

“A Stepping Stone That Just Pushed Me Further Into Wanting to Go to University”: Student Perspectives on ‘What Works’ for Effective Outreach Strategies for Indigenous Students

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Abstract

In Australia, there are numerous outreach initiatives run by universities for Indigenous high school students that attempt to elevate aspirations of Indigenous students to go to university. The theoretical case for these initiatives is strong as much data exists surrounding the barriers Indigenous students face in entering university. However, the research and evidence base for these equity programs remains largely underdeveloped and limited (Bennett et al., 2015). Drawing on findings from interviews with Indigenous university students as part of a National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (NCSEHE) Equity Fellowship, this paper identifies what works and what areas to strengthen in Indigenous specific outreach programs. The paper concludes by discussing the development of strategies and resources to build the evidence base of effective outreach activities for Indigenous students.

Keywords: Indigenous students; outreach; transition; student success.

Introduction

While the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander¹ students participating in higher education has markedly increased since the 1960s, Indigenous students are still grossly underrepresented in higher education. The Universities Australia (UA) *Indigenous Strategy Annual Report* noted that although Indigenous Australian people comprise about 3.1 per cent of Australia’s overall population, they accounted for only 1.9 per cent of higher education enrolments in 2018 (UA, 2020, p. 12). There is a need to continue to build pathways and raise levels of aspiration and confidence of Indigenous students to consider university study as an option (Behrendt et al., 2012; UA, 2017). The majority of universities run outreach initiatives for Indigenous school students that attempt to elevate their aspirations to go to university (Brady, 2012). Many of these programs involve week-long camp experiences that bring school students onto university campuses for information sessions, workshops and events that attempt to demystify university culture and cultivate a sense of belonging to build and sustain student engagement (Kinnane et al., 2014). However, there is a “relative dearth of publicly available, peer-reviewed research or evaluation, conducted with rigorous methodologies, on the effects of equity initiatives” (Naylor et al., 2013, p. 7). Further Gore et al. (2017) report that “the evidence base for equity initiatives targeting Indigenous students is weak” (p. 165). This

¹ While acknowledging the diversity among and between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, in this article the term “Indigenous” is used to respectfully refer to both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.



could be because “it is much harder to obtain data and evaluate an initiative’s effectiveness, given that other factors such as differences in the student body, school culture, staff capacities and other factors may confound the analysis” (Naylor et al. 2013, p. 16).

This paper draws on findings from a National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (NCSEHE) Equity Fellowship which focused on outreach programs for Indigenous students and examined what works and what could be improved in these programs. Drawing on findings from interviews with Indigenous university students, this paper focuses on student perspectives of what was deemed as successful in outreach camps for Indigenous students and strategies to strengthen and improve outreach camps specifically for Indigenous students. The paper then discusses the development of strategies and resources to build the evidence base of effective outreach activities for Indigenous students.

Our Positioning

Katelyn developed an interest in outreach programs and pathways into higher education for Indigenous students through her work in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies Unit at The University of Queensland (UQ) over the last 12 years. She is a non-Indigenous woman who grew up on Jagera and Turrbal country in Brisbane, Queensland. She has completed several projects with Indigenous researchers and is particularly passionate about the possibilities of collaborative research projects and partnerships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers as a way of working to privilege Indigenous knowledges, build dialogue, and contribute to a way forward for Indigenous and non-Indigenous people to work together. These numerous projects then led her to undertake this Equity Fellowship. The Fellowship built on her established national partnerships and collaborations by working closely with an expert Indigenous advisory group and Indigenous research assistant Hayley Williams.

Hayley is a Gamilaroi woman from Tingha in New South Wales, who grew up on Gubbi Gubbi country on the Sunshine Coast in Queensland. She now lives on Jagera and Turrbal country in Brisbane, Queensland. Hayley has worked in various areas of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health in communities and hospitals over the last 10 years. She is particularly passionate about privileging Indigenous knowledges and stories to improve Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and adolescents social and emotional wellbeing. Hayley became involved as a research assistant in the Equity Fellowship after having experienced the benefits of going through an outreach program herself and is passionate about helping other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students reach their full potential.

