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Astronomy camps as a long-term, successful engagement practice

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Science camps are one of the oldest forms of modern public engagement, and yet they are often overlooked. In this talk we will make the case for astronomy camps in particular, as strong evidence for long-term and successful impact. The longest running astronomy camp — the International Astronomical Youth Camp (IAYC) — has been around for more than 50 years, and has since effectively engaged and positively influenced the lives of 1000s of participants from around the world.

The IAYC is a 3-week camp which uses astronomy as a medium for scientific inquiry. Participants are 16-24 years old and come from a great range of backgrounds - academically and culturally - and ~80% have never studied astronomy before attending. During the camp the participants work on a project of their choosing, and they are guided by their working group leaders through the research process. At the end of the camp, they write up their findings (using LaTeX), which get published in a report book.

To clearly understand the camp's impact, we conducted a survey which was completed by ~315 people from over 50 different nationalities, representing every year of the IAYC. We find that many participants go on to pursuing careers in STEM: 25% are currently studying or working in astronomy-related roles, and ~45% have pursued other fields in STEM.

The survey results clearly reinforce the benefits of a camp like the IAYC. Via informal learning, young adults improve their understanding and appreciation of science and the scientific method, and often go on to implement the skills they have learned in the wider world. Thus, these findings can be used to support our case for astronomy and its relevance to society.