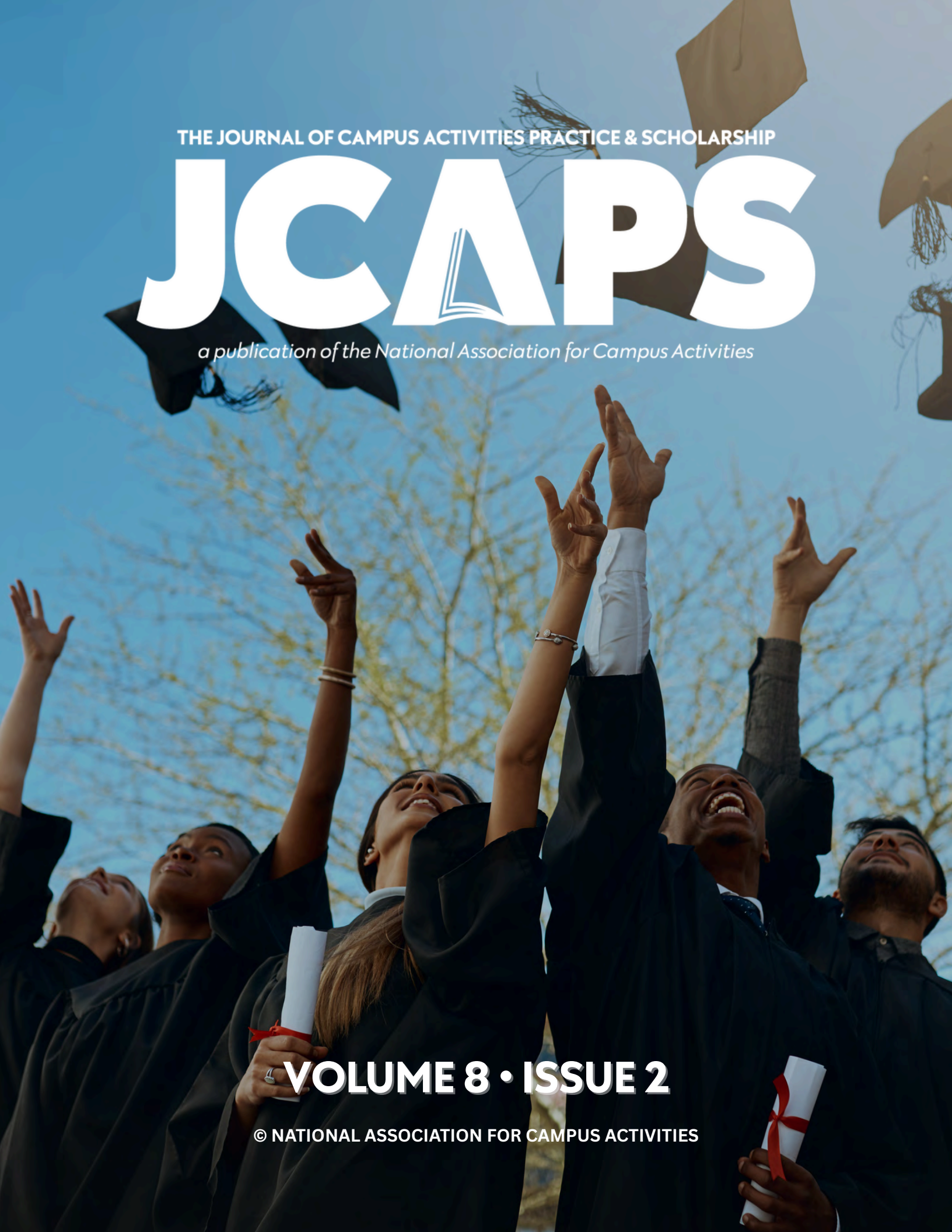




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FLIPPING THE SCRIPT AND PUTTING STUDENTS AT THE FOREFRONT OF CULTURAL CHANGE THROUGH “FOR STUDENTS, BY STUDENTS” DIALOGUES

Heidi Gailor, William Peace University
Carolyn Nye, William Peace University
Betty Witcher, William Peace University
Jennifer Blush, William Peace University
Kristin Koch, William Peace University

While critical reflection on controversial topics was once a celebrated component of academic life, in today's polarized political environment, faculty, staff, and students often shy away from contentious topics at the cost of student growth and learning. In 2020, a small university in the southeast launched a dialogue program, now entitled “For Students, By Students” dialogues under the premise that by launching a student-led dialogue program that encouraged students to hold dialogues on topics of their choice while creating enough structure to attend to participants’ psychological-safety, the students would be better prepared to share feelings and experiences; listen to diverse perspectives; step away from polarities, discover innovative solutions; and engage in group meaning-making that supports a culture of equity, inclusion, and belonging. The response to the dialogues has been largely positive, and this article shares both information about the “For Students, By Students” dialogue program, as well as lessons learned.

Colleges and universities historically have been institutions where discourse over controversial issues has been encouraged, places where students learned to critically evaluate ideas from a variety of viewpoints. In fact, exploring opposing points of view was seen as a cornerstone strategy for high-quality education (Clark & Avery, 2016). A recent survey suggests that current college students feel reluctant to discuss controversial topics (Welding, 2024). One third of college students report having experienced free-speech limitations on campus (Bryant, 2024). Zimmerman and Robertson (2017) argue that “avoiding discussion of controversial topics in U.S. classrooms deprives students of an important part of their learning” (p. 8). However, as a more diverse cohort of students enter university, the opportunity for exposure to new and different ideas expands, some of which may challenge students’ core beliefs. In tandem, a parallel process of political polarization has occurred across the world, which has made those engaged in public discourse uncompromising, undermining trust in institutions (Tornberg et al., 2021). The authors argue that students’ reticence to discuss controversial topics can be reduced by creating psychological safety, while examining controversial topics. One mechanism for doing so is to engage students in dialogue, a facilitated group process where students create shared meaning by carefully listening

to one another's stories and experiences in a community setting with ground rules to ensure an environment of social support.

David Bohm (1996) suggests that dialogue is a win-win form of communication focused on shared meaning, while typical discussions are more competitive, with some ideas and perspectives winning over others. Psychological safety provides a belief that interpersonal risk-taking is safe (Edmondson, 1999). Edmondson and Lei (2014) further suggest that psychological safety is a feeling that one won't face negative interpersonal consequences (e.g., rejection) and instead can connect in a way that enhances learning. In interpersonal settings (e.g., workplaces, school), the safest option is to either remain silent or to parrot comments others have stated. Taking a position can leave one open to a variety of forms of social rejection from gossip to ridicule to social exclusion. Research on norm violators finds that using social rejection to force conformity is a common strategy to maintain and benefit the larger group (Rudert et al., 2023). On a milder level, people may simply be motivated to get along and avoid hurting the feelings of others by making contradictory statements.