Background

Outreach programs are identified as important for building Indigenous student aspirations (Behrendt et al., 2012), and a number of universities run week-long, intensive camp experiences that bring Indigenous school students onto university campuses for information sessions, workshops and events. However, high-quality, research-based evidence of the impact of these programs is limited. It is unclear when the first outreach programs specifically for Indigenous students occurred, but the number of outreach programs have grown substantially since the implementation of Australia’s Higher Education Participation and Partnership Program (HEPPP) funding in 2010. In response to the government sponsored *Review of Australian Higher Education* (Bradley et al., 2008), the HEPPP was introduced to improve higher education participation among people from low socioeconomic status (low SES) backgrounds (DEEWR, 2009). HEPPP funding that is provided to all Australian public universities has led to an expansion in outreach programs for prospective students and also in retention and support programs for low SES university students (DEEWR, 2009). Outreach is defined in the HEPPP evaluation final report as being activities aimed to “increase awareness of higher education pathways, opportunities and associated careers by supporting and developing aspirations and expectations” (ACIL Allen Consulting, 2017, p. 43). Outreach activities include aspiration raising, academic preparation and support for school students, on-campus visits to demystify university, peer mentoring programs, and academic skills development workshops. Programs are also provided for specific cohorts, such as Indigenous students.

Outreach programs are most commonly provided to secondary school students in years 10 to 12 (Naylor et al., 2013, p. 43), although outreach for earlier years of schooling is increasing (Cupitt et al., 2016). As Kinnane et al. (2014) note “many universities collaborate with schools and communities to provide outreach to a great number of Indigenous students” (p. 80). This Fellowship focused on intensive camps for Indigenous students, which are part of a suite of outreach activities being undertaken by universities for Indigenous students (Bennett et al., 2015, pp. 38-39). Other forms of outreach include one-day

university experiences, mentoring programs, and school visits. However, on-campus camps for Indigenous students are currently used at 24 universities across Australia. Outreach camps for Indigenous students share many similarities and usually provide three to five day on-campus experiences for school students, a variety of information sessions, and workshops and events led by Indigenous and non-Indigenous outreach staff as well as Indigenous student ambassadors and mentors. These activities all aim to demystify university culture, so that, hopefully, those students enrol in and attend university.

Methodology

The Fellowship was a one-year project and involved a mixed-methods approach (combining qualitative and quantitative methods) to identify the range of outreach strategies and initiatives that are used to increase access to higher education specifically for Indigenous students. Two Indigenous advisory group meetings were held during the Fellowship to ensure that expert Indigenous advice, feedback and perspectives were interwoven through the Fellowship. Regular online discussions with advisory group members were also conducted. The advisory group members included Associate Professor Clair Andersen, Professor Tracey Bunda, Professor Bronwyn Fredericks, Associate Professor Graeme Gower, Professor Martin Nakata and Professor Maria Raciti. Katelyn also worked with an Indigenous evaluator, Professor Susan Page, who provided formative evaluation throughout the Fellowship by monitoring progress, attending advisory group meetings and providing regular formative feedback throughout all phases of the Fellowship.

This inquiry focuses on qualitative interview data from two case studies of outreach camps and draws on the perspectives of Indigenous university students who participated in these outreach camps while at school. This study focused on answering the following research questions: 1) what are the strengths of the programs?; and 2) what could be improved? Working closely with staff at selected universities, qualitative data was collected from 20 Indigenous tertiary students (10 from each case study site) who had previously attended outreach activities before transitioning to university. This project received ethical approval from The University of Queensland Human Research Ethics Committee (ethics number: 2020000909). All recorded interview data was transcribed by a professional transcription service and then de-identified with names, locations and institutions replaced with codes. The transcripts were imported into NVivo 12 and underwent line-by-line coding to enable the identification of themes. The themes were repeatedly examined and analysed for consistent themes and sub-themes. This process was complemented by a reflective journal that involved interrogating and examining the themes. This paper discusses two success factors and two areas to strengthen outreach camps that were identified as common to both programs during the interviews with students. Other Fellowship findings will be discussed in future publications.

