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Campus Connections Youth Mentoring Program: Cultivating Connection during the COVID-19 Crisis

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Abstract

The University of Colorado Colorado Springs (UCCS) Campus Connections (CC) therapeutic youth mentoring program utilizes the Mentor Model (Weiler et al., 2014) to match at-promise youth from historically oppressed backgrounds with undergraduate student mentors. During the 2020 spring semester, a qualitative exploration of the experiences of CC undergraduate student mentors was completed. The study utilized mentors' (n=7) weekly written reflections and exit interviews to explore their experiences over the course of the 12-week program. The study explored relationships between mentors and diverse youth (ages 10-15), examining changes in mentors' academic achievement, meaningful experiences that contributed to both mentor and mentee socioemotional development, protective factors and strength-based resources, and changes in mentorship processes due to required physical distancing measures in response to COVID-19. The study utilized grounded theory methods (Strauss & Corbin, 2008; Charmaz, 2008) to guide thematic analysis of data, and the initial stages of theory development. Preliminary results of this qualitative study are presented here.

Literature Review

The University of Colorado Colorado Springs (UCCS) Campus Connections (CC) youth mentoring program utilizes the Mentor Model (Weiler et al., 2014) to match at-promise youth from historically oppressed backgrounds with undergraduate student mentors. The CC program facilitates relationships between undergraduate student mentors and diverse youth (ages 10-15) to cultivate a network of resources and promote academic success for both mentors and mentees, provide meaningful experiences that contribute to socioemotional development, and increase protective factors and overall resiliency. Mentors participate in a CC practicum course that provides guidance and support during experiential and service learning (Bringle & Hatcher, 1995) activities.

Numerous process-oriented models of youth mentorship exist. One example of relationship focused programming is Big Brothers Big Sisters that emphasizes rapport building as the primary catalyst for mentor and mentee growth (Parra et al., 2002). CC is distinct from strictly relationship-focused mentorship models, as it employs the Positive Youth Development (PYD) perspective (Damon, 2004; Catalano et al., 2004). The PYD posits that youth are adaptive and fully able to gain the competence and confidence necessary to actualize their self-defined goals and ambitions. Damon (2004) describe PYD as emphasizing "the manifest potentialities rather than the supposed incapacities of young people—including young people from the most disadvantaged backgrounds" (p. 15). Of the 15 objectives that guide the PYD approach (Catalano et al., 2004), CC focuses primarily upon: promoting social, emotional, cognitive, and behavioral competence; fostering self-determination and self-efficacy; fostering clear and positive identity and belief in the future; and providing opportunities for prosocial involvement. Over the course of the 12-week program, CC mentors and counselors emphasize youth strengths and abilities, while also providing therapeutic support.

Campus Connections is further distinguished from relationship-focused mentorship models as it utilizes counselors-in-training (under the supervision of university faculty) as therapeutic support for both mentors and mentees. The primary role of these counselors is to utilize listening and responding skills while providing brief therapeutic interactions with youth, employ the PYD perspective, and support mentors as they engage in ethical decision-making (Krafchick et al., 2019). All CC counselors and mentors receive onboarding training, and ongoing education and support during the CC service-learning practicum course and "post lab" meetings after every CC session. The PYD perspective is infused into all curriculum, training, course meetings, and interactions between youth, mentors, and CC staff.

Programs similar to CC have documented the efficacy of his model, with outcomes including personal growth, academic success, improved interpersonal skills, and professional development (Weiler et al., 2014), and increased self-esteem, problem solving skills, political awareness, and civic action (Weiler et al., 2013). Youth programming that aligns with the PYD approach has documented efficacy, with youth experiencing improved relationship quality with peers and adults, growth of interpersonal skills, improved "self-control, problem solving, cognitive competencies, self-efficacy, commitment to schooling, and academic achievement" (Catalano et al., 2004, p. 117). Evidence suggests that mentors who participate in these programs also derive benefit from the mentorship relationship and PYD programming.

Colorado State University's Campus Connections (formerly known as Campus Corps) Therapeutic Mentoring Program, whose approach to service learning and supporting at-promise youth parallels that of CC, has documented positive impact on the experience of mentor participants (Weiler et al., 2014; Haddock et al., 2013). During focus group interviews with 141 mentor participants, mentors described experiencing significant personal growth including increased awareness of self, confidence in leadership ability, interpersonal skills, and sense of purpose. Participants further articulated professional development through clarification of career goals and increased sense of belonging at the university. Mentors also described improved civic engagement and awareness of needs in their local community, and awareness of stereotypes and a commitment to affect change (Haddock et al, 2013).

