



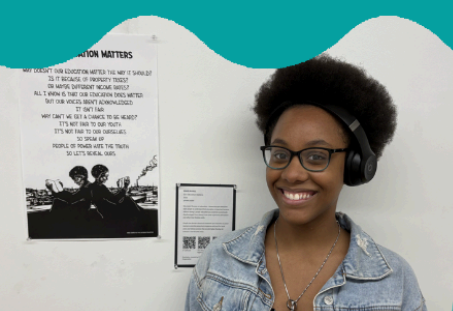


LEAP Annual Report

Leadership, Excellence, Access, Persistence

June 2026

Carnegie Mellon University
Dietrich College of Humanities and Social Sciences





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Executive Summary

Program Overview

LEAP is an educational program at CMU that empowers high school students to become agents of social change through storytelling in the arts and humanities.

Key Achievements 2025-2026

- Piloted a new sophomore-year program
- Served approximately 100 students (a 170% increase from last year)
- Became an Approved Pittsburgh Public School Out-of-School-Time Provider
- Expanded school partnerships to include Pittsburgh Science & Technology Academy and The Barack Obama Academy of International Studies
- Hosted workshops with over 37 guest instructors

Measurable Impact

- **90%** of students reported feeling highly comfortable on a college campus as a result of their participation in LEAP
- **80%** of students reported knowing people and organizations in their community they can partner with to create positive change
- **86.7%** of students gained significant confidence in expressing their ideas
- **100%** of seniors graduated from high school; 88% enrolled in postsecondary education immediately after graduation; 100% plan to continue their education within two years

Looking Ahead

- Launch a LEAP course in the history department, directly connecting CMU students and LEAP high school participants
- Pilot a new senior model, leveraging support from Duolingo's Social Impacts team
- Facilitate the K-12 Engagement Assistant program with CMU's Gelfand Center

A Note from the Program Director

Dear friends,

This year, LEAP expanded its reach and impact across the greater Pittsburgh community in ways we have been building toward for years.

One major milestone was becoming an Approved Out-of-School-Time Provider for Pittsburgh Public Schools and expanding our school partnerships. In addition to continuing our collaboration with our co-founding school, City Charter High School, we established new relationships with Pittsburgh Science & Technology Academy and The Barack Obama Academy of International Studies. It was exciting to connect with new teachers, students, and the broader PPS community this year!

Another highlight was the launch of a pilot program for high school sophomores. Students shared that LEAP opened their eyes to subjects and careers in the arts and humanities they had never previously considered. We are eager to continue building relationships with many of these students as they move through the program in the years ahead.

LEAP's relationship with students extends beyond their time in high school. Another watershed moment for the program came in the spring when many of the students from our very first student cohort earned college degrees, launched careers, or continued building businesses. Seeing graduation photos, hearing updates, and reconnecting with these alumni was a remarkable moment of reflection and celebration for the LEAP team.

As LEAP continues to grow, we remain inspired by the impact our students have in the world – during and after their time at LEAP. Thank you to all of our partners, colleagues, and supporters who make this work possible. Let's keep building together!

In community,

Sarah Ceurvorst
LEAP Program Director



About LEAP

LEAP is an educational program that empowers under-resourced high school students to become agents of social change through storytelling in the arts and humanities. It provides a supportive environment for students to learn, create, and lead.

Students learn with local artists, scholars, and community leaders. Through hands-on experiences, they engage in personal reflection, artistic expression, and civic action. Students develop the confidence, love of learning, and self-efficacy needed to envision and build a better future.

What We Believe:

- The arts and humanities are powerful tools for personal and community transformation.
- Every student brings knowledge, resources, talent, and power to the program.
- Learning is reciprocal—we grow with and learn from our students.
- Students' time and expertise are valuable and deserve compensation.

What We Do:

- **Mentorship**
  Ongoing, personalized support from CMU faculty and staff, including academic and personal advising, recommendation letters, and career guidance.
- **Learning on Campus**
  Regular workshops on CMU's campus led by faculty and community leaders, exploring equity through storytelling, artmaking, critical dialogue, and writing.
- **Student-Led Public Events**
  Platforms for students to share their learning and lead conversations around the issues and stories they are passionate about.
- **Reflection**
  Continuous evaluation to assess growth and impact.
- **Monthly Stipends**
  Compensation that removes barriers to participation for out-of-school time programming.

History of the LEAP Program

2020

CMU professor Dr. Nico Slate and City Charter High teacher Dr. Mark Barga co-teach a course in which CMU undergraduates learn alongside high school students from City High. Students express a strong desire to expand this work, particularly through opportunities that combine humanities learning, creative practice, and exposure to postsecondary pathways.

2021

With support from Ayana Ledford, the Associate Dean for Community Impact & Educational Outreach at CMU's Dietrich College, the LEAP program officially launches with 19 twelfth grade students from City Charter High School. Sarah Ceurvorst, the inaugural LEAP Program Director, is hired, establishing the program's foundational leadership and structure.

