The hallmark program of our organization started as a pure but powerful question: *What would it look like for young people to truly drive their learning?*

The exploration of this question — alongside hundreds of young people across the country — birthed what we now know as the Learning Challenge. In its simplest articulation, we invite 15–19-year-olds around the country to tap into their curiosities and define whatever they want to learn, however they want to learn it. And then we give them the support they need to do just that: full decision-making authority, a bit of money, and an adult Champion to add wind to their sails.

The proposition seems simple enough, but the impact has been profound. After working with over 1,200 Challengers, we’ve been humbled by what a few weeks of deep, supported freedom to learn can do. Aside from it being a wildly liberating and novel experience, youth reconnect with an innate love of learning that has often gone dormant in traditional school settings. The ripple effects extend well beyond the 10 weeks: tangible increases in the degree to which youth seize and create new learning experiences, as well as the underlying confidence, resilience, and skill needed to do so.

Seeing the power of the Learning Challenge has grown our conviction that many more youth need opportunities like it. To meet the need, we’re scaling up the program in substantial ways in the coming years. But we’re not trying to keep the magic for ourselves. Educators and youth development leaders from around the country come to us wanting to dig deeper into what this opportunity is, what makes it work, and what it could look like in their context. This document aims to provide a clear window into the Learning Challenge and, hopefully, spark a conversation about how we can make experiences like it more of the norm than the exception.
THE ORIGIN STORY

You cannot separate the beginnings of GripTape from the start of the Learning Challenge. Over his career in education, our founder, Mark Murphy, had spent time in hundreds of schools, talking with thousands of students. The patterns were palpable, if not disheartening. Even with dedicated educators and strong pedagogy, youth were going through the motions. They would report the same things: *We’re bored. School is a place we come to be told what to do. If we just do well here, then we can do what we want later — maybe in college or when we’re adults.*

But, these were the same teenagers who lit up when talking about the skateboard they were building, teaching coding to middle school girls, or the clothing-line business they wanted to develop. There was no shortage of passions, just a shortage of opportunities to really run towards them.

In the fall of 2015, Mark enlisted 10 young people to explore what was underneath this disconnect and what a different reality could look like. We interviewed and surveyed hundreds of young people and adults to understand their experiences and aspirations. We dug into the research — pulling from bodies of work on agency development and engagement in learning. And then we looked for what efforts already existed. While we found inspiring work that put youth in the “front seat” of learning, we found none that truly had them in the driver’s seat. By May 2016, we were confident that the need was real and the experience young people were craving wasn’t already out there. So we decided to build it.

Venturing into uncharted waters, we made two commitments: The first was to engage in rapid-learning cycles as our methodology — a chance for us to quickly test and iterate. The second was to ensure everything we did was designed alongside youth. Our first learning cycle tapped 300 teenagers from across the country — through surveys, focus groups, design sessions — to help define the inputs that would allow young people to learn what/how they wanted. Three needs rose to the top:

1. **Decision-making authority:** 100% control over what they learn, how they learn it, and whether they are successful ... and a chance to change their mind on any of this at any time.

2. **Financial resources:** the ability to get the resources and experiences to support their learning — transportation, location rentals, software, supplies, tools, subscriptions, etc. And they wanted adults to not micromanage these choices, therefore money was the most direct solution.

3. **A supportive, interested adult:** someone to take a genuine interest in what they are interested in, validate that work, and be a cheerleader to keep going. Young adults felt like they had caring adults who believed in them (family, coaches, teachers), but those adults often had their own agendas.

Want to dig deeper into the findings from this research and discovery phase? Check out the synthesis [here](#)
THE DESIGN

The needs that emerged from our first learning cycle created a powerful blueprint for designing the Learning Challenge, which was created by our Youth Leadership Board and first piloted with nine courageous young adults in July 2016. While we have tweaked what each of these things looks like over time, the major components have been steadfast, and each has proven critical.

