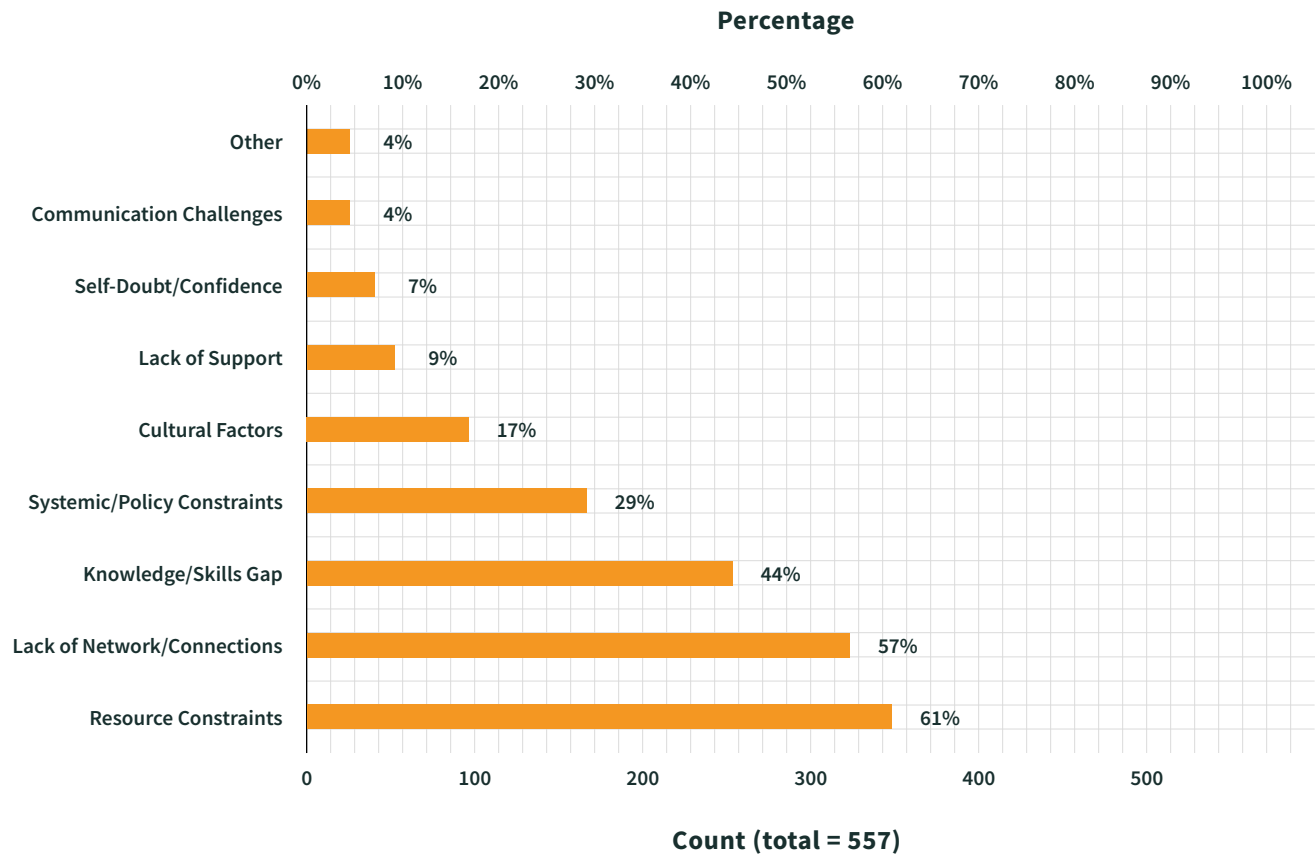
By applying REM, New Sector's study found that fellowship and alumni engagement strategies contributed to changes at community, sector, and systems-levels by intentionally aligning professional development, peer connection, and leadership support across the participant lifecycle. Fellows initially joined New Sector programs primarily for professional development (92%), career growth (72%), and networking (59%). During the program, they cited professional development (90%) and peer learning (80%) as the most meaningful components, alongside New Sector's staff support (62%), coaching (51%) and mentorship (51%). These findings underscore the impact of New Sector's cohort model, hands-on learning (work placements and projects), retreats, workshops, and structured coaching and mentorship relationships in building skills, confidence, and durable professional networks. Post-program, alumni most valued activities that involved networking (39%), virtual learning (28%), and in-person engagement (23%). They expressed strong interest in expanded professional learning (80%) and community-building opportunities (74%). Together, these integrated fellowship and alumni strategies have created the conditions for long-term professional growth, cross-sector connectivity, and continued contributions to the social sector and beyond.

The findings from New Sector's REM activity suggest that the structures and strategies embedded in their program – including cohort-based learning, structured coaching and mentorship, hands-on placements and projects, and sustained alumni engagement – not only shape what participants learn but also shape the kinds of change participants are positioned to create over time.

How Fellowships Support Leaders in Addressing Barriers to Change

Barriers to change reflect elements leaders face that negatively influence the impact they are seeking to make. In this study, barriers to change were captured through surveys, interviews, and focus group discussions with fellowship alumni. In total, 54% of fellowship alumni (698 from) 7 programs contributed to this topic.