The need for psychological safety seems apparent – clearly individuals need to feel comfortable in the spaces they inhabit. However, there are specific outcomes in which individuals and organizations benefit from those feelings of safety. When workplaces are psychologically safe, employees have higher performance due to feeling free to request help or express opinions that supervisors may not agree with. For example, Ge (2020) found a direct link between psychological safety and work outcomes such as employee voice and higher work engagement. Interestingly, psychological safety often plays a mediating role in impacting voice or silence as opposed to a more direct role. Jabbar et al. (2023) found that psychological safety mediated the association between supportive leadership and voice behavior. Among teachers, psychological safety has been found to mediate the relationship between burnout and employee silence (Kassandrinou et al., 2023). Because psychological safety is tied to a fear of rejection and isolation, belonging is conceptually related. The authors argue that individuals who have greater feelings of belonging on their campus experience a greater sense of psychological safety. College students who report greater feelings of belonging are more likely to persist and ultimately graduate (Zosel, 2018) as well as experience greater enjoyment and involvement in classroom discussions and less sensitivities to peer judgment (Zengilowski et al., 2023). Belongingness allows students to trust that their classmates will respect their opinions and not reject them for having an opposing point of view.

The creation of psychological safety within groups is determined by the leader of the group. Within athletic teams, athletes whose coaches were more nurturing as opposed to controlling reported higher feelings of psychological safety (Senel et al., 2024). Within work organizations having inclusive leaders has been associated with greater psychological safety (Woods et al., 2024). Similarly, Wanless (2016) suggests that psychological safety can be created in classrooms when instructors show increased empathy and create environments where students build positive relationships. These actions may enable students to engage in risky behaviors such as discussing controversial topics. As this previous research indicates, leader behaviors are important to creating feelings of safety. All too often as instructors create discussion opportunities, they allow for open discussions with little guidance. The authors advocate for the need for the more structured process

that dialogue provides to increase students' sense of belonging which ultimately should allow them to feel greater freedom to express their opinions, ideas, and insights.

According to Zosel (2018) the use of dialogues enhances belonging, while teaching participants how to manage conflicts when discussing controversial topics. Longo & Shaffer (2019) highlight the importance of university students engaging in dialogue and other modes of collaborative communication to build the capacity for diverse citizens to work together to solve the myriad of problems facing society. With these ends in mind, Honors faculty and staff centered student-led dialogue in the Honors Program starting in 2020. By facilitating and participating in dialogues, Honors students will be better prepared to share feelings and experiences; listen to diverse perspectives; step away from polarities; discover innovative solutions; and engage in group meaning-making that supports a culture of equity, inclusion, and belonging. To further support the sense of belonging, the dialogue work uses a peer mentoring framework for both dialogue facilitator training and dialogue leadership because participating in peer mentoring programs correlates with belonging, social integration, and academic success among first-year college students (Jeanmougin et al., 2024; Leidenfrost et al., 2014; and Venegas-Muggli et al., 2023). To further the sense of belonging, maintaining student ownership over the dialogue process and its outcomes creates a greater sense of psychological ownership for the initiative and commitment to its outcomes (Pierce et al., 2015).

Introducing Dialogue into the Honors Program

At a small southeastern, comprehensive university with fewer than 1000 students, the Honors Program includes about 15% of the entire student population. Students apply for the Honors Program after admission into the university and are selected based on high school academic performance and a history of engaged campus leadership or service. On average, students join the Honors Program with an unweighted high school GPA of 3.75. The 14-credit-hour Honors Program is grounded in the university's culture of immersive learning, offers students opportunities to develop as scholars and community change-agents with its focus on ethical leadership, critically thinking about justice, community connections, and service.

In the fall of 2020, the first-year Honors course, HON 100: Investigating Ethical Leadership, was designed to focus on ethical leadership, dialogue, and peacebuilding. A key component within the redesigned course is facilitating a dialogue program, which the authors now call "For Students, By Students" dialogues. Since the program's inception in 2020, Honors students have hosted 23 dialogues with about 24 participants at each. It is estimated that approximately half the students at the college have participated in one or more dialogues.

The dialogue initiative has two primary goals. The first goal is for students to understand and engage in different modes of discourse. Every Honors student learns how dialogue, discussion, and debate differ; participates in each mode of discourse; and learns how to facilitate dialogue using a formal dialogue method. The second goal is to support students as they build the skills to have honest conversations across differences in the service of participatory democracy.

About the "For Students, By Students" Dialogue Program

From 2020-2022, the authors used publicly available scripts for the dialogues. However, the students wanted the freedom to focus on topics more relevant to their lives. Given this feedback,

the authors launched "For Students, By Students" dialogues and developed a set of templates for the students during the 2023-2024 academic year. Using our L.E.A.R.N. dialogue templates and question prompts, the students can create meaningful dialogues on topics that interest them in less than an hour (Gailor & Tyler, 2024). Since these dialogues are being facilitated by first-year students new to dialogue, the authors believe it is essential to allow students the freedom to pursue their interests while creating a structure to support each dialogue's success. Various topics have been explored such as "Is cancel culture good for society?;" "How has ChatGPT changed the university experience?;" and "Should teachers carry guns."

During the 2023-2024 academic year, the first year of the "For Students, By Students Dialogues," the students wrote and facilitated six dialogues using our templates and training materials. Each of these one-hour dialogues was built using our L.E.A.R.N. dialogue process (see Table 1), which includes five phases.

Table 1

L.E.A.R.N Dialogue Process

Phase	Purpose and Activities
1. Launch	• Explanation how dialogue is unique • Brief introduction of the dialogue topic • Agreement for C.A.R.I.N.G. communication (Communication that prioritizes Curiosity about differences, Appreciation for all community members, Respect for each person's ability to grow, Interpersonal awareness, careful listening with the goal of Networked meaning, and a Guarantee of confidentiality.)
2. Explore	• Gain a better understanding of the topic and comfort with dialogue • Develop a deeper understanding of the topic by examining an artifact (e.g., video clip, an editorial, or another student-generated piece of related media)
3. Acknowledge	• Build self-awareness and social awareness • Reflect on their experiences and perspectives related to the core topic
4. Reflect	• Reflect on possible actions they can take based on the core topic

Phase	Purpose and Activities
5. Notice	Notice how, as a community, they interacted during this dialogue and consider how they can use the dialogue process in other contexts

(Gailor & Tyler, 2024)

A Mentoring Model to Train Dialogue Facilitators

Critical to the success of "For Students, By Students" dialogues is a peer mentoring model built into HON 100. Upper-level Honors students with experience with dialogue work directly with the first-year students, who work in teams of five to prepare for and implement a "For Students, By Students" dialogue for the campus and the local community.