2022

LEAP expands eligibility to include eleventh grade students, widening access and creating opportunities for longer-term student engagement.

2023

The LEAP Workshop Assistant position is created for a CMU graduate student to support programming. During this year, the LEAP curriculum is researched, developed, and formally written.

2024

LEAP establishes a dedicated home-base space in Baker Hall A60G, creating a consistent and welcoming environment where students can see themselves reflected within the CMU community. Programming for eleventh and twelfth grade students becomes differentiated, allowing participants to engage in two years of distinct, scaffolded learning experiences.

2025

LEAP expands again by launching programming for tenth grade students. The program now serves 100 students annually through an intentional three-year developmental arc. CMU student involvement is increased with the establishment of the K–12 Engagement Assistant program with The Leonard Gelfand Center for Service Learning and Outreach's. LEAP also becomes an Approved Out-of-School Time Partner for Pittsburgh Public Schools and expands school partnerships to include: City Charter High School, Pittsburgh Science & Technology Academy, and The Barack Obama Academy of International Studies

2026

Dr. Nico Slate will teach *Education, Democracy, and the Arts* course at CMU, directly integrating undergraduate students into LEAP programming and engagement efforts.

‘25-’26 Student Cohort

The 2025–26 Student Cohort consisted of sophomores, juniors, and seniors from City Charter High School (CCHS), Pittsburgh Science & Technology Academy (SciTech), and The Barack Obama Academy of International Studies (Obama). LEAP students represented more than 20 ZIP codes across the greater Pittsburgh region, with the majority coming from low-income or under-resourced households.

Sophomore Cohort

Sophomore participants were recruited from all three partner schools and joined the program through a combination of self-selection and teacher recommendations.

- 21 sophomores came from CCHS
- 25 sophomores came from SciTech
- 15 sophomores came from Obama

Junior Cohort

The Junior Cohort consisted of 16 students, all from LEAP's long-term partner school, CCHS. Students were selected through a competitive application process that included essay submissions and review by CCHS faculty and staff.



Senior Cohort

The Senior Cohort consisted of 16 students who successfully completed the LEAP Junior Program during the previous academic year. All senior participants attended CCHS, reflecting LEAP's commitment to supporting students through multiple years of scaffolded programming.

Programming

LEAP's programming is scaffolded across three years to ensure deep learning and engagement.

Sophomore Program | Exploration

This academic year, LEAP piloted a sophomore program. It was an opportunity for us to connect with students at a younger age and introduce them to LEAP's focus on social change brought about through storytelling in the arts and humanities. It allowed LEAP to expand access and build early relationships and expectations with students and schools in preparation for the more intensive junior and senior programs, which require a high level of commitment and independence.

Sophomores participated in **quarterly field trips during the school day** with their school. These field trips explored storytelling across disciplines in the arts and humanities, guided by CMU faculty, staff, students, and partners.

FIELD TRIP 1



Visual Art

Students created mixed-media self-portraits that explored who they are – not just how they look. They used visual storytelling to express their perspectives, values, and passions.

FIELD TRIP 2



Writing

Students explored literary works about Pittsburgh and developed their own place-based writing. Professor Ed Simon guided students through the writing process using observation, memory, and imagination.

FIELD TRIP 3



Theater

Students attended a matinee performance at CMU's School of Drama, participated in a hands-on pre-show theater workshop with the show's director, and engaged in a post-show talkback with the show's creative team.

FIELD TRIP 4



Design & Tech

Students visited Duolingo's Pittsburgh headquarters and participated in a design workshop. They explored storytelling through design while gaining exposure to the variety of careers in the tech industry.

Junior Program | Building Concepts & Skills

11th grade students from partner high schools applied to join LEAP's Junior Cohort, a selective program for students who are passionate about the arts, humanities, and/or civic engagement. Juniors participated in regular weekend sessions on CMU's campus and received compensation for their time, helping reduce financial barriers to participation.

Storytelling Frameworks

Throughout the year, students were introduced to storytelling frameworks that use the creative process to analyze social issues. They examined how individuals and institutions use storytelling to shape beliefs, behaviors, and systems.

Community Connections

Students participated in hands-on workshops with local artists, scholars, and organizations that put these concepts into practice. Through these workshops, they deepened their skills, expanded their networks, and discovered community assets across Pittsburgh.

Culminating Projects

The program culminated with student-designed projects that address issues they care about, utilizing the concepts and skills developed throughout the year. Students presented their projects to friends, families, educators, and community members at a public showcase.







Senior Program | Community Application

12th grade students built on their previous LEAP experience by applying the storytelling frameworks, creative practices, and community knowledge they developed in earlier years. Like Junior Cohort members, seniors participated in programming outside of school hours and received compensation, helping reduce financial barriers to participation.