Among survey respondents, 557 indicated facing barriers to change in their environments before joining their fellowship program. **FIGURE 2** highlights the barriers identified from open-ended responses with **resource constraints, lack of network or connection, and knowledge or skills gap** standing out as the most common. Focus groups and interview discussions saw similar alignment to these trends with lack of network/connections seeing consistently strong CCRs with lack of support (92%), self-doubt and confidence (89%), and a desire for an improved sense of belonging (87%). This suggests that a lack of network/connections is often connected with more interpersonal barriers to change like support, confidence and belonging.

FIGURE 2: Barriers to change before joining a fellowship program

Among survey respondents who indicated facing barriers to change before joining their fellowship program, **86% (482) indicated their fellowship experience or community helped them mitigate the influence of their barriers to change.** When asked how in an open-ended response, the following common elements of fellowship experiences stood out:

TABLE 2: Fellowship experiences that helped mitigate barriers to change⁶

Fellowship experience	Mitigated Barriers
Professional opportunities	70%
Networking and relationship building	67%
Knowledge and learning environments	45%
Technical skills development	44%
Cultural exchange and dialogue	41%
Leadership development	32%
Financial support	30%
Alumni Engagement	24%
Mentorship and coaching	8%

While limited in scope, 414 (32%) alumni from nine (9) programs shared their motivations for joining their respective fellowship programs. Respondents overwhelmingly indicated the following motivations.

6. Upon review of responses around barriers to change, the IFN team recognized Skills and knowledge development were too broad of a category to adequately capture the responses, requiring a separation between Knowledge and learning environment and Technical skills development. The distinction between these two codes is in the activities described – standard academic formats aligning with Knowledge and learning environments and experiential training aligning with Technical skills development. The CCRs between these two codes were both less than 25% in each code's total segment – highlighting the distinctions between the references captured. Comprehensive definitions for each code are included in Annex: Qualitative code directory.

TABLE 8: Motivations for joining fellowship

Motivation	Survey responses
Professional opportunities	86%
Networking and relationship building	80%
Personal development	80%
Community or organizational impact	73%
Cultural exchange and dialogue	45%
Financial support	28%
Skills and knowledge development	10%

Many barriers to change were referenced in interviews and focus group discussions when asked about motivations for joining their fellowship program. In these instances, the IFN team was able to improve our understanding of the perceptions leaders had of their fellowship in helping them mitigate the influence of barriers and the practical value gained from their experience to address those barriers.

Key findings

The common theme across these responses was that fellowship programs provide a space to address several barriers to change through a well-rounded, practical, and foundational experience leaders can reference as they grow professionally and personally. The top motivations for joining the fellowship – professional opportunities and networking and relationship building – match the top fellowship experiences that helped mitigate barriers to change. However, when analyzing their CCRs of each fellowship experience, professional opportunities, networking and relationship building

were referenced in at least 90% of each categories total segment of responses. **This suggests that the value of improved access to professional opportunities, networking, and relationship building support other fellowship experiences in mitigating barriers.**

Additionally, skills and knowledge development was referenced the least in survey responses to motivations for joining their fellowship program (10%). This is a striking contrast to the high rate of references to it as a barrier to change and valuable fellowship experience in mitigating barriers to change. More research is needed to understand this difference, but it suggests that, in isolation, building skills and learning opportunities are not what drives leaders to participate in fellowship programs versus alternative professional development opportunities. It also strengthens the evidence in this study that suggests fellowship experiences support leaders in creating impact by bringing together opportunities to develop skills, relationships, and experiences to grow personally and professionally with peers.

Illustrative quotes

“I was managing a young organization and finding it difficult to find funding for the work that I was doing. I didn’t have grant writing skills and I wasn’t very successful. I would get some funding, but not so much to really do the work that I knew that I could do through the organization. Also, I didn’t really have the technical skills to run an organization, it was a barrier because I felt like maybe I was not the right person to be in this position. So, my confidence as a leader was quite low, but all that was before the fellowship.”

MUSINGO MERCY, MOUNTAINTOP INTERNATIONAL ALUM



“As someone with childhood memories of war, I had hoped there was a network of people organizing proactively towards peace, but it felt like a wish. When a Rotarian reached out, out of the blue, the window of opportunity came at a very needed time in life, and enabled me to focus on equipping myself to contribute alongside others who strive to cultivate peace. I felt that I regained my dignity and agency to advance a life long goal.”

NATALIJA VOJNO, ROTARY PEACE FELLOWSHIP ALUM

“What motivated me was the need to want to develop. I thought that the goals for the program really aligned with a lot of my personal development goals, and I also wanted to build a network of folks that I can rely on and grow alongside. I think most folks will probably agree with this but like we grow best when we’re alongside each other – I know I’m in community. That’s what drove me to be a part of it and build my confidence in the work.”

JUAN TELLES, JUSTICE OUTSIDE ALUM



Fellowship Experiences that Leaders Value

Operationalizing a fellowship mission requires a series of thoughtful structures and strategies that facilitate meaningful experiences. The findings from this study highlighted in the previous sections suggest that no individual experience stands out in isolation. Rather, fellowship programs distinguish themselves by bringing together opportunities to develop skills, relationships, and experiences to grow personally and professionally with peers. Understanding the types of experiences leaders value and continue to seek within these programs

can help inform areas of investment for stronger engagement. Building off the fellowship experiences identified as supporting leaders in contributions to change and mitigating barriers to change – highlighted in **TABLE 3** – this study also explored what alumni valued in how those experiences were facilitated and what they gained in the process. To explore the latter, the IFN team complimented interviews and focus group discussion to standardize the career readiness skills⁷ participants may have gained from their fellowship experience – results illustrated in **FIGURE 11**. In total, 837 alumni from 10 programs contributed to this topic with 88% (744) indicating gaining at least one skill from their fellowship experience.

