

DukeEngage 2024 Alumni Study

Program participants report lasting impact on their perspectives, abilities, and postgraduate decision-making

DukeEngage is an immersive, 8-week summer program that sends Duke University undergraduates around the country and the world to work with communities addressing critical issues. Launched in 2007 and housed in the Kenan Institute for Ethics since 2019, the program has enrolled more than 5,500 students to date. DukeEngage projects take students into the field each summer to work on issues that community partners deem a priority, enabling small groups of students and faculty to collaborate with a community to address critical societal needs through an immersive summer of community engagement. Student work must be guided by the community and may consist of direct service, capacity building, or community-based research. Work is accompanied by cultural immersion and regular, intentional critical reflection.

Alumni insights play a vital role in helping DukeEngage leaders assess program outcomes and guide future planning

DukeEngage regularly conducts or sponsors efforts to assess its impact and inform the continuous development of its programming. DukeEngage surveys its alumni every 5 years, with the most recent prior survey conducted in 2019. In 2024, the program sought to gather new information from alumni about their current perspectives

on experiences they had in the program, their professional journeys since graduation, their engagement in philanthropic or policy-focused activities, and their current connections to the DukeEngage program.

Through a survey and follow-up interviews, the DukeEngage 2024 Alumni Study aimed to provide DukeEngage staff with insights to better understand which program aspects work best to achieve the program's intended outcomes and how participation in this community-focused cocurricular engagement program augments undergraduate learning and shapes postgraduate decision-making. An online survey targeted 4,021 potential respondents consisting of alumni from group-based DukeEngage programs in years 2008–2019 and 2022–2023 (2020 and 2021 were excluded because of COVID-19).

The study team obtained 333 eligible survey responses, for an overall response rate of 8.3 percent. The team also conducted interviews with 20 alumni purposively selected by DukeEngage faculty and staff based on information alumni provided in open-ended survey responses; the selection process ensured inclusion of alumni from both domestic and international programs and across a range of program years.

Participants ranked DukeEngage highly among their undergraduate experiences

Nearly three-fourths (73%) of survey respondents ranked their DukeEngage experience as a “a top five experience” among their undergraduate learning, and about one-fifth (21%) of respondents said it was “the top experience.” The most common reason given (54% of responses) was that the DukeEngage experience broadened their perspectives or cultural exposure—namely, the experience increased their exposure to new cultures and differing perspectives that affected how they viewed their environment or themselves.

Many respondents also noted the impact on their academic or professional growth or path (48%), specifically how their DukeEngage experience refined or reinforced their academic or professional focus or provided experience that could be applied to their later academic or career goals.

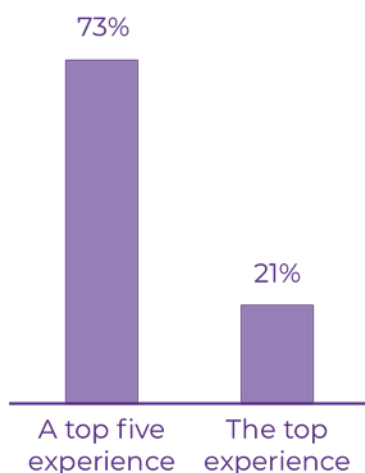
Alumni who participated in international programs were more likely than those who participated in programs in the United States to rank their participation in DukeEngage as the top experience

“ Overall it was an incredible experience to work alongside people who live differently and to experience a different way of life. It was an enriching experience I will never forget. ”

– 2012 participant, international program

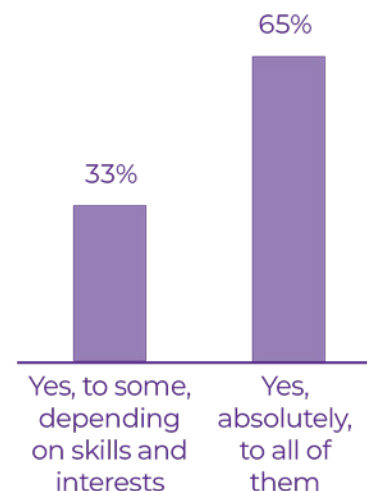
(25% versus 11%, a statistically significant difference). Additionally, nearly two-thirds of respondents (65%) said they would recommend DukeEngage to all new Duke students, while one-third (33%) said they would recommend the program to some students, depending on their skills and interests.

Figure 1 Respondents’ perceptions of where DukeEngage ranks as part of their total undergraduate learning



Note: Figure does not include 6 percent of respondents who indicated “a notable experience, but not one of the most impactful” or “not a notable experience.”

Figure 2 Alumni responses on whether they would recommend participating in the DukeEngage program to new Duke University students



Note: Figure does not include the 2 percent of respondents who indicated “yes, but only to a select few” or “no, not to any of them.”

Participating in DukeEngage shaped participants' experiences across multiple areas

The survey asked respondents to list up to three Duke University programs or activities from their time as an undergraduate that stood out as having had a positive impact on them, and about four out of five respondents (84%) included DukeEngage. Additionally, at least half of survey respondents indicated the program had a fair or great amount of impact on their undergraduate experience across several areas, including their values, postgraduation plans, cocurricular activities, and academic trajectory. The 2024 results show a higher perceived impact on postgraduate plans than reported in the 2019 alumni survey, in which 34 percent of respondents reported a moderate or great impact on their postgraduate plans.