Before each dialogue, the new facilitators participate in two one-hour dialogue training sessions facilitated by the peer mentors. Before starting this training, students take the United States Institute of Peace's "Designing Community-Based Dialogue: Micro-Course," a free resource that introduces its audience to dialogue and how it transforms conflicts and builds peace (Milofsky & Barth, n.d.). During training session one, students become familiar with the differences between dialogue, discussion, and debate before participating in their first dialogue. During the second training session, students are introduced to the L.E.A.R.N. dialogue process and begin working in their dialogue teams. Each team of four to five students is responsible for hosting a dialogue with the support of their peer mentor. Over the next month, each team works directly with their mentor to develop a dialogue script, promote their dialogue, and practice facilitating it. During the actual dialogue, the students' peer mentor is present to support the facilitators' success. Following the dialogues, the peer mentors gather feedback from both the dialogue facilitators in the form of written reflections and an evaluation form completed by participants.

Measures and Outcomes

The evaluation form filled out by participants was a short, anonymous online survey. The form asked participants to rate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with the following statements: "The dialogue experience was a positive one"; "I would consider participating in another dialogue"; "Following this dialogue, I feel more connected to those who shared in this dialogue experience"; "Following this dialogue, I feel a greater sense of belonging within this campus community". Responses were rated on a 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree) scale.

IRB approval was obtained to use the following data for publication. Anonymous survey responses were collected from a total of 47 participants in the spring of 2024. Responses revealed that overall students felt that the experience was a positive one. This held true for students participating in a dialogue for the first time, and for those who had previous experience with dialogues. Results further suggest that the dialogues created a sense of connectedness to other participants and an increased sense of belongingness to the campus community. See Table 2 for a summary of all questions.

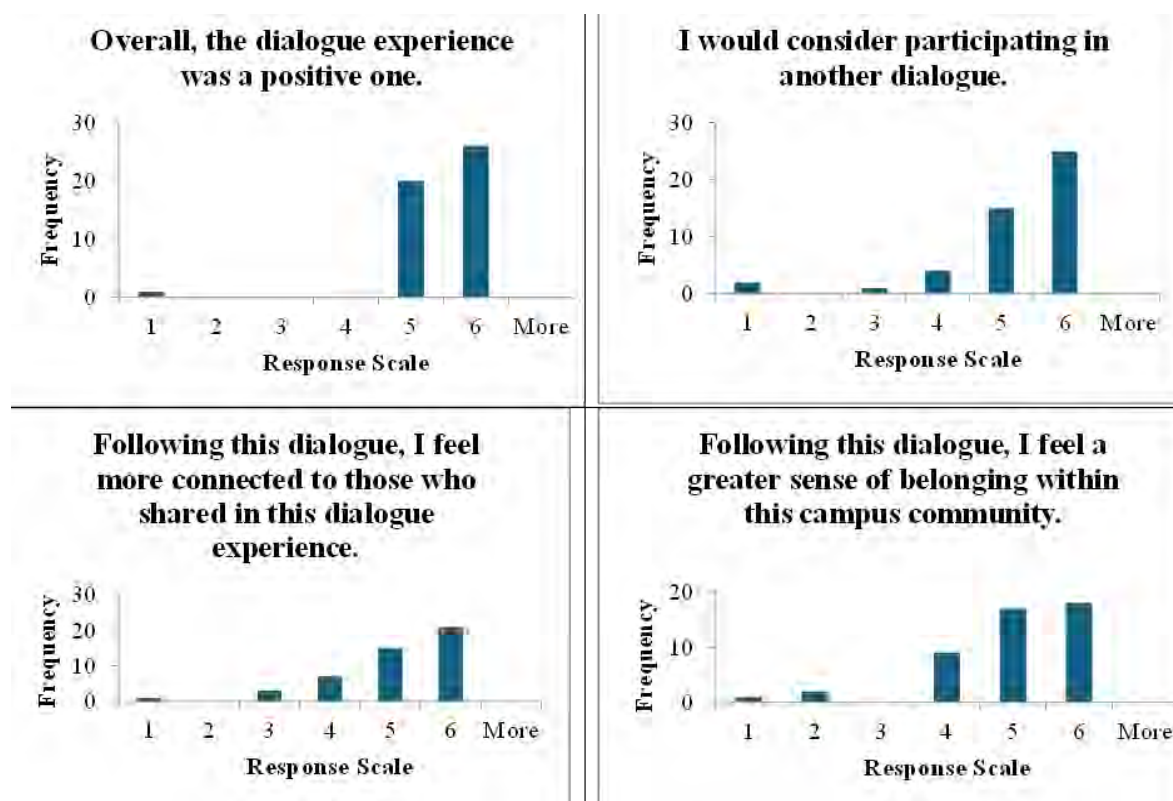
Table 2*Average Responses Across Questions*

	Overall, the dialogue experience was a positive one.	I would consider participating in another dialogue.	Following this dialogue, I feel more connected to those who shared in this dialogue experience.	Following this dialogue, I feel a greater sense of belonging within this campus community.
Overall	5.47 (.83)	5.23 (1.16)	5.09 (1.09)	4.98 (1.15)
First time	5.50 (1.15)	5.20 (1.32)	4.95 (1.43)	4.85 (1.43)
Repeat	5.44 (.51)	5.26 (1.06)	5.19 (.79)	5.07 (.92)

Note. Standard deviation is included in parentheses.

The distribution of ratings shows consistency in responses to the four assessment questions (see Figure 1). For first-timers, participation was a course requirement. For repeat participants, it may or may not have been voluntary. However, a correlation of only 0.18 indicates that there is no relationship between the number of times participating in a dialogue and the average responses of participants across questions, which suggests there is no indication of a self-selection bias in the findings.

Figure 1 Distributions of responses across questions.



Finally, the authors analyzed whether the dialogue topic influenced results; 95% confidence intervals were run on each of the six topics, and no significant differences were detected. Therefore, the structure of the dialogues results in similarly positive ratings, regardless of dialogue topic.