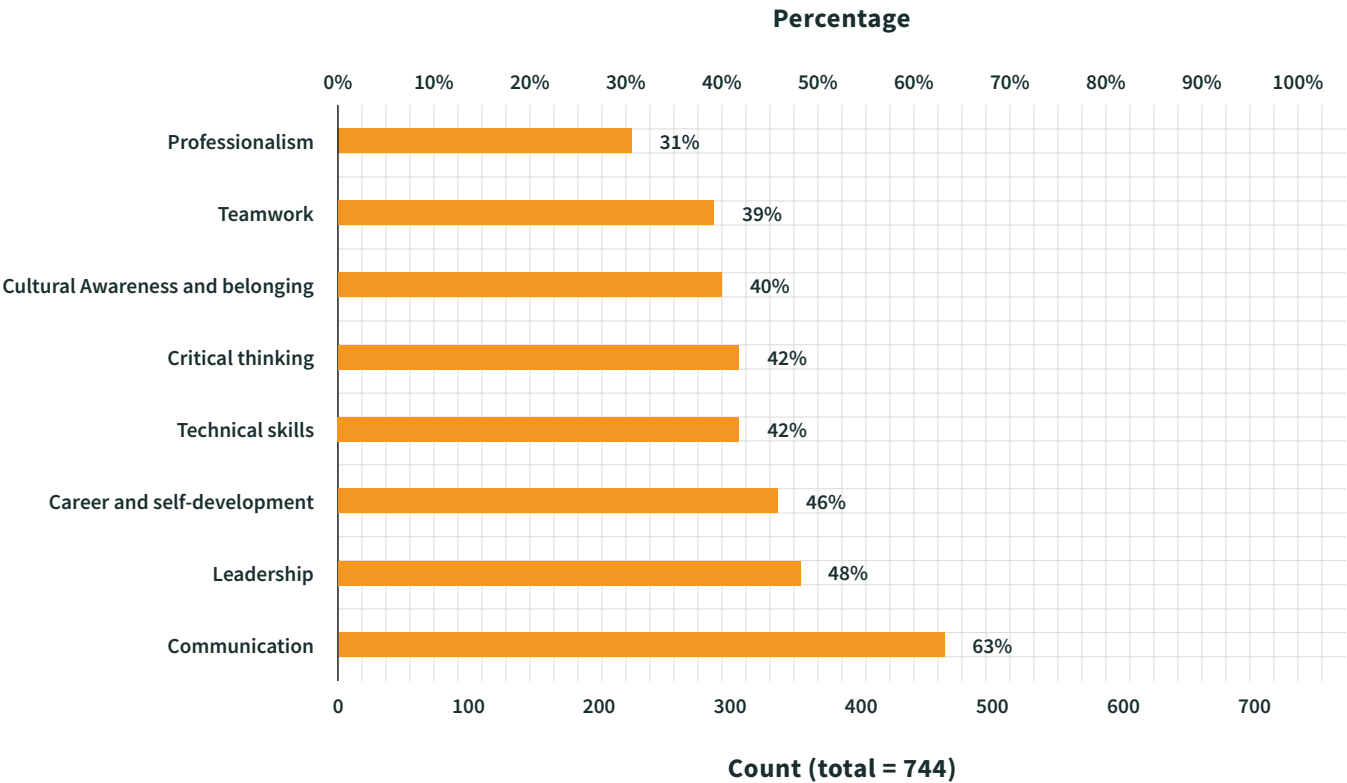
TABLE 3: References of valued fellowship experiences by contribution to change and mitigating barriers to change

Valued fellowship experience	Contribution to Change	Mitigating Barriers to Change
Networking and relationship building	42%	67%
Professional opportunities	38%	70%
Skills and knowledge development ⁸	35%	45% / 44%
Peer-learning	62%	<5%
Alumni engagement	38%	24%
Leadership development	22%	32%
Financial support	10%	30%
Cultural exchange and dialogue	<5%	41%
Mentorship and coaching	11%	8%
Workshops and training	6%	<5%

7. These skills were adapted from the NACE skills for career readiness to align with FANS.

8. Reference footnote 6 for more details

FIGURE 11: Career readiness skills gained from fellowship experiences



Barriers to engagement

Another area explored in this study were barriers to engagement; however, the IFN team did not find any meaningful additions to the findings identified in FANS. This included the following:

- Limited opportunities (both in variety and frequency) to connect with other alumni working on common issues
- Physical distance from a major network or community hub
- Challenges with readjustment following their fellowship experience
- Lack of financial support during their fellowship experience
- Virtual environments being a challenging space to build and sustain relationships

Barriers to engagement are an important piece of feedback for fellowship administrators to consider when designing their programming. Based on the consistency between this study and FANS, questions about barriers to engagement may require a more specialized approach within specific fellowship communities to identify actionable insights.



