Nogemag Healing Lodge: Four Seasons of Land-Based Youth Leadership

Evaluation Report

Reporting period: September 19, 2025 to September 30, 2026

Report prepared by Nogemag Healing Lodge, Funding provided by CATAPULT Canada, Evaluation Guidance and Data Support by The Students Commission of Canada (SCC)

1. Project Description

Nogemag Healing Lodge: Four Seasons of Land-Based Youth Leadership is a year-round, trauma-informed program that supports Mi'kmaq youth through cultural education, land-based learning, healing circles, and opportunities for personal growth. Guided by the Seven Sacred Teachings, the program encourages young people to strengthen their connection to their culture and community while developing the confidence and skills needed to take on new responsibilities and leadership roles.

The project responds to concerns raised through community workshops and youth sharing circles, where participants spoke about some of the challenges affecting young people in their community. These included experiences of trauma and grief, unmet basic needs, and difficulties accessing trusted support. Concerns were also raised about punitive responses to attendance challenges, rather than considering the circumstances that may be affecting a young person's ability to attend. These discussions also highlighted the importance of creating more opportunities for youth to reconnect with their culture, language, and the land.

Nogemag offers a variety of activities that allow youth to explore their interests, develop practical skills, and become more involved in their community. These include outdoor recreation, cooking, arts and crafts, cultural activities, and community service. The program also provides healing circles, mentoring, and academic support, along with opportunities for youth to take on leadership roles as they gain confidence and become more involved.

An important part of Nogemag's approach is recognizing that every young person is different, with their own needs, strengths, challenges, and personal goals. Rather than taking a one-size-fits-all approach, the program works to understand each youth as an individual and provide support that reflects their circumstances. Nogemag places importance on building trusting relationships and creating an environment where youth feel welcomed and respected. Young people are encouraged to participate at their own pace, recognize their strengths, and work toward goals that are meaningful to them. Through this approach, the program aims to help youth develop confidence, resilience, and a stronger sense of belonging and purpose.

Nogemag takes a holistic approach to youth development, recognizing that spiritual, mental, emotional, and physical well-being are closely connected. The program brings cultural teachings and land-based experiences into its activities while recognizing the importance of supportive relationships in a young person's development. Its overall goal is to provide a space where youth feel supported as they continue learning about themselves, their culture, and their place within the community.

2. Methodology

This evaluation report was prepared by Nogemag Healing Lodge to reflect the program's activities and experiences throughout the reporting period. It draws on information provided by Nogemag, feedback gathered through youth and staff focus groups, and supporting data provided by SCC.

The following sources were used in preparing this report:

- **Program Information:** Descriptions of Nogemag's activities, objectives, and overall approach, provided by the program.
- **Youth Focus Group:** Conducted in September 2025, with 20 participants.
- **Staff Focus Group:** Conducted on August 25, 2026, with two participants.
- **Focus Group Responses:** Coded excerpts from youth and staff discussions, reflecting their experiences, perspectives, and observations.
- **Program Data:** Quantitative information provided by SCC for inclusion in the Program Data and Results section.

The focus-group responses were reviewed to identify common experiences and recurring themes. These included participants' sense of belonging, relationships with staff and

peers, opportunities for personal growth and life-skills development, cultural and land-based connections, youth involvement in decision-making, and the program's capacity to meet participants' needs.

Particular attention was given to the experiences and perspectives shared by youth, while staff responses provided additional context regarding program delivery, observed needs, and areas for continued development. These findings were also considered alongside Nogemag's own experiences delivering the program and supporting youth throughout the reporting period.

Quantitative data provided by SCC is presented separately in the Program Data and Results section. This information offers additional context for the evaluation and complements the experiences shared during the focus groups. The available results are presented alongside their limitations to ensure the findings accurately reflect the information provided.

To protect participants' privacy, names and identifying information have been omitted from the focus-group findings. Selected quotations have been included where appropriate to reflect participants' experiences in their own words. Minor edits were made to some quotations for readability without changing their original meaning.

As the focus-group findings are based on qualitative information, they reflect the experiences and perspectives shared by those who participated in the discussions. These findings alone do not establish how common each experience was across the full participant group or measure changes over time. The quantitative data is considered alongside these findings, with any gaps or limitations clearly identified to ensure the evaluation accurately reflects the information available.

3. Program Reach and Participant Profile

Throughout the reporting period, Nogemag Healing Lodge supported 21 Indigenous youth between the ages of 12 and 16 from Elsipogtog First Nation, New Brunswick.

