

**THE ATLA PROJECT: Final Report**  
ARTISTIC TRANSFORMATION LEARNING ADVOCACY  
Rich/Collins Community, Leadership, and Impact Fellowship 2022  
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The ATLA Project, which stands for Artistic Transformation Learning Advocacy, surged from lived experiences of mine interacting with performing and visual arts in a community setting. As an interdisciplinary artist, I've always been passionate about the possibilities the art provides us to enable people to be not only consumers but also participants and active contributors in their communities. I firmly believe that the arts are central, not peripheral, to social transformation. Nevertheless, opportunities in art tend to seem more like a privilege instead of equal and affordable options for all. Therefore, I found it essential to expand arts education opportunities in the Waltham community to simultaneously facilitate a diverse environment for cultural acceptance since accepting different backgrounds and perspectives is the first step toward social change.

Being an international student from the Dominican Republic, I had the daunting task of adapting to a foreign environment. Nevertheless, that didn't stop me from progressively pushing myself to explore and get to know the community that I was now inhabiting. And during the research process I conducted to develop the ATLA Project, I found that the Waltham youth population faces many personal and systemic challenges such as violence in their homes or neighborhoods, economic inequality, racism, discrimination, mental health, environmental injustice, gentrification, immigration status, and more. The Waltham Public School District's demographics reflect the diversity of the community, being far more racially diverse than Massachusetts generally: 9.7% Black, 40.7% Latino/Hispanic, and more than double the number of English language learners. There's a lack of opportunities for Waltham youth to enrich their knowledge, not only through the mediums that traditional disciplines offer but also through the arts. The community lacks support and resources in their homes and communities, with few other art resources that tackle social issues being accessible to this target population. The creative and analytical lenses of the arts will allow the community to be inquisitive and interactively identify, tackle and find plausible strategies for social problems. Therefore, the ATLA Project sought to tackle the need for a particular outlet to allow the youth in this community to express, grow, and advocate through art.

One of the things that I genuinely appreciate about leading a community project is the amount of logistics and planning skills that I acquired. And to make this happen, several steps had to be taken into consideration: finding a community partner, recruiting volunteers, marketing the program, and designing the workshops' lesson plans. After I had the ATLA Project overall program and was aware of the community needs I sought to tackle, finding a community partner was the next critical goal. After reaching out through several options, Kendal Gillians, the Waltham Boys & Girls Club (WBGC) program coordinator, showed interest in partnering with the ATLA Project. As Kendall explained to me that the program's participants were already very

interested in exploring the intersection of art & social justice, the decision to partner with WBGC and the Keystone Program was ideally made.

Secondly, I had the daunting task of marketing the program among the Brandeis community to recruit volunteers for the program. Initially, I had ideated collaborating with Waltham artists that will function as the workshop facilitators. Some professors in the Creative Arts department connected me with some artists that they've worked with before and could potentially become facilitators for ATLA. Nevertheless, I found that collaborating with Waltham artists couldn't be feasible due to the tight time frame and budget constraints that I was working with. But not everything was lost. As I started to send my flyers through several email listservs (such as the Music, Theater Arts, Fine Arts, and Waltham Group organizations), many Brandeis students expressed interest in volunteering in the program and becoming involved as workshop facilitators. Ranging from different art expertise, talents, majors, and class years, having Brandeis students as ATLA workshops facilitators provided a new ideal lens into the program. They shared their knowledge in arts and social advocacy and helped to bridge the gap between what high school students discuss at home and with their peers and what they need to be discussing to better position themselves for the future. And as Brandeis is an institution where social justice plays a relevant role, Brandeis volunteers also had the opportunity to apply their classroom learning to practical scenarios that have real implications in a community setting. Evidently, the ATLA program had a small but meaningful team of 4 volunteers who gave their all from day one!

Thirdly, the ATLA Program formed a cohort of approx. 8-10 teenagers. And the Brandeis workshop facilitators had the full flexibility to design each workshop while considering their skills and what the high school students were interested in exploring. From early March to late April, the ATLA Program offered three workshops. On March 14th, Donna DeChambeau '24 led the "Performance of Change" workshop about theater and monologue writing. Students explored what's a monologue, how to write it, and how to stage it to learn how to use words and actions to reflect your own experiences and propel a message to the community. On March 21st, we had the "Music & Mental Health" workshop led by Grace DeRoche '24, a major in music and psychology. The program's participants explored the intersections between music, wellness, and community impact through several dynamic activities, such as breaking down songs and songwriting. It was a meaningful opportunity to envision music beyond a superficial level, what it does to you, and what it can do for the community. And last but not least, Edward Friedman '22 and Alaina Vermilya '24 led the last workshop titled "Photography: A Lense To Social Justice." Students learned the fundamentals of Photography and had meaningful conversations about the powerful impact an image can have.

In terms of assessing the impact of the ATLA Project, it was essential to have constant communication with Kendall Gillians, the Keystone Program coordinator, to consider which aspects of ATLA we could improve and how they could fit into the Keystone's curriculum. Furthermore, I also conducted regular meetings with the ATLA volunteers, including a final feedback form in early May asking for their opinions and thoughts about their experience volunteering with ATLA and the WBGC. It was enlightening to hear that "they enjoyed getting involved with WBGC for the first time," "appreciated the opportunity to be creative as a

volunteer planning lessons on what they're passionate about," and also "enjoyed coming together as a group of volunteers having the same mission to learn and educate others." I'm immensely grateful for the ATLA volunteers, as, without their constant commitment and never-ending passion, the ATLA wouldn't have been as meaningful as it was.

Although my participation as a Rich/Collins Fellow is coming to an end, that doesn't mean that social change and impact need to stop here. Regarding how the ATLA Projects seeks to be sustainable and achieve a long-term result beyond the Fellowship, a collaboration with other existing programs is in the works. Beyond Brandeis, I'm planning to continue implementing the ATLA Project curriculum into the Keystone Program and other WBGC programs, expanding the age range to elementary and middle school kids. And among the Brandeis community, I plan to collaborate with other Brandeis' Waltham Group organizations, such as Kids Connect and Junior Brandeis Achievers, to increase connections between Brandeis students and Waltham youth.

In conclusion, my journey as a Rich/Collins Fellow led me to immerse myself in the convergence between arts, social justice, and community outreach. As an inspiring filmmaker that seeks to dip into a fast-paced industry, the skills of leadership, communication, problem-solving, and empathy would be essential for my professional growth and personal journey as I reach closer to my intended career. Being able to learn how to expand arts education for unprivileged communities as a platform that tackles critical social issues while simultaneously including cross-cultural experiences through the program, I was finally able to implement the learning that I've acquired in classrooms, dance & film studios, into a collaborative experience in the community to explore creative approaches to social change, employing arts as an instrument for community building and engagement.

Indeed, this Fellowship has been one of the highlights of my Brandeis experience. I'm sure that my passion and commitment to social justice and change will not stop here; it will keep growing and evolving to continue filling the gaps among youth, inequality, and change. The ATLA Project surged from my own experiences, and my desire to make a change for youth, such as the arts, changed my life and made me who I am today. It was a project that I've always wanted to do, and to finally have the opportunity, flexibility, support, and freedom to lead it and collaborate with amazing people throughout it, it's something that I'm incredibly grateful for. Thank you so much.