Community Partnerships

Students learned with and from local artists, nonprofit organizations, and community leaders who use the arts and humanities to address real-world challenges in Pittsburgh. Through these partnerships, they expanded their networks, strengthened their understanding of community assets, and explored how creative practice can contribute to social change. Students recognized their role within Pittsburgh's broader ecosystem of artists, educators, and community organizations working toward positive change.

Culminating Projects

The senior year culminated in student-designed creative projects that reflected their learning and addressed issues they care about. Seniors presented their work alongside the Junior Cohort at LEAP's annual public showcase, sharing their projects with friends, family, educators, and community members.







Our Impact

LEAP evaluates our impact through surveys, as well as written and verbal reflections.

What Students Say About LEAP:

- *"It has allowed me to get closer to people I would've never talked to outside of school. I genuinely feel as though I've established a community."*
- *"LEAP has affected my understanding of social justice. I understood prior to LEAP the problems and issues happening in our world, but I was unsure on how to tackle these issues or how people can help. Through LEAP I have met many people who work towards change, and different ways they go about doing that. It inspired me to think more creatively about solutions. Also LEAP has affected my post high school plans to be more humanitarian."*



- *"The best thing about LEAP is the guest speakers coming to educate us in their fields and letting us know what change we can make."*
- *"LEAP has made me more confident to share my artwork, and made me more confident about using art to enact social change. I've become more steady in wanting to change the world and my community for the better. I want to do my best to really make an impact on people, to change minds and hopefully benefit marginalized communities."*

Highlights of LEAP's Impact:

- **90%** of students reported feeling highly comfortable on a college campus because of their participation in LEAP.
- **80%** reported knowing people and organizations in their community they could partner with to create positive change.
- **86.7%** reported increased confidence in expressing their ideas.
- **60%** said LEAP had a significant impact on helping them determine what they want to do after high school.
- **100%** of LEAP seniors graduated from high school; **88%** enrolled in postsecondary education immediately after graduation.; **100%** plan to continue their education within two years.

Looking Ahead

We are excited to build on our successes and expand our impact. Below are some of our goals for the coming years:



Expanding the Junior Cohort

Building on the success of LEAP's sophomore pilot program with three school partners, the 2026-2027 Junior Cohort will welcome students from additional partner schools, including City Charter High School, Pittsburgh Science and Technology Academy, and Barack Obama Academy. This partnership expansion will broaden access to LEAP's programming, strengthen relationships across Pittsburgh-area schools, and create a more diverse cohort of students.



Launching a CMU Undergraduate Course

Beginning in Fall 2026, LEAP's Faculty Director, Dr. Nico Slate, will teach *Education, Democracy, and the Arts*, a new undergraduate history course at CMU. LEAP seniors will participate alongside CMU students, creating opportunities for near-peer mentorship, meaningful feedback on student projects, and deeper exploration of the role of the arts in civic life. The course will also help demystify the college experience while strengthening connections between LEAP and the university community.



Creating Leadership Opportunities for Seniors

In the 2026-2027 academic year, LEAP seniors will partner with a local nonprofit organization – Community Forge. Students will work with Community Forge staff to identify community priorities and co-design creative projects that respond to real organizational needs. LEAP seniors will apply the frameworks



and skills they have developed throughout the program to create meaningful local impact.

This initiative, developed in collaboration with Duolingo's Social Impact team, will provide LEAP seniors with authentic leadership opportunities while strengthening the program's partnerships across the Pittsburgh community.

Deepening Connections with CMU Students



LEAP will continue creating new opportunities for CMU students to engage with the program. In partnership with CMU's Leonard Gelfand Center for Service Learning and Outreach, LEAP will host a *K–12 Engagement Assistant*, providing a graduate student with hands-on experience in youth programming.

LEAP Advisory Board



Ayana Ledford
Advisory Board Chair
Associate Dean for Community Impact and Educational Outreach, Dietrich College of Humanities and Social Sciences, CMU



Sarah Ceurvorst
Program Director
Academic Pathways Manager, Dietrich College of Humanities and Social Sciences, CMU



Dara Ware Allen
Advisory Board Member
CEO and Principal of City Charter High School



Elizabeth Keller
Advisory Board Member
Associate Head of School, School of Art, CMU



Miguel Alvarez
Advisory Board Member
Executive Director of Admission at CMU



David Lehman
Advisory Board Member
Partner, K&L Gates LLP



Nico Slate
Faculty Director
Professor, Department of History, CMU



Angela Welch
School Coordinator
Chief Academic Officer of City Charter High School



Mark Barga
Advisory Board Member
Education design specialist at Kay-Twelve



Marlene Williams
Advisory Board Member
Director of Operations, Center for Shared Prosperity, CMU



Mike Mayer
Advisory Board Member
Board of St. James School, Philadelphia, former leader at General Electric, Honeywell (formerly Allied Signal), & Aramark Corp.

Gratitude

We are deeply grateful to the partners, past and present, whose generous support has helped advance LEAP's mission and impact.