The program offered activities every second weekend, along with a full week of summer camp. Attendance remained consistently high, with approximately 15 to 21 youth participating in each weekend session. Most participants attended regularly, with only occasional absences due to other commitments, such as organized sports. Overall, youth continued to show strong participation throughout the year.

Throughout the program, youth took part in activities that encouraged them to develop practical skills and take on leadership responsibilities. They helped prepare and deliver

meals to Elders, participated in community fundraising, and worked together on special projects and community events. These experiences gave youth opportunities to contribute to their community while working alongside one another.

Cultural activities were also an important part of the program. Youth participated in sharing circles, drumming, and sweat lodge ceremonies, providing opportunities to learn through cultural teachings and shared experiences. The program also introduced emotional regulation techniques, brain games, and opportunities to develop conflict-resolution skills through storytelling and discussions with one another.

The photographs below highlight some of the activities and community contributions made by Nogemag youth throughout the reporting period.



Figure 1. *Group photograph of Nogemag youth participants and staff.*



Figure 2. *Nogemag youth exploring traditional Mi'kmaq wigwam structures.*



Figure 3. *Traditional sweat lodge structure built by Nogemag youth for ceremonies held at Nogemag.*



Figure 4. *Nogemag youth participating in a community toll-gate fundraiser with support from community members.*



Figure 5. *Nogemag youth and staff enjoying a swim at Laverty Falls following a hike in Fundy National Park.*



Figure 6. *Nogemag youth collaborating with Elder Margaret-Ann Milliea and community members Cory Augustine, Jayda Milliea, and Jordan Levi to create their Brother Bear-themed Christmas float, which won first place.*



Figure 7. *Free meal prepared by Nogemag youth for delivery to community Elders.*



Figure 8. *Meal and accompanying note prepared, served, and delivered to community Elders by Nogemag youth.*

4. Youth Focus Groups and Staff Perspectives

The following themes reflect experiences and observations shared by youth and staff during the focus-group discussions. They highlight what participants value about Nogemag, how they experience the program, and areas where improvements may be needed. While certain themes appeared throughout the discussions, the findings do not represent a formal count of how many participants shared each view.

Social Connection and Belonging

Youth described Nogemag as a place where they can meet new people, develop friendships, and become more comfortable connecting with others. One participant shared that they now feel more confident greeting people they previously felt self-conscious speaking to. Another described how participating in Nogemag had made it easier to socialize more generally.

As one participant explained:

"I get to socialize with these people."

Staff also emphasized the importance of building relationships and earning the trust of youth. They described creating an environment where participants feel comfortable being themselves and developing meaningful connections with others. These perspectives suggest that relationships are an important part of how youth experience Nogemag, beyond the activities themselves.

A Welcoming and Supportive Environment

Youth spoke positively about the welcoming atmosphere at Nogemag and the relationships they have developed with staff. Participants described feeling comfortable within the program, while staff emphasized the importance of responding to youth with understanding and providing support when they are having a difficult time.

Staff also recognized that every young person has their own circumstances and may require different levels of support. Rather than taking a one-size-fits-all approach, Nogemag works to understand each youth as an individual and respond to their needs accordingly.

One youth participant described what makes Nogemag different from other programs:

“I think Nogemag is different from other groups because it focuses on helping each individual child. Other camps and groups tend to focus on helping the group as a whole, but Nogemag makes sure that every child gets the support they need.”

This perspective highlights the importance of individualized support from the youth's point of view. It also reinforces the value participants place on having their individual needs recognized rather than being treated the same as everyone else.

These experiences reflect the program's trauma-informed and relationship-centred approach. Although the focus-group discussions do not formally measure participants' sense of safety or well-being, they provide insight into how youth experience the support available through Nogemag.

New Experiences, Outdoor Learning, and Life Skills

Youth highlighted the opportunities Nogemag provides to spend time outdoors, experience new activities, and learn practical skills. Participants spoke about outdoor adventures and learning everyday responsibilities, such as cooking and cleaning up after themselves. They also described exploring the wilderness and developing a greater appreciation for their surroundings.

One participant shared a teaching they had learned through the program:

“We always try and leave them better than we found it.”

The participant explained that they try to apply this teaching beyond Nogemag in other places and situations.

These experiences suggest that youth value opportunities to learn through participation and hands-on activities. For some, the program has also encouraged them to explore new interests. One participant, for example, described writing a story inspired by a land-based outing.

Youth Voice and Meaningful Participation

During the focus groups, youth were encouraged to share their opinions about the program, including what they enjoy and what they feel could be improved.