About the Programs

Both camps were held at large metropolitan universities during the school holidays. Program 1 has been running since 2014 and involves 5 discipline-specific camps held over the year. Coordinated by three Indigenous outreach staff, most of the camps in Program 1 are designed for students in years 11 and 12 with one camp for years 9 and 10. This camp is usually attended by about 20 students who stay in a residential college for the five nights. The aim of this camp is to provide Indigenous students with insight into the wide range of study options. Students apply for the camps and are chosen according to criteria based on their academic merit including achieving Bs or higher on school reports from year 7 to the current year, having a 90 per cent school attendance, and being on an ATAR (Australian Tertiary Admission Rank) pathway. Program 2 is coordinated by one non-Indigenous outreach staff member in collaboration with other non-Indigenous staff and Indigenous student ambassadors who work as leaders on the camp. This camp is focused on a specific disciplinary area and has been running since 2010. This week-long camp is run once a year during school holidays and is open to students in years 9 to 12, with 20 to 25 students attending each year. Both camps involve students participating in interactive workshops and lectures, and workplace/industry visits. Students receive guidance from student ambassadors and industry experts about study and career opportunities. The students had diverse pathways from school into university with some transitioning straight into university, others taking a gap year before commencing university, and others attending one university before transferring to another. These varied pathways demonstrate the difficulties in tracking students through school into university. Many of the students participated in multiple outreach programs while at school.

Student Perspectives on Strengths of Camps: Connections and Cultural Aspects

The connections and relationships that students made — particularly peer-to-peer and student-to-ambassador — while attending the camps are a key success factor of both camps. Peer-to-peer connections were significant with the opportunity to meet like-minded Indigenous students with aspirations to attend university:

I think the best aspect for me was being around like-minded young Indigenous students like myself who wanted to go to university and wanted to pursue further education. [Program 1]

It was good for me to meet other people who are like-minded ... I'm even in contact with a few of them. I was thinking of moving in with them while I'm doing university. [Program 1]

I was able to spend time with about 20, 25 other students from different high schools around the state ... I'm actually still in contact with quite a few of them. [Program 2]

I got to meet a lot more of a larger network and a lot more people in the Indigenous community here, which was really nice because, like, all my family is from elsewhere. [Program 2]

This was particularly important as students noted they were often one of few Indigenous students at their school:

At my school we had very, very low Indigenous numbers ... so I never really got those opportunities to hang out with young Indigenous students my age and discuss about things that we have experienced ... going to those camps and having those chances of rooms filled with these students was so good. [Program 1]

Just getting to know everybody from their different cultures and values, knowing that there's other like-minded people the same as yourself. I think that was more of a personal one for me. Because growing up, I didn't really know too many other Indigenous people following the same sort of lifestyle as me at the time. So, it was kind of a relief. It was like, oh, there's great opportunity still. [Program 2]

I'm from a smaller school in [town], and there were no other Indigenous students in my grade. It was great to be able to get to know people in that sort of environment. [Program 1]

Some students also spoke about the connections they made with student ambassadors/mentors who were current Indigenous university students working on the camps:

I love the fact that the people that were running the camp were students of the uni already, and that they were Indigenous students, as well. [Program 1]

They kind of told you straight what uni was like and what you'd go through and stuff like that. There wasn't really any hand-holding which was kind of nice. They were just very much like, this is for real. You've got to work; you can't just come in here expecting to do nothing. [Program 2]

The mentors we had were really nice. They were all Indigenous and really passionate about Indigenous education and outreach programs and stuff and I could see that. They wanted to be there and that was cool. [Program 2]

Certainly ambassadors/mentors play an important role in leading the activities in both camps and staying with the students in accommodation. They also act as mentors to the students and answer questions about studying at university.

The importance of having the opportunity to connect with one's own cultural identity during both camps was also highlighted by many students, especially as some students did not have many opportunities to connect with their identities in other contexts such as at school or home:

I definitely think it was getting to connect with my heritage more, and connecting with others because I'm from a smaller school ... and there were no other Indigenous students in my grade. [Program 1]

It just really allowed you to express your Indigenous culture. [Program 1]

When I was younger, I didn't know too much about it. ... He [an Elder] was really good with it, because he — on the first night, he came in and he did the smoke ceremony with us all, and just told us a bit about — well, some stories and a bit of our culture and stuff that no-one, a lot of us, didn't know about — like a bit more sense of the community. That was really good. I loved that. [Program 2]