Campus Connections Therapeutic Youth Mentoring Program couples the Mentorship Model (Weiler et al., 2014) with the PYD approach (Damon, 2004) to elicit and enhance existing strengths and sources of resiliency in youth mentees and participating mentors. During spring semester 2020, a qualitative exploration utilized semi structured interviews and mentors weekly personal reflections to explore

mentors' experiences in CC. While the preliminary results from this study confirm the themes identified by Weiler at al. (2014) and Haddock et al. (2013), additional themes spoke to the influence of the diversity of mentor and mentee identities on the mentorship process, and the impact of transitioning to a virtual environment due to the COVID-19 response.

Methods

Researchers employed Grounded Theory Methods (GTM) (Charmaz, 2008; Strauss & Corbin, 2008; Dillon, 2012) to analyze the data. Members of the research team utilized GTM's structured approach to coding to "hold a conversation with the data" by engaging in repeated review of interview transcripts, with the researcher recording "notes, comments, observations, [and] queries" (Merriam, 1988, p. 131) in the margins of the documents. For the purpose of this brief review of the study, only the preliminary concepts and themes derived from the interview transcripts are shared here.

The coding process aligned with GTM, as multiple researchers reviewed the transcripts a minimum of three times. The first review of the data consisted of open coding, whereby each researcher recursively reviewed each transcript identifying, categorizing and labeling portions of text (Strauss & Corbin, 2008; Dillon, 2012). Researchers then reviewed the data a second time, engaging in axial coding as they identified relationships between concepts and created labels to describe the phenomena. The third stage included the organization of themes under related core concepts; concept maps were used during this stage to organize and illustrate the relationship between emerging themes and concepts (Strauss & Corbin, 2008). The final phase of analysis focused upon the formation of theory, facilitated by researcher note taking and memos, and email communication between researchers.

Methods of Verification

Adhering to Lincoln and Guba's (1985) four guiding principles ensured the trustworthiness of results. The concept of credibility, or the level of congruence between reality and the construct being studied, was attended to by waiting until the coding process was complete to engage in a comprehensive review of the literature. By waiting to review the literature, the research team ensured that the identified themes and concepts were inductively derived and not influenced by prior knowledge of constructs in the field. Furthermore, upon reviewing the literature after the coding process, it was confirmed that the results aligned with previous findings regarding the mentorship process (Haddock et al., 2013; Weiler et al., 2014).

The second concept that contributes to the trustworthiness of results is the transferability of emergent themes, concepts, and resulting theory. The small sample size (n=7) and limited sources of data narrow the generalizability of results. Readers are encouraged to consider the results within the greater context of the mentor-related literature and explore the possible transferability of the results presented here based upon their own personal and professional experience (Shenton, 2004). Dependability of results, Lincoln and Guba's (1985) third concept refers to the researcher's ability to replicate the study and derive similar results. Over the course of this study, members of the research team engaged in diligent note taking throughout the data collection and analysis process. Researchers were scrupulous in adhering to the protocol articulated in the Institutional Review Board (IRB) application, ensuring that every step of the research process was recorded, and the study could be replicated.

Confirmability is Lincoln and Guba's (1985) fourth concept that contributes to the trustworthiness of qualitative results. This concept refers to the degree of researcher objectivity, a necessary characteristic in order to ensure the accuracy of results. The objectivity of researchers was attended to throughout the study through the process of "bridling" (Stutey et al., in press; Dahlberg et al., 2008). Each member of the research team engaged in their own self-reflective process, examining and investigating their own points of view, assumptions, and taken-for-granted beliefs regarding concepts and issues that arose over the course of the study. This consistent self-reflexive process ensured that each member of the research team "bridled" their own biases and worldviews, aiming to better understand how these factors influence their objectivity, and how they might minimize its impact on emerging results (Stutey et al., in press; Dahlberg et al., 2008).

Results

Demographic Information

The study included 7 mentor participants from a variety of backgrounds, with diverse demographic characteristics. See Table 1 below for a summary of participants' demographic information. The majority of participants reported pursuing degree concentrations in the field of human services and indicated that their experience as mentors confirmed their commitment to pursuing a career in the helping professions.