Some participants suggested having more regular check-ins, particularly when someone may be feeling down or experiencing a difficult time. Others identified practical improvements that would make their experience more comfortable, including sensory supports, additional blankets and pillows, more bathrooms, and better sleeping arrangements.

Youth also raised concerns about the availability of transportation, staffing, and space for activities and overnight stays.

Their feedback highlights the importance of continuing to involve youth in discussions about the program. By listening to their experiences and suggestions, Nogemag can better understand what participants need and identify areas for improvement.

Cultural and Community Connection

Cultural learning and community involvement were also reflected in the focus-group discussions. Staff described opportunities for youth to participate in land-based activities and learn alongside Elders and knowledge keepers.

Youth also shared experiences of giving back to their community, including preparing meals for Elders and participating in activities that encouraged them to work together. Some participants spoke about carrying teachings from Nogemag into their everyday lives.

These experiences highlight the role that cultural and community involvement plays within the program. While the discussions provide insight into what participants value about these opportunities, further feedback would help better understand how their cultural knowledge and connections may develop over time.

Program Challenges and Capacity

Both youth and staff identified challenges that affect the delivery of Nogemag's activities and the experiences of participants.

Youth raised concerns about transportation, limited facilities, and the comfort of sleeping arrangements during overnight activities. They also suggested improvements that would make the program more accessible and comfortable.

Staff described challenges related to available resources and the program's capacity to meet the needs of participants. Having enough staff, suitable facilities, and reliable transportation were identified as important considerations for continued program delivery. These concerns highlight areas where additional resources and support could help Nogemag respond to participants' needs and maintain consistent programming.

5. Program Data and Results

This section presents additional information provided by the Students Commission of Canada (SCC) to support Nogemag's evaluation. The results offer insight into participants' family circumstances and how they view their academic futures. These findings complement the experiences shared during the youth and staff focus groups and provide further context for understanding the different needs of young people involved in the program.

Family Demographics and Additional Support Needs

As part of the assessment, participants were asked whether they lived with a family member experiencing additional support needs. These included circumstances such as disability, illness, addiction, age-related needs, mental illness, or language barriers.

The results showed that 40% of respondents reported living with a family member experiencing one or more of these circumstances, while the remaining 60% indicated that they did not.

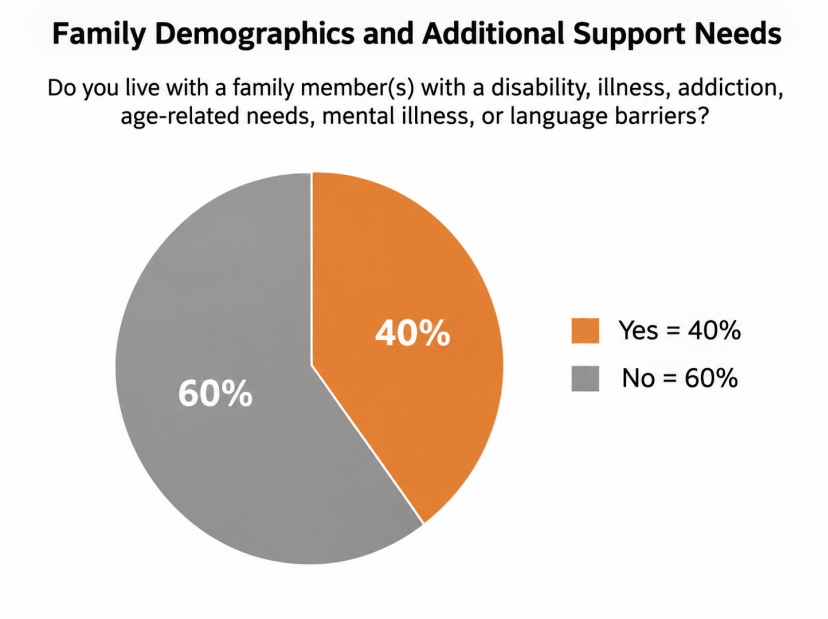


Figure 9. *Participants living with family members experiencing additional support needs.*

These findings provide some insight into the different family circumstances that youth may experience outside the program. While the results do not tell us how these circumstances affect each participant individually, they highlight the importance of recognizing that young people may have different responsibilities or challenges in their lives.

This is particularly relevant to Nogemag's individualized and trauma-informed approach. Rather than assuming that every young person requires the same level of support, the program works to understand each youth's circumstances and respond to their needs accordingly.

Academic Future Plans — Before and Now

The assessment also examined how participants viewed their academic future plans, comparing responses from an earlier assessment with those collected during the current assessment.