In addition to the evaluation form, first-year Honors students also completed reflection papers. Several representative quotes from the reflection papers follow. One student wrote, "Dialogue is important because it is a form of peacebuilding through communication. It allows for others' perspectives to be told in an environment that is non-judgemental." In another reflection, a student wrote, "Facilitating a dialogue was an enlightening experience. It taught me how to lead a conversation in a peaceful manner while listening to other people's perspectives." Finally, a student wrote, "I felt that it was a very open and supportive place for people to give input without feeling like they will be judged in any way. I also enjoyed hearing different perspectives and learning new insights that I most likely wouldn't have become knowledgeable of otherwise."

Reflections and Recommendations for Other Campuses

Currently, first-year Honors students continue to facilitate "For Students, By Students" dialogues using our L.E.A.R.N. dialogue process. While the authors had great success launching our dialogue process through the curricular space, it can easily be replicated in the co-curricular realm. Student governments hosting town hall forums or civic engagement offices hosting dialogues can all use this method to empower students to lead their peers in a psychologically-safe environment and

productively engage with controversial topics. For institutions looking to bring this framework to their campus, the authors have several recommendations for how to utilize the process.

First, we put intentional effort into the training of the student facilitators. The authors learned that it was necessary to teach students about dialogue conceptually, but it was equally important to show them how dialogue should be done. Students in training to be facilitators take an online dialogue course, participate in a peer-led dialogue, participate in classroom dialogue training led by peer mentors, and complete a full dress rehearsal of the dialogue they will be charged with facilitating. To utilize the “For Students, By Students” method to its full capacity, it’s important to ensure student leaders are properly trained and confident before hosting their first dialogue.

Another key component regarding training was the peer-mentor model. The upper-level Honors students trained the first-year Honors students and also supported them as they navigated the dialogue project, which proved to be extremely helpful. This peer-to-peer learning helped the underclassmen feel more confident in their skills as facilitators, and the peer mentors grew in their confidence as campus leaders and incorporated dialogue work into other areas of campus life. On other campuses, a good starting point would be to train the first cohort of students on this dialogue process, and in future semesters, bring them back to serve as mentors for the new student leaders. This offers a new opportunity for returning leaders to dig deeper into their leadership development by coaching the next generation of dialogue leaders.

Another recommendation for implementing our L.E.A.R.N. dialogue process is to create structured buy-in to the program when it is first launched. A great deal of our success was due to the fact that going through dialogue training and becoming a facilitator was a requirement for incoming Honors students. The students had to garner participation from the larger university community as a component of their grade, which motivated them to host successful dialogues. In the co-curricular space, a way to create structured buy-in to the program is to make hosting a dialogue part of a student's position description. In a civic engagement office, this could be a requirement of student workers that would be hired. For student organizations, a dialogue could be included during Student Organization Officer Training workshops; officers can participate in a dialogue during training and then receive a toolbox for how to implement their own dialogues. Incorporating the L.E.A.R.N. dialogue process into the positions or programs that are already created would be a way to get the “For Students, By Students” model off the ground on other campuses.

If getting a group of people in the same physical space is a concern, it should be noted that the dialogue process can be successfully utilized in a virtual environment as well. For dialogues that were hosted virtually, there were even parents living in other countries that participated. This offers an opportunity for a greater reach to those outside the physical campus community, and this may fit the needs of some campuses better than an in-person environment. While some students reflected on preferring in-person dialogues, this process can work for virtual campuses or those with large online student populations.

In today’s polarized environment, it is important that students are equipped to engage with contentious topics, share their experiences, and listen to diverse perspectives. The structure provided by the L.E.A.R.N. dialogue process was also critical to creating increased feelings of belonging and connectedness that students needed before they could engage, learn, and grow in the dialogue groups. As this dialogue model is implemented on other campuses, remember that

this is “For Students, by Students” for a reason. Peer-to-peer learning and development was critical for the success and buy-in of this program. The authors encourage campus staff and faculty to flip the script and put students at the forefront of creating cultural change through dialogue to help depolarize campus conversations and promote psychological safety.

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CONSENSUS FROM MID-LEVEL PROFESSIONALS ON CAMPUS REENGAGEMENT POST-PANDEMIC

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This Delphi study collected student engagement strategies used to reengage students post-COVID in campus activities. Integral to student engagement leadership, mid-level student affairs professionals possess the skills and experience to guide entry-level staff and advise senior-level administrators in decision-making. This study sought consensus from mid-level campus activities professionals to identify recommendations for successful event planning, coordinating, and programmatic interventions needed to connect with students post-COVID.

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted all aspects of higher education. In response to outbreaks of COVID, colleges and universities closed their campuses, moving operations online to protect students, staff, and faculty members. While academic courses remained in session remotely in 2020, student affairs and activities all but halted as students moved home. Mid-level professionals led engagement efforts virtually and shepherded their entry-level colleagues along in support of students. Four years later, higher education institutions have rebounded, if not returned to “normal,” once again offering in-person instruction and opportunities for students to socialize at campus events and activities. Student engagement has certainly increased since pandemic lows in 2020-2021 (NSSE, 2022), yet it is seemingly still recovering from disruptions to ways students connect with each other and their campus. While the rise in student engagement and participation in campus activities is due to institutions’ return to in-person classes and activities, we were interested in the role that mid-level student affairs practitioners played in reengaging students in campus life. Their ability to connect with students, manage from the middle, advocate for entry-level professionals, and influence decision-making makes mid-level professionals an ideal population to learn from, particularly for new and emerging professionals.

The purpose of this study was to gather mid-level student affairs professionals’ perceptions of the strategies and approaches needed to increase student reengagement in campus activities to foster

student learning and development following virtual-only programming due to COVID-19. Mid-level student affairs administrators with campus activities experience across the U.S. were surveyed to understand effective engagement strategies and identify the needs of these professionals to reengage students on college campuses. As Renn (2020) posited about the return from remote learning and programming during a presentation at the Association for the Study of Higher Education national conference, “as we repopulate campus in a very embodied way, and particularly identities that are embodied identities, students with disabilities, queer students, students of color, how do we re-enter our spaces in a way that is more humane and more compassionate?” Our participants’ responses shed light on ways student affairs practitioners intentionally created and reestablished such inclusive and humane spaces, reengaging students and fostering their development during a time of transition. This information will equip campus leaders with valuable information to better respond to the dynamic and uncharacteristic student experiences of the last few years that continue to impact college student engagement across the country.