THE APPLICATION:

The experience starts with a passion and a plan. We have learned that the must-haves for this to be a meaningful experience are authentic interest and a commitment to putting real time towards the pursuit. So we ask applicants to share just that: what they are passionate about learning, and how they want to pursue that learning, with a focus on the first steps they will take to create their project.

There are no trick questions. We offer tips and plenty of examples of successful applications. We allow applicants to share however is most authentic for them — video, interview, presentation, email, online form. We also offer them access to our Youth Leadership Board to field questions.

We select by the same criteria: we look for authentic passion in the topic, clarity that learning is the primary goal, and that there’s a starting point for how to go about it.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Application Questions:</th>
<th>Learning Challenge Guidelines:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Share your passion. Tell us about the topic you want to pursue for your Learning Challenge.</td>
<td>❑ You’re completely in charge of deciding what you explore and how you do it.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. The BIG Why? It’s important for us to know why this Learning Challenge matters to you.</td>
<td>❑ Your learning doesn’t depend on school, so you can do the Challenge on your own outside of class.</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. This is a learning challenge. As you dive into your learning, what do you want to discover about your topic?</td>
<td>❑ You lead your learning, so no more than 1/3 of your time in the Challenge is spent in adult-led experiences like classes, camp, or study abroad programs.</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. The 10 weeks are in your hands. In detail, tell us what you plan to do during that time.</td>
<td>❑ You have 10 weeks to complete your Challenge.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>❑ You are between 15 and 19 years old.</td>
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<td>❑ You live in the U.S.</td>
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THE CHALLENGE:

Once their application has been accepted, Challengers are on their way. To help them on their journey, we equip them with three things:

1. **Decision-making autonomy**
   Perhaps most essentially, young people are given free range to define what they want to learn, their approach to learning it, and how they define success — all of which can be revisited at any time. They’re not on the hook for anything for GripTape. This intense level of ownership is both empowering for Challengers but also squarely sets responsibility for success and failures on them.

   “I have complete autonomy over my learning process and experience, which is something my schools have never offered me.”

2. **Money**
   We provide grants for up to $500 to be used however the Challenger wants in pursuit of their learning goals. We pay this in a form the youth chooses.

   “One of the highlights of my Challenge was realizing that an organization believed in me and my idea so much that they decided to invest in me. This made me feel honored and valued.”

3. **An adult Champion**
   Every Challenger is paired with an adult Champion. They check-in roughly five or six times over the course of the 10 weeks. This is not a teacher. There’s no guidance, no advice, no direction. This is someone to regularly check in, take a genuine interest and support the learner’s own thinking and reflection (what’s working, what’s not, where do you go from here).

   “I think what contributed the most to me was the constant reminder from my Champion that this learning challenge is my own and unique.”

The 10 weeks culminate in a powerful final meeting with their Champion. While Challengers are noting realizations about themselves throughout the experience, this is the crescendo. It is an opportunity to zoom out with someone who has been next to you for the whole ride. Together, they take stock of all that has happened and punctuate how the young person now sees themselves and what they want to take with them into their future. (Listen to one Challenger, Landon, reflecting on his End-of-Challenge conversation in [this short video](#)).

In the weeks that follow, we aim to ensure Challengers will have opportunities to continue driving their learning. We provide them a letter of recommendation (that can be helpful to get future jobs, entrance into other programs) and some GripTape swag to remember the pride they felt during their Challenge. As alumni, they have plenty of opportunities to keep engaging with us, including applying for our Youth Leadership Board or working on other key initiatives (ex: managing our social media strategy).
A CONSTANT WORK IN PROGRESS

While these three pillars of the Learning Challenge have remained constant from our first prototype with nine intrepid learners in August 2016, we have committed to constant learning and iteration. With each Challenge, we elevate new questions and ideas that we want to test.