We did a lot of activities like getting to know each other and then we did a lot of activities about our background, about what we thought, cultural-wise, and I really, really enjoyed that because you don't really get to experience that at school or anything. So it's nice to be with like-minded people. [Program 1]

These cultural activities are very affirming for students and celebrate their Indigenous identities, especially for students who are unsure about their identities and cultural knowledge. This illustrates that both outreach camps are much more than just finding out what uni is about and highlights the importance of cultural activities within camps to provide opportunities for students to connect with like-minded Indigenous students and help affirm their Indigenous selves (Raciti et al., 2017). Overall, the strengths of both camps included the connections students make with each other and the student ambassadors leading the camps, and the cultural aspects of the camps.

Student Perspectives on Areas to Strengthen: More Post-Engagement and Indigenous Perspectives in the Curriculum

The need to improve post-camp engagement was highlighted by numerous students who spoke about the lack of follow up from the camps:

I believe one of the staff members contacted us with a letter to see how we went ... But after that, I don't think we really had anything after that. But yes, the follow-ups could be improved, I believe. [Program 1]

That would be good if there was more engagement. [Program 1]

No-one contacted me after the camp. I'm not sure if they did for other people. But as far as I'm aware, there wasn't for me. [Program 2]

There was no communication after the camp until university started back up [Program 2]

However, students from Program 2 had mixed responses relating to post-engagement with some discussing positive experiences of their engagement with staff after the camp (the outreach staff member's name has been changed to the pseudonym John):

Obviously, I'm still in contact with John and also some of his contacts. [Program 2]

Me and John speak quite frequently. Yeah, no, there's quite a lot of follow-up. [Program 2]

Other students suggested post-camp engagement activities:

If they could have organised a meet-up again, after the thing, to get everyone to — that sort of thing. I understand that's hard, because at this camp everyone was literally from everywhere, all over the state ... So, I understand that's hard but that would have been nice to have sort of a meet-up thing after the camp, a few months later or something. [Program 1]

But I think that's definitely something that — [I've] been trying to push and I think it is a good thing to push, hence I'm trying to stay in contact with a few of them and be just like, hey guys, how are you doing? Because I think that's good, checking up and being like, how are you doing, even if they don't necessarily — like even if it's, I'm going good, at least it prompts that thought process. [Program 2]

Students also discussed the need to improve the camps' inclusion of Indigenous perspectives in curriculum, emphasising the need for the hands-on activities within the camps to be further indigenised:

We're at an Indigenous camp; we're all Indigenous; we should be talking about Indigenous perspectives within our degrees. [Program 1]

At the end of the day it is a camp for Indigenous students, but I think there could be some more aspects incorporated throughout the camp. [Program 1]

We celebrate Western perspectives on this kind of stuff ... but especially, like, Indigenous knowledge with biology and coming into the world of biotech and genetic engineering and stuff like that, I feel like Indigenous people have a massive, massive place in that area, because they know how the plants react, how things react, how stuff like that happens which can be instrumental in saving a lot of people from starving in the next hundred years or whatever. Yeah, I just wish it [the curriculum] was a bit more diverse. [Program 2]

It would also be very nice to see how it's been adapted and used, especially when it comes to things like hunting or in the smaller Indigenous communities; I think that would have been very interesting to cover as well, in a hands-on experience. [Program 2]

Students also noted that more discussion and reflection on cultural identity within the camps would further strengthen the camps:

I think there are some more cultural aspects that probably could be involved, whether it be just little things throughout the day or even the nights to focus on that. As I said, at my school we had a very low Indigenous population there, so going to this where I know I'm surrounded by Indigenous students, it would be good to experience and learn. That's one thing I noticed is during the introductions a lot of students that were there that didn't really know much. [Program 1]

That would probably be great if we could do more, just because I feel like we never really get the chance to speak about that. It was just so nice hearing other people's perspectives and being able to share your own story, like your family background. That would probably be — if I had any improvements, that would probably be one thing, just maybe to focus on that a bit more because I feel like it's hard for people to speak up about that unless they're in a setting like this where it's very, very comfortable. [Program 1]

Overall, both camps play an important role in creating a safe space for students to connect with each other, with ambassadors, and with their own cultural identities. Including more post-camp follow up and further Indigenous perspectives in the camps content would further strengthen the programs.