Key findings & building on FANS

FANS identified 3 key experiences alumni value that keep them engaged beyond their initial fellowship programming – building relationships, sharing knowledge and experiences, and accessing new professional opportunities. The findings from this study suggest a similar trend with the same 3 experiences standing out followed by peer-learning – not identified in FANS but captured in this study by expanding the scope influence from a fellowship program. **Cohort-structured engagement and in-person programming stood out as common characteristics valued in how fellowship engagement was facilitated, receiving CCRs of 85% and 81% respectively among all references of strategies and structures.** A theme among references to cohort-structured engagement is that cohorts provide a safe entry point into a new and vulnerable experience that makes it easier to build relationships and a sense of belonging through shared experiences.

Also in line with findings from FANS, the 3 top career readiness skills gained from fellowship experiences – although in different order – are consistent with the top 3 skills referenced in FANS. This includes

Communication (63%), Leadership (48%), and Career and self-development (46%). This illustrates consistent areas of growth from fellowship programs across years and populations.

Finally, FANS identified mentorship and coaching as valued opportunities that would increase alumni engagement in their fellowship community. Despite low CCRs within contributions to change and mitigating barriers to change in this study, **mentorship and coaching opportunities were referenced as a valuable experience that built communication and leadership skills with 30% of alumni indicating it as a meaningful post-fellowship resource and a motivation for staying engaged in their fellowship community.**⁹ Mentorship and coaching experiences referenced in interviews and focus group discussions, while less frequent, were strongly associated with positive influences and motivations to stay engaged with the program. Considering mentorship components were not a common characteristic across consortium research partner programs, this emphasizes the enthusiasm towards mentorship and coaching.

9. These were separate survey questions that both received 30% from the same sample population.

Illustrative quotes

“The cohort model was the first time we had done something like this and it was really helpful. They [All Stars Helping Kids Accelerator program] had individual touchpoints with the organizations, and then they had different trainings for us as well. Just being able to be with an intimate group of other leaders was really helpful.”

SUSAN OSTERHOFF, GRATITUDE NETWORK ALUM

“The sessions and training were incredibly impactful, and what stood out most was the peer-to-peer learning and sense of community. I learned a great deal from fellow participants and their experiences.”

BERYL MUNGAI, MOUNTAINTOP INTERNATIONAL ALUM

“The fellowship helped me to connect with mentors who understood the complexities of addressing harmful practices and supporting survivors gave me confidence that that guidance helped me see myself as a part of a broader movement, not just an individual actor.”

SELINE ACHIENG, MESCRIPDS DATA AND RESEARCH CENTER ALUM

“I think having the alumni network at your fingertips is paramount – knowing that anyone you meet, be it the mentors, the guests that we invited in, or the other fellows, can be resources for you.”

CIVIC ACTION PROJECT ALUM

Partner showcase – UASP

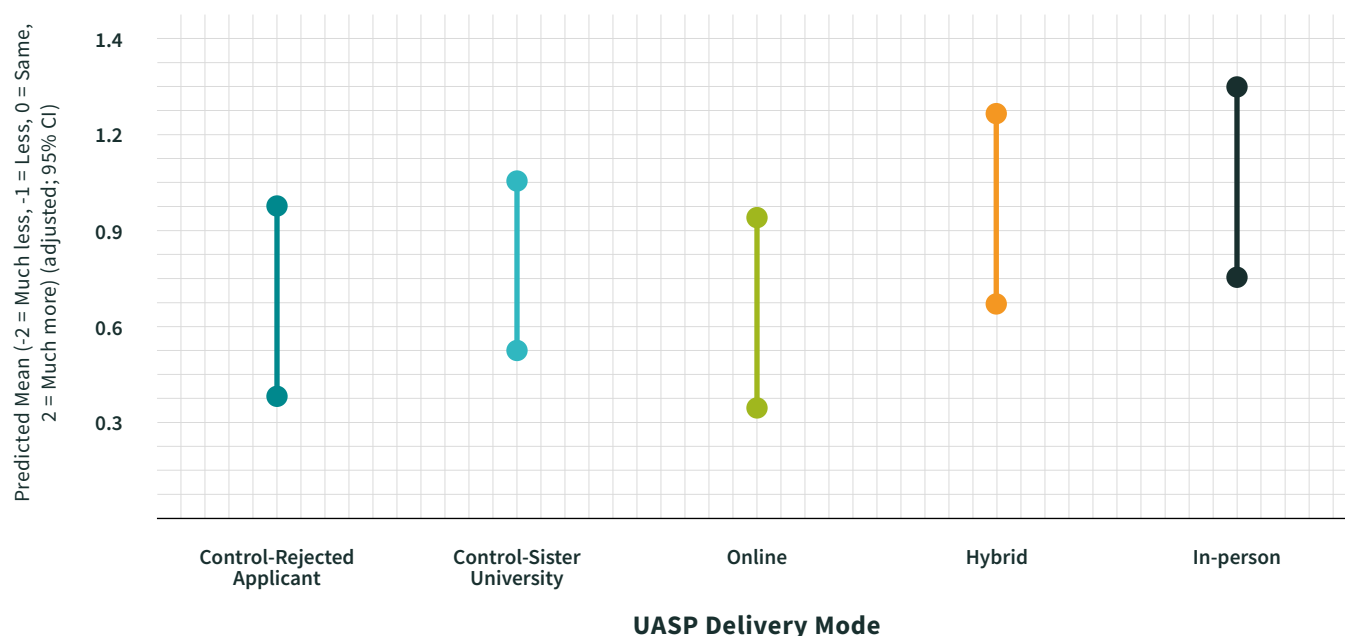
Since the COVID-19 pandemic, virtual and hybrid exchange opportunities have become more common in the fellowship sector. The conventional value of in-person exchange in building relationships and engagement remains understood, but there are still gaps in understanding of the difference in long-term impact outcomes between in-person and other exchange formats. Partners like UASP explored this topic in their control study facilitated by Global Insight by comparing individual improvements over time between participants who completed in-person, hybrid, and online exchange programs with two distinct control