Through these “lean start up-esque” cycles, we’ve honed and evolved the program in powerful ways. We’ve learned that our initial 5-week Challenge was too short and needed to double in length. We’ve gone — and stayed — virtual in order to extend our reach. We’ve moved from a larger force of volunteer adult Champions to a smaller, more integrated group of paid Research Champions.

We’ve also tested some ideas that have come and gone. We thought the program could potentially support teams versus individuals, but overwhelmingly young people preferred to apply as individuals. We also tested the idea of adding peer navigators — fellow youth serving in a Champion-like role. Challengers much preferred the core Champion model.

The most evergreen commitment we make is to continue to center the perspective of young people in driving their learning, taking their cues for how we can constantly improve and refine the program.
THE CHALLENGE IN ACTION

So, what does this actually look like in practice? Since its inception, our Challengers have explored a vast range of topics: blockchain technology, fashion, coding, brand building, photography, arduino, design, electrical engineering, voting, marketing, landscaping. How they have explored these topics and what they’ve done with that learning is just as diverse. Here are just two snapshots to get a taste of what the Learning Challenge looks like in practice.

Meet Ethan.

Ethan was curious to learn about electrical engineering, lighting, and coding. He decided to harness those interests to invent a lighting system that community theaters could afford. During his Challenge, he learned to code and built this prototype. He is now enrolled in college with a dual major in computer science and theater.

“I was never a person who wanted to try new things or step outside my comfort zone, but taking a chance on GripTape was one of the best decisions I’ve ever made. It truly is a life changing experience.”

Meet Nigeria.

Nigeria was interested in exploring marketing, but didn’t know much about it. She decided she’d get some experience by creating a marketing campaign for her friend’s clothing line. With no shortage of setbacks — challenges finding a photographer, friends being upset they weren’t cast in the shoot — she prevailed to not only build a campaign but get credited at NY Fashion Week. Coming out of this experience, she realized she didn’t actually want to pursue advertising, but rather creative design work.

“I learned that if we want young people to be successful in the world, they have to do things in the world.”

Want to see more? Check out this TedTalk from one of the Challengers, Alphina, reflecting on her experience and comparing it with school.
IMPACT

When we launched the Learning Challenge, the aim was simple: Design an experience that put young people in the driver’s seat and empower them to learn what they wanted, how they wanted.

So the measure of success we cared about most — in the early years and still today — is whether youth think we have done that well, whether they love and value the experience, and whether it matters to them as they chart their course into the future.

Now, more than 1,200 Challengers later, it is clear that the experience has an impact that long outlasts the 10 weeks. Over time, we have focused more on looking for and measuring that impact. We gather data — qualitative and quantitative — throughout their time with us, but also in the subsequent 6, 12, 24 months.

98% Self-assessed their Challenge as a success, and 95% stated they want to pursue additional topics where they get to design and lead their learning.

100% Challengers reported they enjoyed participating in the Learning Challenge.

100% Report that GripTape increased their confidence they can accomplish something with hard work.

97% Report that, 6-12 months after participating, they have decided to pursue learning opportunities they would have previously passed on.

“How I was feeling before the [Learning Challenge] to now is a complete 180. Before, I was cynical, but I’ve been nicer to myself... less hard on myself. Because I let myself be more open, I gave myself permission to make mistakes. I’ve had bad personal experiences in my past, but now when I make a mistake, I realize, if I try to fix it, it’s okay. It’s really important that I go back and try to fix a mistake because before I would shut down and get angry. Now I’m able to take advice, reflect, and learn and improve.

- A Challenger reflecting on their learnings

“GripTape is an opportunity that is so good for the young mind ... it gives them what they don’t get at school, to develop skills with different inventions and technology. It will make society better and bring even more entrepreneurs, and we will all reap the rewards. The difference is the classroom is theoretical knowledge ... The students are told, ‘This is how it is done,’ but GripTape gives them the opportunity to start young to develop the opportunity to say ‘This is my own thing, and I can develop to do this and do it well.’”