Discussion

Connections: Peers and Ambassadors

The strong peer-to-peer connections/friendships that were formed during the camps were identified by students as key elements of the camps. Many of the students continued these connections onto campus when they attended university. As one student noted during an interview: “It was really beneficial for me just having the community of people and knowing that when I come to uni there's going to be people who I know”. This is similar to Cuthill and Jansen's (2013) findings that the UQ Young Achievers program strengthened students “social connections and support through meeting like-minded peers and their student mentors” (p. 16). Drummond et al. (2012) also found in relation to a mentoring program that “higher education aspirations can be shaped by friendships and in-group identification” (p. 39).

These connections are particularly important for Indigenous students because, as some students pointed out in interviews, university can be a very difficult, colonial space for Indigenous students to navigate. This is supported by Paige et al. (2016), who report that universities can be “unfamiliar, unsupportive and challenging” places for Indigenous students (p. vi). The connections made between Indigenous school students and Indigenous university student ambassadors were also deemed highly important to students. As one student noted in an interview, student ambassadors can answer “those really hard-hitting cultural questions: What's it like to be an Aboriginal person at a very old, white institution?”. Similarly, a student who had attended an outreach program and is now an ambassador viewed their role as “to impart on them [school students] about being an Aboriginal person in a very white and traditional institution”. This aligns with Bennett et al. (2015) who point out that student mentoring “stands out as an important aspect of effective outreach initiatives ... where university students build relationships with high school students and assist them to develop their awareness of higher education opportunities and pathways” (p. 41). The interviews with students also demonstrate that in some cases students who participated in the programs are now ambassadors/mentors themselves. This is supported by the HEPPP evaluation final report, which also found that

mentors are often students who were involved in outreach activities while they were at school (ACIL Allen Consulting, 2017, p. 54). As Cupitt et al. (2016) emphasise, student ambassadors are certainly “in a unique position to bridge gaps between institutions and individuals within those institutions” (p. 23).

The Importance of Cultural Aspects and Indigenous Perspectives in Outreach Programs

Cultural aspects, such as yarning circles about cultural identity, are often included in outreach camps for Indigenous students. These sessions were highlighted by students as particularly important components and can play a role in strengthening a student’s own cultural connections. Students also emphasised during interviews the importance of having the opportunity to connect with their own cultural identities on the camp, particularly as some students did not have many opportunities to do this in other contexts such as at school. Cultural aspects were also highlighted as an area that could be strengthened in outreach programs to allow more opportunities for students to reflect on and connect with their own cultural identities. This links with Bodkin-Andrews et al. (2017), who emphasise that “researchers and teachers need to recognise the importance of cultural identity as a positive driver for schooling motivation and future aspirations” and that “a positive sense of cultural identity” is “the strongest predictor of many of the motivational and future aspirational outcomes” (p. 26 & 28).

In addition, the importance of embedding Indigenous perspectives in the “hands-on” activities included in outreach camps was noted by students during interviews as an aspect that could be further strengthened. As Fredericks et al. (2015) point out, learning content in university contexts often “reflects very little, if any, Indigenous perspectives” (p. 1). Paige et al. (2016) argue that “culturally responsive pedagogy” is needed to support Indigenous students’ learning outcomes and provide examples of engaging with Indigenous knowledges and cultural contexts in teaching and learning (p. 26). Certainly, the important work of embedding Indigenous perspectives in curricula is being undertaken at a number of universities across Australia. However, Page et al. (2017) emphasise that including Indigenous perspectives in curricula and achieving “sustainable curriculum change requires dedication and resources ... human resources will be required, including experienced Indigenous academics, who can lead the change” (p. 47).

Strengthening Post-camp Engagement

The importance of maintaining post-camp engagement with students was emphasised by students as an aspect of outreach camps that needs improvement overall. Strong post-camp engagement is listed by Gale et al. (2010) in their Design and Evaluation Matrix for Outreach as a key strategy for effective outreach. They outline that effective outreach programs are long-term, sustained and call for “an approach that requires the development of ongoing relationships between young people and those in a position to offer them ongoing guidance which relates to their situation and capacities” (p. 6). Student perspectives on post-camp engagement were mixed. Some students that attended Program 2 noted that one particular outreach staff member had maintained contact with them. Another student who had participated in multiple programs noted that one program did provide regular follow up with emails, online catch-ups and alumni events. Strengthening post-camp engagement is particularly important to further support students in their pathways to university, and could also support evaluation by creating opportunities for feedback from students regarding what worked and what could be improved in outreach programs.