groups of non-participants to compare. UASP focused on strengthening research management ecosystems across institutions of the African Research Universities Alliance by supporting mid and senior level academic and administrative professionals. The program model combined applied research management and leadership training, peer learning, exposure to international best practices, coaching, and small grants to help participants implement practical, institution-level reform. The delivery mode evolved over time from fully in person to hybrid and online formats.¹⁰

10. The program adapted during the COVID 19 pandemic to offer hybrid and fully online modalities, scaling access while maintaining emphasis on applied learning, peer exchange, comparative perspectives, and context specific institutional problem solving. Engagement with U.S. universities, including mentoring and observation of diverse research management structures and practices, was a core part of the in person and hybrid models, but was not part of the fully online modality.

The study found that participants who engaged in hybrid and in-person formats experienced statistically significant improvements in personal and professional development compared to those who engaged in the online program – falling within the range of the control groups as indicated in **FIGURE 12**. While the results from this study are specific to the UASP program, the findings strengthen the idea that having at least some in-person engagement components in a fellowship experience can make a difference in the long-term growth of the participants.

FIGURE 12: Increases in research management practices/responsibilities



How Fellowships Capture Impact and Learning

The collaborative research model of this study provided a space for the IFN team and research consortium to explore the practical challenges and opportunities of fellowship practitioners in capturing the impact and learning of their programs with leaders. In this study, the IFN team looked inward – working with and collecting feedback from partners at every stage of the research process – and looked outward – working with the Salzburg Global Seminar to facilitate a series of workshops to learn from other MERL professional across the fellowship sector.



Looking inward – IFN Consortium

Routine surveys, interviews and focus group discussions remain the most accessible methods of data collection for most fellowship program teams. Fellowship cycles provide limited windows for routine data collection activities as program teams are often focused on facilitating fellowship experiences with a new cohort of leaders – e.g. recruitment, selection, placements, orientation, participant support, and end of program conferences. This balance of facilitating fellowship experiences with new leaders makes the opportunities to engage alumni – those that could most meaningfully share the impact of their fellowship experiences on their personal and professional lives – a precious occurrence. This was the key reason why the templates developed and disseminated through this study were focused on tools. However, when the opportunity to thoughtfully engage with program alumni presents itself, fellowship practitioners have a wide range of approaches to collect these meaningful insights.

Partners showcased in this study illustrated several rigorous and creative methods for capturing impact from their fellowship communities including **control studies**, **triangulation**, and **Ripple Effects Mapping (REM)**. They also shared other methods that were not highlighted in this study, however partners have incorporated in their work including the following:

- **Value for Investment analysis:** Partners like New Sector Alliance explored Value for Investment analysis within their program to understand the potential “returns” investing in leaders can have at different levels of society.
- **Social Network Analysis (SNA):** As part of the IFN learning series, the IFN team provided an overview of social network theory - the role of social relationships in transmitting information, channeling personal or media influence, and enabling attitudinal or behavioral change – and how to facilitate and SNA within a fellowship community.
- **Creative, arts-based methods:** As part of the IFN learning series, the IFN team provided an overview of how they can build a space for alumni to share feedback in new or creative ways – pictures, video responses, paintings and more. The main intention of building these spaces is to empower alumni to express themselves in the way they feel most comfortable – offering an often-unseen perspective and consideration that is lost in standard questions and formats.

These examples highlight the range of expertise and interests represented among consortium partners. **Like fellowship experiences, many partners expressed value for the community within the collaborative research process which provided an opportunity to learn from other practitioners – not just about advanced or creative methods of data collection, but also the distinct practical challenges in implementing certain activities.** The mid-point survey (conducted after most partners had completed data collection activities) indicated 63% of consortium partners having an increased ability to develop monitoring, evaluation, research, and learning (MERL) resources for their programs – noting being in community while conducting their data collection activities as something they valued.

While exploring broad data collection spaces, the research consortium also took the time to identify key **ethical considerations** to incorporate in the process. The categories and considerations below stood out as key areas of consideration for managing research initiatives with fellowship communities:

Ethical Domains	Approach Priorities
Informed Consent Protocols – The overarching framework of procedures ensuring that fellowship participants voluntarily agree to involvement in research activities with full understanding of purposes, methods, risks, and benefits.	Multi-layered consent process – A consent approach that collects agreement at multiple stages (e.g., initial participation, data collection, publication, secondary use) rather than relying on a single blanket agreement, allowing participants to opt in or out at each phase. Consent documentation – The written records - forms, agreements, and disclosures – that capture what participants were told, what they agreed to, and under what conditions, serving as both legal protection and an accountability trail. Community considerations – The practice of accounting for how research activities may affect the broader fellowship community beyond individual participants, including cultural norms, collective interests, and potential group-level harms or benefits.
Data Ownership and Participant Controls – The policies and mechanisms that define who holds rights over research data and how participants can exercise control over information they contribute.	Participant data rights – The specific entitlements participants hold regarding their data, such as the right to access, correct, withdraw, or restrict the use of their contributions at any point during or after the research. Community vs. legal ownership – The tension between a fellowship community’s moral claim to collectively generated knowledge and the formal legal ownership structures (institutional IP policies, copyright, contractual agreements) that may assign rights differently. Data lifecycle management – The governance of research data across its full lifespan – from collection and storage through analysis, sharing, archiving, and eventual destruction – with defined ethical safeguards at each stage.
Attribution and Recognition – The principles and practices governing how credit is assigned and contributions are acknowledged across all participants in a research initiative.	Flexible attribution options – A range of crediting approaches (co-authorship, named acknowledgment, community credit, anonymous contribution) that accommodate different participants’ preferences, professional contexts, and comfort levels with visibility.

Ethical Domains	Approach Priorities
	Recognition validation process – A structured method for confirming with contributors that the form and degree of credit they receive accurately reflects their role and aligns with their wishes before publication or dissemination. Political & professional safety – Protections ensuring that participation in or attribution for research does not expose fellowship members to political reprisal, professional retaliation, or social harm within their home institutions or regions.
Transparency and Accountability— The commitments to openness in research processes and clear responsibility structures that allow fellowship communities to hold researchers and institutions answerable.	Ongoing communication – The sustained practice of keeping participants and communities informed about research progress, changes in direction, emerging findings, and any decisions that affect their involvement – not just at the start and end. Organizational transparency – The disclosure of institutional interests, funding sources, decision-making structures, and potential conflicts of interest that may influence how the research is conducted or how results are used. Quality assurance – The systematic processes for verifying that ethical standards, methodological rigor, and community agreements are being upheld throughout the research, including internal reviews and external audits. Reporting standards – The agreed-upon norms for how research findings are documented and shared, including what is reported back to the fellowship community, in what format, and on what timeline, ensuring results are accessible and not selectively presented.

Looking outward

Partner showcase – Salzburg Global

To explore challenges outside of the consortium, the Salzburg Global Seminar launched a community of practice for MERL professionals by implementing an 8-part workshop series of fellowship MEET-UPS (Monitoring & Evaluation Exchange Talks for Understanding and Progress). During these workshops practitioners would come together to collaboratively determine and explore learning priorities by sharing common challenges related to:

- People, partnerships, and planning
- Collecting, capturing, and verifying data, and
- Using data for decision-making.

The practitioners organized themselves into groups, conducted research asynchronously, and presented via online workshops to the full MEET-UP community to explore each learning area in depth. Like the IFN Consortium, this series provided a safe, collaborative space to uncover common pain points and exchange solutions for measuring change and impact. The reflections and takeaways from these discussions include the following:



Learning Priorities	Key Insights & takeaways
Open engagement & networked accountability	• Participatory MEL systems must prioritize alumni-led engagement in and co-ownership of indicators, procedures, and reporting out of insights. These model the types of leadership approaches most Fellowship programs promote and create relationships of reciprocity rather than transaction. • Use a variety of tools to sustain and manage engagement. Such diverse methods and approaches help to ensure wide participation in collecting feedback, deep qualitative exploration, and the sharing of results. • Consider using forecast or transformative evaluation approaches to address power dynamics.
Measuring intangible & long-term impact	• Employ methods capable of assessing how program components support long-term impact (i.e. ripple effects mapping (REM) and relationship network mapping). • Leverage A.I. to support protocol creation and outputs, specifically that use storytelling to communicate.
From evidence to influence	• Be intentional in outlining stakeholder needs and priorities to best match these with MEL communications efforts. • Use innovative techniques and tools to communicate creatively and utilize multiple media forms to promote uptake by various audiences. • Honestly acknowledge the potential for positive bias, but also encourage critical feedback by providing multiple input avenues and by demonstrating purposeful consideration of any “non-positive” responses. Mitigate bias by using various data collection strategies.
Building a learning culture & internal buy-in	• Align board leadership priorities to MERL. • Pilot small high-value projects to demonstrate early impact, and where possible, leverage the support of external evaluations to build internal capacity. • Empower staff to use MERL to inform decisions. • Embedding MERL costs - including those to build organizational capacity - into grants for funding sustainability.





Next Steps and Considerations

Broadly, this study illustrates how fellowship experiences – across regions and thematic areas – provide a unique value for leaders in advancing their work by bringing together a wide range of opportunities that balance the development of skills, relationships and professional opportunities in a collaborative environment. Access to these opportunities help leaders overcome barriers that hold them back from contributing to meaningful change. This study also highlights the value of shared spaces for evaluators to define challenges and explore solutions to strengthen how programs can better assess and support alumni impact. In doing so, fellowship programs support the development of mission-driven communities that reinforce how leaders can contribute to and drive change at every level of society.

The findings also leave us with practical questions to consider in the design and management of fellowship programs to improve the impact and value for leaders.