Theoretical Framework

The frameworks guiding this study are Kuh’s (2009) student engagement theory and Strayhorn’s (2018) work on students’ sense of belonging. Two components are important within Kuh’s discussion of student engagement: a) the time students put into their studies and activities that lead to experiences and outcomes associated with student success, and b) how higher education institutions allocate resources and provide opportunities to encourage students to participate and benefit from the activities. Strayhorn (2008, 2018) related students’ engagement in purposeful activities to their sense of belonging, explaining how positive interactions and experiences foster their connectedness to their university community and lead to student success. Students’ sense of belonging influences important outcomes related to success, motivates and drives student behaviors and perceptions, and can lead to positive achievement, well-being, and happiness in their environment (Strayhorn, 2018). This study seeks to explore how mid-level student affairs professionals incorporate their expertise, research, knowledge, and institutional resources to engage students and promote their sense of belonging.

Literature Review

Student Engagement Pre and Post COVID-19

According to Kuh (2009), student engagement encompasses the time and effort students spend on activities “empirically linked to desired outcomes of college and what institutions do to induce students to participate in these activities” (p. 683). The National Survey of Student Engagement’s (NSSE) (2021) annual results data indicate that certain types of student engagement decreased for the 2020-2021 academic year. NSSE reported that “forms of student engagement that have historically relied on face-to-face interactions or accessing services and attending events, including collaborative learning, discussions with diverse others, student-faculty interaction, and supportive

environment, declined at many institutions” (NSSE, 2021, “How Engagement Shifted During the Pandemic” section). However, higher-order learning, reflection and integrated learning, quantitative reasoning, learning strategy, effective teaching practices, and quality of interaction did not decrease substantially. Notably, collaborative learning and supportive environment declined less for seniors compared to first year students, which could demonstrate that seniors navigated the pandemic’s challenges by using pre-established support networks and knowledge of campus resources (NSSE, 2021).

Research has been conducted to understand the pandemic’s impact on student learning and student engagement in and out of the classroom (NSSE, 2021). In 2022, modes of student engagement hinging upon interpersonal interactions, including those between students and faculty, with diverse others, and through collaborative learning, significantly increased (NSSE, 2022). Furthermore, first-year students’ and seniors’ time spent participating in co-curricular activities climbed, nearly reaching pre-pandemic levels (NSSE, 2022). Still, little research has been conducted to understand how mid-level student affairs professionals navigated the virtual reality, especially to identify approaches designed to maintain (and potentially increase) student engagement with campus programming, student organizations, event attendance, and student leadership involvement after the pandemic.

Findings from the COVID-19 Student Survey (Blankstein, 2020) identified that students lacked a sense of belonging and connection to others at their institution during the first year of the pandemic. Bernadska et al. (2024) found that when asked about the pandemic’s influence on their sense of belonging, the majority of students reported feeling isolated and disconnected from their institution’s community. Significantly, many students attributed their disconnectedness to missing opportunities to socialize in face-to-face interactions with peers while attending campus events, utilizing university resources, and networking inside and outside of their classes (Bernadska et al., 2024).

Perozzi et al. (2022) examined student affairs work during COVID, specifically related to decision-making, essential services, financial impacts, and specific student populations’ impact and support. This global study found that 72% of student affairs service practitioners across the world were excluded from the initial institutional meetings about COVID response, except in Asia where 51% reported being included. Perozzi et al. stated “the least likely to have attended initial meetings were SAS practitioners in North America (86%) and Oceania (84%) ... most SAS staff (85%) were included in managing institutional responses” (p. 24). Further, the study found that student affairs practitioners in North America expected their work to more permanently include online services post-pandemic. This study connects the prevalence of decision-making without student affairs professionals with the reality that these practitioners were the ones leading the required changes. This highlights some complexities associated with incongruence between institutional decision-making and student affairs professionals, which will be discussed in more detail in the next section.

Student Affairs Professionals

According to Ackerman (2007), student affairs professionals on college campuses are unusual compared to corporate professionals because they are expected to possess leadership skills before taking jobs as mid-level managers, rather than developing leadership experience as middle managers. Like corporate middle managers, however, mid-level leaders of higher education are expected to “facilitate change” (p. 56). In recent decades, the number of higher education administrators has outpaced student enrollment growth (Weise & Christensen, 2014). Student affairs professionals have experienced increased burnout and stress (Marshall et al, 2016) that has caused professionals to exit the field (Mullen et al., 2018; Tull, 2006). This leaves gaps in student services and forces the remaining professionals to practice in a perpetual state of hiring and training new staff. Bodin and colleagues (2020) encouraged additional research to better understand student affairs staff retention. McNaughtan et al. (2023) studied the relationship between empowerment and known desirable outcomes in connection with employee engagement of directors of international student centers on college campuses across the United States. Staff empowerment arose as a topic for discussion among scholars of higher education who are seeking to increase employee satisfaction and engagement (Aithal, 2016; McNaughtan et al, 2019), yet the focus of these studies included increased sense of purpose (Quinn & Spreitzer, 1997), and work conditions (Al Jabri & Ghazzawi, 2019; McNaughtan et al., 2019). One important constituency group often under researched includes mid-level student affairs professionals, as these are the practitioners who often must carry the additional labor when entry level professionals depart to different careers or when other mid-level professionals accept promotions to senior level positions. Mid-level professionals will be discussed in more detail below.

Mid-level Student Affairs Professionals

Often overlooked, mid-level student affairs professionals are the “unsung professionals of the academy” (Rosser, 2004, p. 317). They carry expertise that often goes unnoticed by faculty and upper-level campus administration and experience increased turnover. This group of professionals must juggle daily operations, delegate to other departmental professionals, and implement change. They guide entry-level staff and inform senior-level staff about what occurs on the local level. Rosser (2000) identified mid-level professionals as under-researched over twenty years ago, and that remains the case today.

Further, Rosser (2004) conducted a national study on mid-level leaders in higher education and found that professional and institutional work life perceptions have an impact on their satisfaction, morale, and turnover. McNaughtan et al, (2019) recognized mid-level higher education administrators as suffering from a lack of empowerment. Bodine Al-Sharif et al., (2020) attributed part of these issues to the “middleness” (p. 3) of these positions. Often this middle position leaves mid-level professionals with high levels of responsibility and expectation for job performance, yet they find themselves “invisible” (p. 3) within the academy. McNaughtan (2023) indicated that

these aspects contributed to a lack of satisfaction within their roles. McNaughtan et al. (2023) studied empowerment and employee engagement of mid-level international center directors in the United States and found a positive relationship between empowerment and job satisfaction.