Table 1- *Participant Demographic Characteristics*

Demographic Characteristic		Number of Participants	%
Race/Ethnicity			
White		3	42.86%
Asian		1	14.29%
Native American		1	14.29%
Hispanic/Latino		1	14.29%
Black/African American		1	14.29%
	Total	7	100%
Gender			
Female		5	71.43%
Male		2	28.57%
	Total	7	100%
Age Range			
18-24 years old		5	71.43%
35-44 years old		1	14.29%
55-64 years old		1	14.29%
	Total	7	100%
Student Major			
Psychology		4	57.4%
Social Work		1	14.29%
Communication		1	14.29%
Other		1	14.29%
	Total	7	100%

*n=7; 1 participant elected not to answer all questions in the demographic survey, thus not all of their information is reflected in this summary table.

Emergent Theory: Mentors' Adaptive Growth Process

The preliminary results from this study confirm the themes identified by Weiler et al. (2014) and Haddock et al. (2013), while also revealing themes regarding influence of the diversity of mentor and mentee identities on the mentorship process, as well as the impact of required transition to a virtual environment due to the COVID-19 response. Mentors described themselves as having a variety of identities that lead to experiences of discrimination within institutions (particularly the university) and the greater community. All mentors reported instances where they were able to empathize with the youth based on their disadvantaged identities and adverse life experiences. They further describe these instances of increased empathy as supporting the building of rapport.

The Foundation: Rapport & Connection

The rapport between each mentor and their mentee, their mentor-family, mentor-coach, CC practicum course instructor and CC staff was consistently referenced as the foundation of support that enabled the mentor to adapt and achieve self-growth. Rapport within CC was the common factor described by all mentors as the source of resilience, support and strength that enabled them to engage in the following actions: Engage with the mentee in the virtual environment; identify challenges and improvise and adapt in the moment; engage in exploratory dialogue with supportive persons in CC; participate in self-reflection, self-care, and self-growth; implement new strategies for addressing challenges and improving interactions with mentee. Figure 1 illustrates mentors' adaptive growth process in response to required changes due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Figure 1: Mentors' Adaptive Growth Process
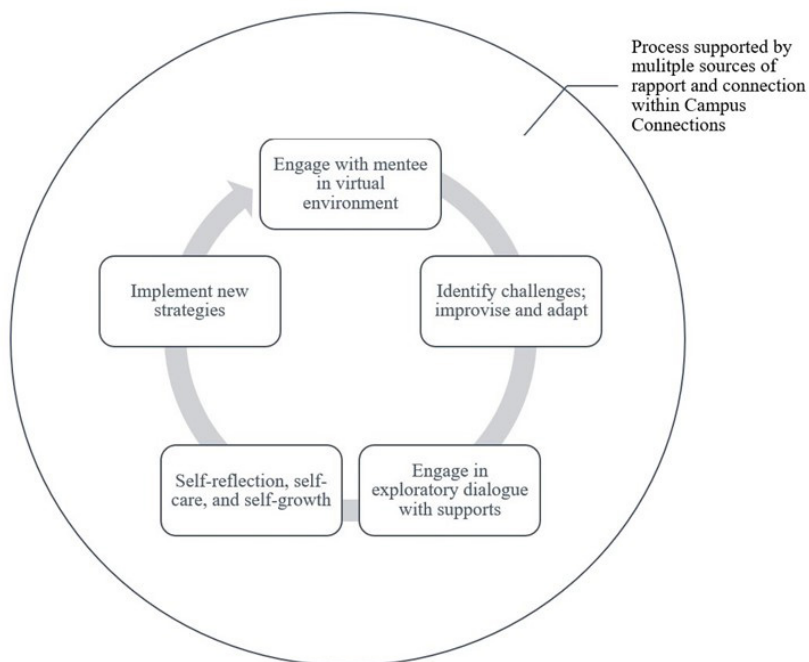
Engage with Mentee in Virtual Environment

During the first four weeks of the 12-week CC session, mentors participated in structured in-person activities aimed at supporting mentee and mentor socioemotional growth, academic success, and cultivation of positive civic attitudes. Mentors engaged extensively with youth during weekly family-style meals, walk and talks, and guided activities. It was during week five of the program that state directives required the closure of all after school activities, followed by transition to remote learning due to COVID-19. In alignment with social distancing requirements, CC leadership cancelled CC meetings until the program could be restructured and transitioned to a virtual environment.

During week eight of the CC semester, CC resumed meeting with a revised schedule of activities facilitated using Zoom teleconferencing platform. The new structure and schedule resulted in less one-on-one time between mentors and mentees. One mentor participant described this decrease in time spent with his mentee as challenging his ability to "bond": "We were able to create a larger bond and able to help [them] develop and grow within those five hours per week . . . transitioning online we had one hour per week . . . [we] had to adapt how you might connect."