In addition, statistical significance tests on this set of survey items' results revealed two differences related to program year and program location. First, respondents in the recent program year cohort (i.e., 2015–2022) were more likely than respondents in the older program year cohort (i.e., 2008–2014) to report the program had a fair or great amount of impact on their cocurricular activities (58% versus 46%) and on their postgraduate plans (65% versus 50%). Second, alumni who participated in domestic programs were more likely than those who participated in international programs to indicate DukeEngage had a fair or great amount of impact on their academic trajectory (62% versus 44%) and on their postgraduate plans (72% versus 50%).

“After DukeEngage, I decided that I did not want to work in the nonprofit/social sector, but I wanted to remain engaged with it in a volunteer capacity ... Wherever I worked would need to align with my own values, which helped me decide not to pursue a career in finance or at a consulting firm ... The moral compass I refined during my DukeEngage was so crucial that I made a difficult decision to leave a job when a company I was at did not align with my values.”

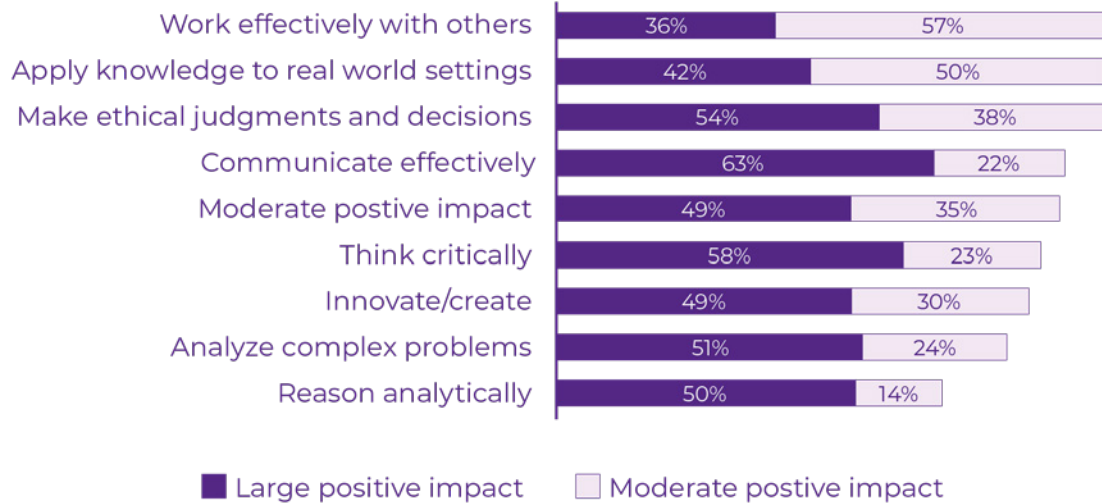
– 2019 participant, domestic program

Respondents noted that the program enhanced a variety of their skills and abilities

Most respondents indicated the DukeEngage program had a moderate or large positive impact on each of the specific skills and abilities addressed in the survey. These included the ability to work effectively on diverse teams (93%), apply knowledge to real-world settings (92%), make ethical judgments and decisions (92%), communicate effectively (85%), take initiative/be proactive (84%), think critically (81%), innovate/create (79%), analyze complex problems (75%), and reason analytically (64%).

Relatedly, among the subset of survey respondents who reported they are currently employed (n = 254), many identified skills from their DukeEngage experience they used in their work. The majority (74%) described using soft skills gained from, or aligned with, their program. Respondents indicated these skills enhanced their ability to effectively interact with others in a professional setting and included, for example, creativity, interpersonal skills, adaptability, and problem-solving.

Figure 3 Respondents' perceptions of the impact of DukeEngage on their abilities



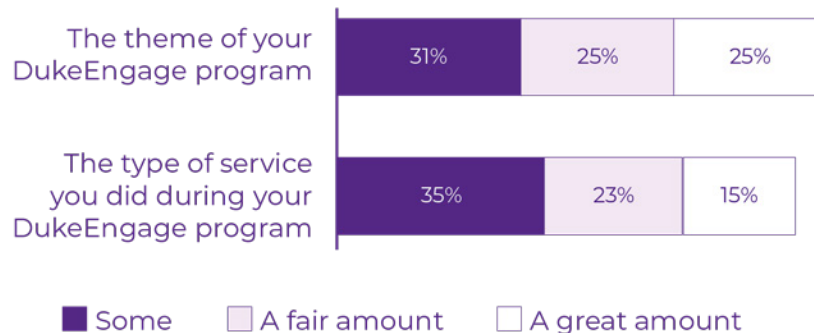
Note: Figure does not include respondents who indicated the program had "no impact" in a specific area, which ranged from 7 to 36 percent.