As mid-level administrators, these well-educated professionals perform demanding work, but rarely do these efforts reap recognition for a job well done (Johnsrud, 1996). One important aspect pertinent to our study is Rosser's (2004) finding that mid-level professionals desire recognition and respect for their expertise, both within the institution and in their individual units. Rosser found that this professional group received constructive feedback, trust, and guidance on their performance from senior administrators. They reported feeling pressure to perform and recognize the importance of providing effective leadership in their units. Routinely, mid-level professionals must juggle institutional decision-making and policy implementation. Rosser's study found that an increased respect for the contributions of mid-level professionals increases satisfaction and minimizes the likelihood that they will leave the institution. External relations, perceptions of their career support, and the responsibility to impose federal, state, and institutional policies also contribute to job satisfaction of mid-level professionals.

Positionality

Author 1 is a faculty member of higher education and student affairs at a public regional campus and serves as the program coordinator for the master's program in college personnel. Her research focuses on campus engagement, sense of belonging, and equity issues in higher education. She has experience in campus activities, alumni affairs, and advancement. She identifies as a cisgender, queer, white womxn with (dis)abilities.

Author 2 is a Ph.D. candidate in higher education administration and doctoral research assistant in higher education administration. Her professional background includes working in admissions and enrollment management, instructing college writing and poetry courses, and promoting gender equity and power-based violence prevention education in private and mid-sized public institutions. She identifies as a cisgender, queer, white, Jewish woman.

Methodology

Higher education research has utilized the Delphi method to study strategic planning (Murray & Hammons, 1995), competencies of entry-level student affairs practitioners (Burkard et al., 2005), and helping competencies of student affairs professionals (Reynolds, 2011). The Delphi method collects anonymous judgements from experts about a complex issue without face-to-face interaction. Franklin and Hart (2007) identified how the Delphi process provides an avenue to gather informed, focused, and objective insight from experts. This study seeks to identify strategies used by campus activities professionals to reengage students following the COVID-19 pandemic. The purpose of this study is to gather the strategies and approaches needed to increase student reengagement in campus activities from student affairs professionals working in campus activities-

related professional roles following virtual-only programming to foster student learning and development.

The Delphi approach relies upon multiple rounds of data collection and analysis, wherein researchers analyze and summarize participant responses following each round of data collection, share those summaries with the participants in the study, and receive feedback from participants to build consensus among the expert panel. The Delphi method is a flexible, effective, and efficient methodological approach that can be successfully used to answer research questions that seek advice and knowledge from campus activities professionals to support students.

Participants

Recruitment for participation occurred on student affairs social media platforms and email via the college student personnel listserv, CSPTalk. Four requirements to establish “expertise” of participants were met. Those requirements were: 1) knowledge and experience with the issues under investigation; 2) capacity and willingness to participate; 3) time to participate; and 4) effective communication skills (Adler & Ziglio, 1996). Eight participants responded to the call to participate in this study. Six of the participants reported having 10 or more years working as a campus activities professional on a college campus, one had 4-9 years of experience, and one had 0-3 years. We included the participant with 0-3 years of experience because the participant met the recruitment criteria as a mid-level professional. All participants currently work in the Midwestern U.S. Three participants worked in the Southern U.S. for part of their career, while the other five have worked exclusively in the Midwest. Table 1 provides participant demographic information relevant to this study, primarily years of experience, institution type(s), and functional areas represented.

Table 1. *Participant Demographics*

Participant	Years of Experience	Institution Type(s)	Functional Areas Worked In
1	10+	2 Mid-size regional publics, 1 small private	Campus activities, student organizations, fraternity and sorority life, residential life, leadership development
2	10+	1 Mid-size regional public	Dean of Students, student activities
3	10+	1 small private	programming board
4	10+	1 mid-size regional, 1 large research	Student life, student involvement and leadership

5	0-3	1 small private	university program board
6	4-9	1 small private	student life
7	10+	2 mid-size regional publics	residential life, women's resource center, Title IX, student success office
8	10+	1 mid-size regional	campus activities, career center

Procedure

The first-round questionnaire was distributed to participants in March 2023 and consisted of an open-ended questionnaire asking participants to share observations and ideas about engaging students in campus activities. Participants were encouraged to generate as many written responses as possible to three specific questions: a) What are the most important engagement strategies you have used when working with students since returning to face-to-face campus activities?; b) What professional development opportunities, educational resources, and/or on the job experiences have enhanced your engagement skills?; and c) What knowledge and information is needed to more adequately equip you to engage students in campus activities? Participants were given the opportunity to verify first round responses or make revisions.

Ongoing verification throughout the Delphi process is essential to improve reliability (Adler & Ziglio, 1996), which is why this verification loop is part of the research protocol. The results from round one were analyzed and used to develop a second-round questionnaire. Core themes were identified based on first-round tallies. An external auditor reviewed original data to ensure that each core idea was fairly represented. The result of this exercise was to provide a second survey where participants were asked to rank the importance of the items using a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (not at all important) to 4 (extremely important). Participants were given the opportunity to verify first-round responses or make revisions at the conclusion of each round, and the results for the preceding round moved the consensus-building process forward. Additionally, we established that interquartile 1 needed to be 2.6 or higher to be considered consensus for this study. This, coupled with the mean scores, helped us establish which strategies in the second round came to consensus.

During round three, participants were asked to respond to two rankings from the second round: median and interquartile range. The median divided the responses from participants into two equal halves: the point below which 50% of the respondents fell. The interquartile range provided a range for how much consensus participants had built around a certain item. The score was determined by subtracting the 25th percentile from the 75th percentile. Scores closer to 0 represented high consensus among respondents about an item, and scores closer to 7 represented limited consensus about an item. The results provided insights from experts and are discussed in the findings section.

Findings

The data collection process stretched over March and April 2023. In the first round of the survey, participants identified 41 engagement strategies to encourage student participation in face-to-face activities. Many of these strategies included ways to promote campus events (e.g. creative promotion, email, newsletters), different event types and ways to connect with students (e.g. quick and easy events where students can come and go as they please, hybrid options, teambuilding activities, formal and informal one-on-one meetings with students), and personal and professional elements that student affairs practitioners can employ (e.g. being authentic, showing up and being visible in student spaces, having activities “with” them rather than “for” them).

In round two, we shared those engagement strategies with the expert panel and asked them to rank the importance of utilizing each strategy. Following our analysis of their rankings and measurement of consensus levels for each engagement strategy, we found that our participants had come to consensus on 18 out of 41 total strategies. These 18 engagement strategies and their consensus levels are shown in Tables 3, 4, and 5.