Limitations

There are inevitably some methodological limitations to this research. The qualitative aspects of the Fellowship involved students (and outreach staff and caregivers/parents) being asked for their views based on their experience and these responses are by nature subjective. Another possible limitation in relation to evaluating outreach programs, as outlined by Harrison and Waller (2017, pp. 83-84) is the influence of:

- Selection and self-selection biases: Those students already predisposed towards education are more likely to disproportionately take up opportunities.
- Priming and social desirability effects: Young people become attuned to the idea that there are a “correct collection of attitudes to express to practitioners, teachers and parents”.
- Deadweight and leakage: Deadweight is described as when “a disadvantaged young person who was already on the pathway to higher education without the need for outreach activities participates” while leakage is when “the targeting method fails and relatively advantaged individuals are erroneously included within the target group ... it will tend to

cause an over-estimation of an activity's effectiveness by capturing individuals who were always likely to apply to university".

However, the findings within this article are also informed by the wider body of knowledge regarding evaluation of outreach programs from other national and international research. Care has been taken to ensure that findings derived from the qualitative interview data are also supported by other research and/or other relevant data. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that these findings are generally transferable to the wider context of outreach programs for Indigenous students in Australia.

Conclusion

Outreach programs for Indigenous school students that involve bringing students to university campuses have been identified as a critical strategy to facilitate successful pathways for Indigenous students into higher education. Despite this, there was very limited evidence of effective outreach initiatives prior to this research. The Fellowship was a timely and valuable way of addressing this gap by building a stronger evidence base about effective outreach strategies for Indigenous students through a high-impact research project with key stakeholder networks. Findings from interviews with students are particularly valuable as they provide rich stories and narratives about the experiences of students in relation to outreach programs. Their perspectives highlight the strengths and the areas to improve outreach programs for Indigenous students. As Bunda reinforces:

The concept of narrative and storying is much more a part of an Indigenous practice than the hard data in numbers, in the statistics. That's not to say I dismiss that statistical information. But it's the narrative, it's the story that needs to be important in terms of thinking about the work we're doing in Indigenous higher education (cited in Smith et al., 2018, p. 38).

As part of the Fellowship, suggested strategies have been developed for outreach staff to assist them in strengthening camps:

- Ensure post-program engagement with students is strong. This continues the connection with students to strengthen a focus on the "whole-of-student-life-cycle" approach, supporting the student through school, into university, and beyond to maintain the relationship and connection.
- Work collaboratively with Indigenous academic staff across the university to ensure Indigenous perspectives are embedded within the "hands-on" activities included in the camps, being mindful to recognise and be aware of the additional workload. The issue of hidden workloads of Indigenous academic staff is discussed by Page and Asmar (2008).
- Discuss with university leadership and sponsors/funders of the program, the multiple understandings of what "success" means in relation to the camp from different stakeholder perspectives.
- Draw on available resources to develop a stronger approach to evaluation of programs (e.g., Naylor, 2015; Wilkins & de Vries, 2014).

Practical resources are being developed for outreach practitioners to assist them in understanding the processes of evaluation in the context of outreach programs for Indigenous students. This includes video clips with key Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers discussing practical steps and processes for evaluating outreach programs as well as a podcast, co-hosted with Professor Tracey Bunda, which focuses on interviews with key Indigenous stakeholders about "what works" in relation to Indigenous outreach programs. Continuing to strengthen the evidence base for effective outreach camps—in the context of COVID-19 restrictions and beyond—will assist in improving and implementing stronger programs to support the transition of Indigenous students into higher education. The interviews with Indigenous students demonstrate that outreach camps play an important role in encouraging Indigenous students to transition into university. As one student described, the camp was "a stepping stone that just pushed me further into wanting to go to university". The power of stepping onto a university campus to participate in an outreach program cannot be underestimated.

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