Participation in DukeEngage had an important influence on respondents' career trajectories

The majority of survey respondents indicated there was a connection between their career trajectory and the theme of their DukeEngage program (81%) and type of service they did (73%), while 84 percent of respondents who were currently employed said they approach their work today differently because of their DukeEngage experience. Among

the respondents who elaborated on how or why they approached their work differently because of their experience (n = 83), nearly half (45%) referred to DukeEngage as a foundational experience that influenced their career trajectory by providing a first point of entry into a career or influencing their chosen field.

Figure 4 Respondents' perceptions of connections between their career trajectory or current or planned work and elements of their DukeEngage program



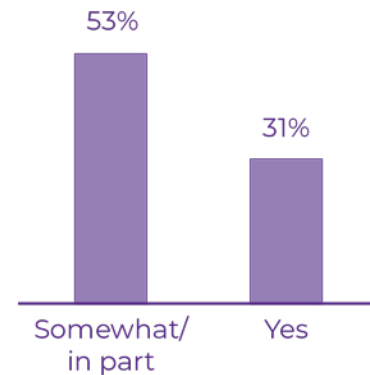
Note: Figure does not include respondents who indicated "little to none" connection to the element, which ranged from 19 to 27 percent.

Many respondents connected DukeEngage with their graduate or professional studies and later volunteering

About half of those respondents who had previously, were currently, or planned to pursue a graduate or professional degree (n = 254) reported at least a fair amount of connection between their graduate or professional education and the theme of their DukeEngage program (52%) and the type of service they did during their program (45%).

A large majority of survey respondents indicated DukeEngage shaped how they think about effective volunteer work and civic engagement (89%) and reported participation in volunteer work since completing their undergraduate degree (84%). Many of these respondents saw at least a fair amount of connection between their volunteer work and the theme of their DukeEngage program (40%) or the type of service they did during their program (34%).

Figure 5 Respondents' perceptions of whether they approach their work today differently because of their DukeEngage experience



Note: Figure does not include 16 percent of respondents who indicated they did not approach their work differently because of DukeEngage.

“ It’s something I draw from frequently ... Whether it’s the brand on the resume ... or the types of experiences that you get to have and the impact that you drive, which felt really meaningful. The chance to really experience a new field of work, but also a new country or part of the U.S., and having the financial backing to do that for many students probably makes it easier or viable ... it’s continued to be such a strong differentiator for Duke. I love being an alum. ”

– 2012 participant, international program

Study data suggest there is an active DukeEngage community

A majority of survey respondents indicated they maintained contact with other students in their DukeEngage group (74%). This is a higher proportion of survey respondents than in 2019, in which 34 percent reported maintaining connections with

their fellow DukeEngage students. Some respondents also reported staying in contact with their program leadership (19%), the community partner supervisor or staff from their program (15%), or other members of their host community (14%).

Respondents' final thoughts on DukeEngage

When invited to share final thoughts on DukeEngage, respondents expressed appreciation for the opportunity, voiced support for its continuation, highlighted key program strengths, and offered suggestions for improvement

In open-ended survey responses and follow-up interviews, many respondents discussed how the program was a highlight of their college experience, how they continue to draw from their experience, and that they frequently discussed their DukeEngage experience during interviews when applying for jobs or graduate programs. Some specific strengths of DukeEngage respondents noted included the program's structure, which allows relationships and connections to form; the applicability of the program to respondents' careers; and how the program experience pushes students to take broader perspectives, think more critically about the world around them, and consider how they should serve others effectively.

Regarding suggestions for program improvement, several alumni suggested creating additional opportunities for participant education and support before, during, and after the experience. They described, for example, how the program could support students in the application process by encouraging them to participate for the right reasons to get the most from the experience; prepare them for their role and how things work in the field; and set up structures to support student learning, self-reflection, and engagement when students return to maximize the knowledge they take away from the experience.

Over its more than 15 years in existence, DukeEngage has regularly sought to gather information from DukeEngage alumni about their current

“ I get excited to know that they're doing impact research on the DukeEngage program, I think it is very unique in what it's trying to do ... it's really wonderful that it's coming full circle. ”

– 2015 participant, international program

perspectives on the experiences they had in the program. As this study shows, the program has had lasting impact on many of its participants. DukeEngage is considered by a large majority of alumni to have been a top experience—and, in some cases, the top experience—among their undergraduate learning.

Alumni in the current study described how their participation enhanced their skills and abilities in a variety of ways, as well as how DukeEngage has had a direct influence on their decisions around pursuing graduate or professional education, their career trajectory, and their participation in volunteer work and civic engagement.

This study reflects Duke University's commitment to learning from projects such as DukeEngage. The university and program staff understand the value in studying the program's impacts, appreciate the willingness of alumni to stay in touch and provide input, and will continue to undertake these types of efforts in the future.

For more information

This brief describes key findings from a study of DukeEngage alumni conducted by Westat in late 2024 and early 2025. Westat is an employee-owned research firm serving federal and local government agencies, nonprofit organizations, universities, and other clients in a broad range of research areas, including survey research, statistical design, and program evaluation. For more information on the DukeEngage program, visit <https://dukeengage.duke.edu>.