In round three, we asked our expert panel to rank the importance of the 23 strategies about which they did not come to consensus during round two, shown below in Table 2. These strategies included: phone calls, collaboration with faculty, craft related activities, emails, game nights, grab & go events, hybrid option for attendance, newsletters, one-on-one meetings, restorative justice-based community building, team building activities, to name a few. Of the 23 other strategies, the panel came to consensus around one additional strategy in round three: knowing what other events are happening on campus, shown in Table 6.

Table 2. *Student Engagement Strategies that Did Not Reach Consensus in Survey 2*

Engagement Strategy	Mean	Quartile 1	Consensus Level
One-on-one meetings with students (informal)	3.71	2.14	1.86
Installation pieces (passive programming)	3.4	1.5	1.75
Hybrid option for attendance	3.33	2.5	1.5
Knowing what other events are happening on campus (for scheduling purposes)	3.25	3	0.75

Partnering with academic departments	3.25	3	0.75
Craft related activities	3.17	2.4	1.43
Restorative justice-based community building strategies	3.17	2.4	1.43
Using student engagement platform computer software (Presence, Classdojo, etc.)	3.17	2.4	1.43
Collaborate with faculty in classrooms	3.14	2.5	1.21
Small group meetings	3.14	2.5	1.21
Team building activities	3.14	2.5	1.21
One-on-one meetings with students (formal)	3.13	2.5	1.5
Game nights	3	2.2	1.47
Grab-and-go events (take materials, etc.)	3	2.33	1.34
Seek out teaching assistants and graduate assistants for assistance with advertising	3	2.2	1.6
Pop-up events	2.86	2.29	1.21
Surveys/feedback	2.83	2.17	1.43
Emails	2.63	2.13	0.87
Overlapping options/choose your own adventure type of programming	2.6	1.83	1.55
Practical training workshops	2.5	2	1.17
Promoting on campus intranet (listservs, campus updates, etc.)	2.43	1.75	1.25
Phone calls	2.38	2	1

Newsletter	2.3	1.4	1.6
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Student Activities

All engagement strategies participants identified in the student activities category related to connections professionals can make with students and programming that directly address the students' interests and needs. These strategies and their consensus levels are shown in Table 3 and included: connecting with students and their friends, in-person event attendance, designing around students' interests, creating gathering opportunities, quick and easy events where students can come and go as they please, skill development with an emphasis on socialization skills, and word-of-mouth promotion among students. Participants ranked these six engagement strategies the highest in the second survey when asked to rate the importance of each strategy for campus activities professionals to reach positive student reengagement on college campuses.

Table 3. *Student Activities Responses that Reached Consensus in Survey 2*

Engagement Strategy	Mean	Quartile 1	Consensus Level
Connecting with students and their friends	3.71	3.14	0.75
In-person event attendance	3.38	3	0.88
Designing around students' interests	3.88	3.38	1
Creating gathering opportunities	3.29	2.6	1.26
Quick and easy events where students can come and go as they please	3.43	2.75	1.25
Skill development with an emphasis on socialization skills	3.43	2.75	1.25
Word-of-mouth promotion among students	3.43	2.75	1.25

Institutional Allocation

Engagement strategies identified as extremely important in the institutional allocation of resources category were those that cost time, money, or resources. These suggestions and their consensus

levels are shown in Table 4 and included: creative promotion, enhancing and adding resources to student-planned events, partnering across campus by joining in on events that are already happening on campus and planned by other areas, and utilizing social media to reach students.

Table 4. *Institutional Allocation Responses that Reached Consensus in Survey 2*

Engagement Strategy	Mean	Quartile 1	Consensus Level
Enhancing and adding resources to student-planned events	3.5	3.14	0.5
Creative promotion	3.5	3	1
Partnering across campus by joining in on events that are already happening on campus and planned by other areas	3.0	3.25	1
Utilizing social media to reach students.	3.71	3.14	0.86

Professional Elements

Finally, strategies in the professional elements category were those that aligned with professionals' training and experience as student affairs practitioners. These strategies are shown below in Tables 5 and 6 and included: being authentic, accepting that student engagement will be different post-COVID, making it fun for students and different from coursework, making individual connections with students at large campus events, rebuilding community, showing up and being visible in student spaces, and knowing what other events are happening on campus for scheduling purposes. Interestingly, knowing the campus calendar was not originally selected in the second round of the survey, yet all but one participant qualified it as "extremely important" in the third round.

Table 5. *Professional Elements Responses that Reached Consensus in Survey 2*

Engagement Strategy	Mean	Quartile 1	Consensus Level
Being authentic	4	4	0
Accepting that student engagement will be different post-COVID	3.5	3	1

Making it fun for students and different from coursework	3.63	3.13	1
Making individual connections with students at large campus events	3.5	3	1
Rebuilding community	3.88	3.38	0.62
Showing up and being visible in student spaces	3.63	3.13	0.87

Table 6. *Professional Elements Response that Reached Consensus in Survey 3*

Engagement Strategy	Mean	Quartile 1	Consensus Level
Knowing what other events are happening on campus for scheduling purposes	3.86	4	0

Implications

Understanding how mid-level campus activities professionals engage students on college campuses following the pandemic is essential to provide robust educational and programmatic approaches to engagement on college campuses. The findings above indicated the importance of Kuh's (2009) understanding of student engagement and Strayhorn's (2018) sense of belonging. Throughout this section we articulate the ways that student engagement hinges on time and resources to promote student success. This study could assist professionals with decision-making approaches and developing beyond-the-classroom skills in students. Furthermore, it may provide insights for new professionals about how mid-level professionals prioritize their student engagement work. Many studies (e.g. Blankstein, 2020; Bernadska et al., 2024; Perozzi et al., 2022) that have occurred regarding campus engagement post-COVID have not included the perspectives of trained student affairs professionals, thus this study brings necessary considerations for practice.

Regarding engagement strategies for student activities, our panelists' responses reflect that student affairs professionals should be fostering connections with and among students, creating gathering opportunities, and designing programming around student interests. Panelists reached the highest consensus around professionals connecting with students and their friends, and emphasized that intentional programming should bring students together, cater to their interests, and help them

socialize. Simultaneously, however, our expert panel came to consensus around planning quick and easy events where students can come and go as they please. Taken together, these responses indicate that while students are looking for individual connections with each other and student affairs professionals, they are also looking for events in which they can get the information or interactions they seek and leave. This poses a challenge for current student affairs administrators related to relationship building and fostering student leadership capacity. For example, these large-scale events often help professionals identify student interest and build rapport for future engagement opportunities, specifically in terms of recruiting student leaders to champion certain student-led events. This shift toward grab-and-go events may pose future challenges for student affairs professionals who rely on student leaders and student interest to shepherd programs.