The average score increased from 3.11 in the earlier assessment to 3.91 in the current assessment, representing an increase of 0.80 points on a five-point scale.

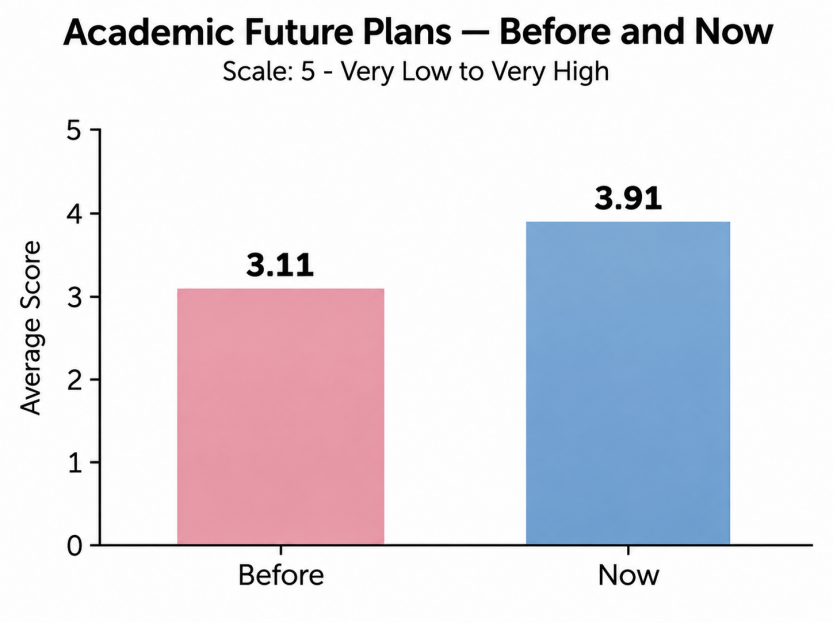


Figure 10. *Changes in average academic future plans assessment scores, before and now.*

The results show a positive change in participants' reported views of their academic futures. Although the assessment does not explain what contributed to this change, the higher average score suggests that respondents may have developed a more positive outlook toward their future educational plans.

While academic planning is not the primary focus of Nogemag, the program encourages youth to recognize their strengths and work toward goals that are meaningful to them. These findings offer an additional perspective on how young people are thinking about their futures, alongside the personal growth and experiences described in the focus groups.

Data Considerations and Limitations

The findings presented in this section are based on assessment information provided by SCC. The number of respondents, exact collection dates, and whether the same participants completed both academic future plans assessments have not yet been confirmed for this report.

The family demographics results provide information about respondents' household circumstances but do not establish how those circumstances affect individual participants. Similarly, while the academic future plans assessment shows an increase in average scores, the available information does not determine whether that change resulted directly from participation in Nogemag.

These results should therefore be considered alongside the qualitative findings and Nogemag's own program information. Together, they provide additional context for

understanding participants' experiences, while recognizing the limitations of the available data.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

The focus-group discussions suggest that youth value Nogemag for the relationships they have developed, the support they receive from staff, and the opportunities available to them through the program. Participants spoke positively about meeting new people, becoming more comfortable in social situations, and taking part in activities that allow them to learn new skills and explore their interests.

The assessment data provided by SCC offers additional insight into participants' family circumstances and academic future plans. The findings highlight the different circumstances youth may experience outside the program, while the increase in average academic future plans scores suggests a more positive outlook among respondents. Although these results cannot be attributed directly to Nogemag, they provide further context for understanding the needs and experiences of the youth involved.

Youth also described applying some of the lessons learned through Nogemag in their everyday lives. Staff perspectives further emphasized the importance of trust and relationship-building, particularly in creating an environment where young people feel understood and supported.

At the same time, participants identified areas where improvements could be made. Youth expressed a need for more regular check-ins and additional resources to improve their comfort and experience within the program. Concerns about transportation and facilities were also raised, while staff highlighted the challenges of delivering programming with limited resources.

These findings are based on qualitative information gathered through the youth and staff focus groups. While they provide valuable insight into participants' experiences, they do not establish how common each experience was across the full participant group or measure changes over time. Additional attendance records, participant information, and follow-up evaluations would help provide a more complete understanding of the program's outcomes.

Overall, the findings present Nogemag as a program that youth describe as meaningful and supportive. Its emphasis on relationships, cultural connection, and understanding the individual needs of young people remains an important part of its approach.

Moving forward, continued input from youth will help inform the program's development. Addressing the challenges identified through the focus groups, particularly around staffing, transportation, and facilities, will also be important in supporting Nogemag's ability to meet the needs of its participants.