- *How can we leverage peer learning as a resource to enhance other elements of the fellowship experience — like relationship building, professional opportunities, and developing skills?*
- *How can we improve access to fellowship experiences that mitigate barriers to change – like resource constraints, lack of network/connection, and knowledge and skills gaps?*
- *How are we modeling our values in fellowship experiences to empower leaders and support their contributions to change?*

At the same time, more research is needed to capture the influence of fellowship experiences and support practitioners in identifying improvements. This study was exploratory in nature by using non-experimental methods of research – underscoring the importance of building from and testing these findings to improve our understanding of the influences of fellowship experiences. The findings from this study – and the examples shared by consortium partners – illustrate



a growing appetite for more rigorous and creative methods of capturing fellowship impact. From control studies and social network analysis to value for investment analysis and arts-based methods, the range of approaches is expanding, making spacing for programs and professionals to come together to share those insights and strengthen the fellowship ecosystem together – sharing what works, discussing what does not, and exploring innovative approaches to advance the field.



IFN is committed to accelerate innovation in the fellowship sector by bringing research, community, and action together. This study represents a meaningful step forward in understanding how fellowship programs support leaders in driving change. The collaborative research model made it possible — bringing together over 20 organizations and reaching over 1,600 participants from 141 countries — is itself a reflection of the commitment across the sector to learn and grow together. The IFN team looks forward to continuing this work with the fellowship community and encourages all leaders and practitioners in the impact fellowships space to engage with these findings, share their own experiences, and contribute to the growing body of knowledge that strengthens fellowships as a force for positive social change.



Annex: Qualitative Code Directory

The following section is a snapshot of the codes used in the analysis of this study. Importantly, this is not the comprehensive codebook applied to this study. Only codes that appear in this report are included in this directory. Unless otherwise noted, the definitions for each code are consistent across sections.

*Please note under Fellowship experience, the subcode Skills and knowledge development evolved into two separate subcodes—Knowledge and learning environments, and Technical skills development—to better analyze CCRs with Barriers to change.

1. Contributions to change:

Specific references to changes felt or made by alumni at the individual, institution, community or systems level of society that they credit (whether fully or in part) to their fellowship experience or network engagement. This includes references made by partners or beneficiaries about alumni.

- A. Individual-level change:** Captures changes in an alumnus's personal or professional life. This could include career advancement, achieving a personal milestone, overcoming a meaningful challenge, or other accomplishments.
 - I. Increased leadership capacity:** Captures alumni improving or advancing their role as a leader in their organization or community. This could include improved confidence, attending school, career advancement, modeling leadership practices explored during their fellowship, taking on new opportunities and responsibilities, and more.
 - II. Improved sense of expression & belonging:** Captures alumni improving their ability to express themselves authentically or feeling respected, accepted, valued and/or connected in spaces. This could include building supportive relationships, finding community, sharing their culture and values with others, valuing broad perspectives, and more.
 - III. Strengthened technical capacity:** Captures alumni building professional skills relevant to their work. This could include instances of improved use of technology (e.g. social media, AI, infrastructure), training approaches, financial literacy, and more.
- B. Institution-level change:** Captures changes in organizations, government, or other entities with structured procedures and norms. This could include improving processes, developing new solutions, changing the institution's workplace culture or approaches, or other specific examples of influencing their institution or advancing its work.
 - I. Improved Funding:** Captures alumni improving their ability to build sustainable funding for their organizations. This could include increasing overall fundraising, diversifying funding sources, improving the efficiency in which they spend funds, and more.
 - II. Improved Partnership Opportunities:** Captures alumni improving their organization's engagement with local, regional, national, or multilateral actors. This could include NGOs, philanthropies, legislatures (i.e. lawmakers), regulators (i.e. executive), and more.
- C. Community-level change:** Captures changes of groups of people within the larger society. This could include raising awareness on issues, facilitating cross-cultural exposure and dialogue, spreading innovative solutions and approaches, or other specific examples of actively supporting the efforts of others outside of their immediate network or institution.
 - I. Spreading innovative solutions:** Captures alumni working to replicate, scale, or spread innovative solutions beyond their original context. This could include sharing methods or best practices, transferring knowledge to new settings, introducing or piloting a model or approach in a different community, expanding proven initiatives, and more.
 - II. Increased awareness and mobilization:** Captures alumni improving local community organizing efforts around specific issues. This could include campaigns to raise awareness, promote innovating solutions, advocate policy reform and more.

D. System-level change: Captures changes in underlying influences that shape how larger networks of individuals, groups, and institutions in a society function. These could include influencing policies, advancing thought leadership, scaling a solution to address a wider challenge, or other specific examples of efforts to address systemic challenges.

I. Influencing policy or legislation: Captures alumni engaging with governmental or regulatory processes to shape public policy, legislation, or law. This could include advocating for reform, lobbying elected officials, contributing to the drafting of a bill, providing testimony before parliament or congress, and more.

II. Investing in leaders or communities: Captures alumni improving access to leadership or community development opportunities. This could include leading a mentorship program, developing a scholarship fund, facilitating exchange experiences, and more.

III. Strengthening citizen engagement: Captures alumni improving the institutions that support an active citizenry and hold governments accountable. This could include improvements in journalism, local NGO/advocacy groups, access to community centers, and more.

2. Fellowship experience:

Captures the range of structured and informal opportunities that fellowship programs provide to support participants' growth, connection, and capacity.

A. Alumni engagement: Ongoing involvement with a fellowship program or its community after the formal fellowship period has concluded. This could include alumni networks, reunions, continued collaboration on projects, volunteer and advisory roles other formal opportunities facilitated by a fellowship program that sustains connection over time.

B. Cultural exchange and dialogue: Exposure to cultural contexts and perspectives through cross-cultural interaction. This could include international travel, host community engagement, or facilitated dialogue that fosters mutual understanding and broadens participants' worldviews.