Identify Challenges

Mentors described a variety of challenges associated with the transition to remote interactions with their mentees. One mentor reported having to relearn how to read their mentee's non-verbal cues while video chatting, while another mentor emphasized their struggle translating listening and responding skills to the virtual environment. Two mentors described struggling with the emotional impact and ethical implications of witnessing the conditions of their mentee's home environment (i.e. arguing and yelling between household members, lack of resources in the home). Another two mentors reported struggling to interact with their mentee due to distractions in the mentee's home environment (e.g. "the Xbox," and "online videos"). Following identification of these challenges, all mentors reported improvising and addressing challenges in the moment before seeking the support of others within CC.

Engage in Exploratory Dialogue

Each participating mentor described at least one particularly meaningful interaction with a mentor-coach, member of their mentor family, or CC instructor or staff regarding challenges faced during the transition to remote mentoring. One mentor stated that—after seeing her mentee's difficult living conditions—she immediately reached out to one of the CC counselors. Although mentors receive training in identifying clinical issues and safety concerns, they are instructed not to address the concern themselves and instead communicate the issue to the CC counselors and supervising faculty. The CC counselor and course instructor/faculty supervisor then address those clinical or safety concerns using the protocol described in the Campus Connections Youth Mentoring Program Implementation Manual (Krafchick et al., 2019). When the mentor described above was confronted with her mentee's difficult living conditions, the mentor described working through the ethical decision-making process with the counselor, before engaging in self-care and personal faith-based practices to cope with the distress associated with this experience.

Self-Reflection, Self-Care, & Self-Growth

Upon consulting with supports within CC regarding the challenges associated with remote mentoring, mentors described themselves as

engaging in self-reflection regarding their own responses to the changes due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Mentors reported feelings of grief and loss in response to the transition to remote learning, working, and mentoring. One participant described the transition as causing her to, "shed a little bit of my student identity, having to go off campus and go home again was really difficult." Three participants referenced these feelings of grief and loss, and exposure to mentee's adverse experiences, as triggering distress associated with their own adverse childhood events. Despite the difficult and distressing nature of these experiences, all participants reported employing a series of self-care interventions and continued reflection as a means of achieving self-growth.

Mentors described using a variety of coping strategies to work through the distress associated with the changes and stressors attributed to the COVID-19 pandemic. Coping mechanisms included physical exercise (transitioned to in-home or outdoors), meditation, journaling, personal therapy (transitioned to telehealth), and engaging the support of fellow mentors, CC counselors, and CC staff. In addition to utilizing self-care as a coping strategy, mentors also reported learning to find the "balance between having those more serious conversations and then bringing it back down to the light-hearted" by encouraging laughter. From goofy games, to telling funny stories, mentors described humor as helping them and their mentor to relieve distress.

Implement New Strategies
The final phase in this recursive Adaptive Growth Process is the implementation of new strategies. After gathering information from supportive others within CC, and considering new perspectives, mentors describe identifying and implementing new approaches with their mentee. While some mentors started engaging in online interactive games with their mentee, others described finding ways to elicit dialogue that allowed youth to both process difficult experiences while also learning to laugh and "have fun."

Conclusion
Campus Connections cultivates connections between mentors and mentees through experiential and service learning (Bringle & Hatcher, 1995) activities. The data derived from the spring semester 2020 session of CC is particularly relevant as participants transitioned from face-to-face interactions, to a virtual environment due to required COVID-19 response. Mentor participants described the transition to remote interactions with their youth mentees as introducing a number of challenges, from exposure to youth difficult experiences in the home environment, to learning to read youth body language and non-verbal cues and translating listening and responding skills to virtual interactions.

In response to these challenges, mentors described engaging in an Adaptive Growth Process where they learned to identify difficulties, engage in dialogue with supportive others in CC, improvise and adapt, and engage in a self-reflective process that resulted in self-growth and positive action. Mentors can serve as "one of the powerful protective factors in the lives of high-risk youth" (Burns & Hoagwood, 2002, p. 140), as the relationship between mentor and mentee provides youth the consistent support and sources of connection necessary to weather adverse experiences. The self-growth process described by mentor participants supports the notion that mentors also experience growth and improved resiliency as a result of their relationship with their mentee and participation in the greater structure of the CC therapeutic mentorship program.

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