- A parent reflecting on the growth they’ve seen in their child
IN PURSUIT OF AGENCY

As we dug into these results, the impact of the Learning Challenge could best be summarized as driving agency — the ability to make intentional choices and take an active role in the course of one’s learning.

Through the Learning Challenge, we met an innate desire to drive one’s learning with the actual conditions — simple and inexpensive as they are — to truly do it. The result was a self-reinforcing cycle that further stoked the desire and capacity to continue to exercise agency in more intentional and effective ways.

While conventional wisdom might assert that it takes a long time to calcify this sense of agency, we observed powerful changes in Challengers in as little as 10 weeks. More inspiringly, the increases reported by them and those around them only grew as time went on.

Dig deeper into our framework for learning agency here.
WHAT WE HAVE LEARNED

At this point, you might be thinking, “Wow, it seems remarkably easy to empower young adults to drive their learning.” Well, yes and no. You’re right that there is an elegant truth underneath this all: Youth want this type of experience and, when given the opportunity, beautiful things happen. On the other hand, it also represents a deep paradigm shift in how learning and power play out in our learning environments, and the status quo is hard to shake. **Five years in, here are some of the most critical lessons we’ve learned to make something like the Learning Challenge possible.**

➢ **You need all three ingredients:** Over the years, we’ve found that the combination of decision-making, money, and a Champion are all critical to the success of the program. In the places where we’ve seen others remove elements of any, the experience unravels.

➢ **Failure can be success:** Some of the deepest and most enduring learnings have come from failure and the chance to make meaning of that (an opportunity we often rob young people of, usually with good intent). [Just listen to how one Challenger made sense of his “failure.”](#)

➢ **Helping can hurt:** Parents and educators often think that youth need us to impart knowledge, direct them, give advice. And while there is a time and place to play this role, it isn’t all the time and every place. This is what young adults report experiencing, and it robs them of critical opportunities to fail, rebound, get resourceful. The Champion role is powerful because it explicitly and intentionally bucks this dynamic.

➢ **Interrogate for access:** We’ve been steadfast about our commitment to providing this experience to young people who don’t have the resources to get it otherwise. But there are other barriers that can hold people back from applying or taking advantage of something like this. We’ve had to constantly reflect on what those might be and shift our program accordingly (for example, allowing video applications so written essays weren’t a barrier).

➢ **Being a great Champion takes practice:** In our early days, we found a diverse group of people to volunteer as adult Champions. We tried to make it easier by just matching them 1:1. But the quality and investment levels really varied. It takes some real unlearning to lean into this role and not inadvertently take the reins back from young people. We now rely on a smaller group of adults with a larger cohort of Challengers, allowing us to dedicate real time to increasing the effectiveness (and efficiencies) within this role.

➢ **Sweat the logistics:** In pursuit of putting young people in the driver’s seat, you’ll likely run into some tricky operational hurdles, each of which could let the air out of the tires. For example, most systems are not set up to be able to just give youth money. Ironing out these details takes time, but matters greatly in creating a seamless and empowering experience.

➢ **Don’t force it:** We’ve found that this experience works with a wide range of youth across contexts and backgrounds. It does not work when they’re forced into it by an adult (read: “This will look great on your college application.”)
WHAT’S NEXT

As we head into 2021, we have more conviction than ever in the power and importance of unleashing the brilliance and curiosity of young people. We’re doubling down on making this experience available to more teenagers, planning to support at least 450 more youth in the coming calendar year.

That said, we’re also inspired by the ways that others are hungry to build from the insights of our work in new and innovative ways. We’ve heard from after-school and summer programs looking to develop similar offerings and liberatory home-schooling efforts leaning on this approach. We’re working with middle schools translating this into a capstone experience for all students and high schools designing a bridge experience to get “off-track” 9th graders fired up again. The possibilities are humbling.

If you’re looking to go deeper into these learnings and apply something similar, the GripTape team is offering a limited set of consulting engagements. Reach out to Mark Murphy if interested: Mark@griptape.org