C. Financial support: Direct or indirect (i.e. in-kind) funding that enables participants to engage fully in fellowship activities or pursue related initiatives. This could include stipends, grants, tuition costs, travel allowances, or project-based resources that compliment the fellowship experience.

D. Leadership development: Structured experiences with the specific objective of strengthening the ability to lead, influence others, and effect change. This could include leadership assessments, strategic planning exercises, or reflective practices that enhance self-awareness, decision-making, and the capacity to mobilize others.

E. Mentorship and coaching: Guided relationships with experienced professionals or advisors who provide individualized support. This could include formal mentor-mentee pairings, one-on-one coaching sessions, or advisory relationships that offer feedback, encouragement, and strategic guidance.

F. Networking and relationship building: Establishing and cultivating professional or personal connections with individuals, organizations, or institutions beyond one's immediate circle. This could include structured networking events, informal community spaces and activities, or ongoing relationship cultivation that strengthens connection to a broader community.

- G. Peer-learning:** Collaboration or dialogue with people of the same status within a program to share knowledge and experiences relevant to a common topic. This could be structured or informal spaces between fellowship cohort members, alumni or community members that enable participants to learn from each other's experiences, perspectives, and expertise.
- H. Professional opportunities:** Career-advancing experiences facilitated through fellowship participation. This could include internships, job placements, collaborative projects, speaking engagements, or publishing opportunities that enhance participants professional profile or portfolio of work.
- I. Skills and knowledge development:** Acquisition or enhancement of technical, analytical, or practical competencies applicable to participants' professional or civic endeavors. This could include subject-matter coursework, applied research, or experiential learning that deepens expertise in a specific field or discipline.
- J. Workshops and training:** Formal instructional sessions designed to build specific competencies or introduce new concepts relevant to a particular role or industry. This could include facilitated seminars, hands-on skill-building exercises, or technical training that strengthens capacity in targeted areas.
- K. Knowledge and learning environments:** Captures fellowship experiences that helped participants mitigate barriers to change through formal learning spaces and academic resources. This could include access to coursework, research opportunities, academic institutions, subject-matter expertise, or structured educational settings that support the deepening of knowledge in a specific field or discipline.
- L. Technical skills development:** Captures fellowship experiences that helped participants mitigate barriers to change through practical, hands-on training. This could include access to applied workshops, field-based learning, technical certifications, skill-building exercises, or other practice-oriented experiences that strengthen the ability to perform specific tasks or methods.

3. Barriers to change:

Captures a fellow's lived experience that negatively influences their ability to contribute to the change they see as important.

- A. Communication Challenges:** Barriers related to language barriers, difficulty articulating ideas, or challenges in effectively conveying messages to stakeholders.
- B. Cultural factors:** Barriers related to cultural norms, traditions, societal expectations, gender roles, or resistance to change based on cultural beliefs.
- C. Knowledge/ skills gap:** Barriers related to insufficient knowledge, expertise, training, or technical skills needed to implement meaningful change.
- D. Lack of Network/Connections:** Barriers related to insufficient professional networks, limited access to influential contacts, or isolation from relevant communities and stakeholders.
- E. Lack of Support:** Barriers related to insufficient encouragement, backing, or assistance from family, employers, institutions, or community members.

- F. Resource Constraints:** Barriers related to limited financial resources, funding gaps, lack of equipment, infrastructure, or material support needed to advance change.
- G. Self-Doubt/Confidence:** Barriers related to personal insecurities, imposter syndrome, fear of failure, or lack of confidence in one's abilities.
- H. Systemic/Policy Constraints:** Barriers related to institutional, governmental, or structural obstacles including bureaucracy, regulations, political climate, or organizational policies.

4. Motivations for joining a fellowship:

Captures the range of personal, professional, and community-oriented reasons that drive alumni to pursue fellowship participation. This could include a desire for personal development, professional growth, community or organizational impact, expanded networks, new skills, cross-cultural exposure, and more.

- A. Community or organizational impact:** Captures alumni motivated to join the fellowship program by a desire to create meaningful change within their communities or organizations. This could include improving local conditions, strengthening institutional capacity, addressing systemic challenges, advancing a social mission, or driving outcomes that benefit the people and places they serve.
- B. Personal development:** Captures alumni motivated to join the fellowship program by a desire to grow on a personal level. This could include building self-awareness, gaining new perspectives, strengthening confidence, exploring purpose or identity, cultivating resilience, or pursuing transformative experiences that shape who they are beyond their professional roles.

5. Fellowship design:

Characteristic of a fellowship experience that are noted as valuable, contribute to change or help mitigate barriers to change by an alumnus.

- A. Cohort-structured engagement:** Captures fellowship experiences facilitated through a defined group of participants who progress through the program together. This could include shared curricula, group-based activities, collective reflection, or sequential programming that fosters a sense of shared identity, mutual accountability, and collaborative learning among cohort members.
- B. In-person programming:** Captures fellowship experiences facilitated through face-to-face interaction in a physical setting. This could include on-site workshops, residential gatherings, field visits, community immersions, or co-located activities that enable direct engagement, relationship building, and experiential learning in ways that depend on physical presence.



IFN 2026 Impact Study

A study on the impact of fellowship experiences and the role of programs that support leaders in driving change.