While participants indicated that both are true, this contrasts with how large-scale campus events are often designed and managed, leaving students who seek community unable to find it. Such events are often an opportunity for professionals to create touchpoints with many students with the intent to establish a relationship later, yet our panelists' responses suggested that students may seek a deeper connection and one-on-one attention despite the event's scale. Considering the panel did not come to consensus around reengaging students in formal and informal one-on-one meetings, their responses show that student affairs professionals should be prepared to make individual connections with students during large, ongoing campus events. Consequently, building relationships with students and catering to their individual needs should be incorporated into large-scale campus event design. One way to respond to student needs could include mid-level professionals' intentional overstaffing of events, regardless of size, to allow a space for students to engage in private, meaningful interactions in public spaces when they pursue that deeper connection. We recognize the staffing challenge this poses for an already understaffed profession. Imagining a way to centralize distribution of materials for large-scale events could maximize the student affairs professionals' availability during the event to engage with students rather than performing some of the manual tasks associated with setup or teardown. Considering ways to use existing technology provided by third-party vendors could also be a vital mechanism to promote engagement between professionals and students.

Our expert panel's responses regarding event planning and marketing showed that student affairs practitioners should take steps to maximize resources and connections in order to reach students. Panelists' consensus around creative promotion, using social media, and relying on word-of-mouth promotion among students shows that the ways we reach students are evolving and that professionals should appropriately market events through channels students actively use. The panel also shared that professionals should find ways to join events that are already happening, either by partnering across campus to join events planned by other areas or working with student groups to add resources to student-planned events. These findings reflect that student affairs practitioners now rely heavily on collaboration to connect with students, which responds to Ackerman's (2007) call for increased collaboration between student affairs units and between

student affairs and faculty departments. Doing so maximizes efficiency, time, costs, and resources, as professionals can promote their area's goals and mission at existing programming. While partnering in this way ensures the visibility of professionals' offices at larger events, we recognize that it can be difficult to influence the shape of a program to create space for meaningful interactions with students when other organizers have all but solidified its design. Professionals should thus consider how impactful joining already-planned events may be for their offices, recognizing there may be a tradeoff for unequal event contribution among campus partners and student groups.

Establishing a relationship with other offices, departments, and student groups proves vital, as does the knowledge and access to the larger campus calendar. Most often, joining preplanned programming requires an invitation to contribute from the organizers before the event is marketed to the rest of campus. Thus, professionals must know other areas well enough to receive an invitation to collaborate or must know which annual events are upcoming to initiate a partnership with organizers. This creates a barrier for student affairs practitioners who are new to their role or institution and have not yet built rapport or established a network with key campus allies. New professionals may similarly be unfamiliar with the campus events calendar to know what annual events and existing programs are upcoming that would be beneficial for their office to join.

Panelists emphasized the importance of knowing what other events are happening on campus for scheduling purposes in round three. Awareness of other campus events may not have been selected in the second round because for some professionals their institution's campus calendar may be inaccessible or underutilized. We recognize that at some institutions the presumably accessible campus calendar serves as an institutional bureaucratic measure that may not wholly portray engaging opportunities across campus for a variety of reasons and therefore may not have been at the forefront of participants' thinking when they responded. Still, panelist responses demonstrated that knowing the calendar is not only essential for scheduling events at times when students are available and to avoid overlapping with other programs and events, but also important for initiating collaboration with campus partners.

Though participants were asked to identify engagement strategies, they also identified values and personal characteristics such as being authentic and accepting that student engagement will be different post-COVID as key professional elements to help reengage students. Significantly, panelists reached the highest consensus around being authentic. Maintaining authenticity is crucial to professionals' interactions with students, especially as students connect differently post-pandemic. Indeed, it is a learning process for practitioners to adapt to new ways students establish relationships, not only with offices and campus activities, but with each other. Doing so requires that professionals share their authentic selves and embodied identities (Renn, 2020) in their work to create spaces of trust where students can feel supported enough to do the same. We believe that being authentic with students is an important part of fostering meaningful and rich interactions, yet we recognize that authenticity can and should mean different things for individuals who work

within a variety of spaces and for those with marginalized identities. Authenticity is about being candid and sincere, remaining true to oneself, and critically reflecting on one's social identities (Sergev et al., 2024). However, candidness and sincerity do not equate with full transparency with students and colleagues.

While we encourage professionals to be authentic with students and remain true to themselves in their work, we are sensitive to how mentally and emotionally draining it can feel for one to bring one's full self to student affairs work. Through an examination of Latinx/a/o mid-level student affairs professionals, Martinez-Benyarko et al. (2023) recommended increasing administrators' mentoring experiences to promote upward mobility for Latinx/a/o representation within the higher education leadership hierarchy. These types of mentorship opportunities for minoritized and underrepresented mid-level student affairs professionals may alleviate some of the pressure to conform and promote authenticity within the workplace.

Other professional elements that panelists agreed upon included rebuilding the community, showing up and being visible in student spaces, making connections at large events, and making events fun and different from students' coursework. Their responses demonstrate that as students spend less time seeking out student affairs offices, activities, and one-on-one meetings, professionals should meet students where they are—literally and figuratively. Practitioners should meet and connect with students in spaces where students frequent and feel comfortable, recognizing that they can share meaningful interactions with students outside of their office space and regular hours. We also mean to reiterate that meeting students where they are translates to accepting that students will engage in campus life and experience belonging differently than alumni did before the pandemic. Among many other disruptions, COVID altered students' personal lives, their means of communication, and ways of socialization. For professionals to create engaging and fun environments where students can be themselves, connect with peers and staff, and bond with their community requires that we listen to their needs, respect their experiences, and engage authentically with them.

Finally, and not to be overlooked, student affairs practitioners are suffering from burnout (De Sawal et al., 2022), fatigue, and are continuing to exit the field (Marshall et al., 2016) at high rates. The developmental focus of student affairs has not adequately prepared practitioners to address the unique concerns of students and adapt to barriers to engagement that are specific to our post-COVID reality. As Ackerman (2007) acknowledged, the mid-level professional finds themselves in an invisible space, often left to enforce others' decisions through supervision of entry-level professionals. This occurred during institutional responses to COVID-19 for mid-level professionals, just as it has occurred for many years before within the academy. Perhaps through this consensus-building activity focused on the professionals independently responding to these important inquiries, professionals will themselves feel reinvigorated and encouraged to continue doing the work to support campus engagement.

Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations exist within this study that should be noted. First, the professionals within this study self-identified as being mid-level professionals. This participant pool for this study was small, but not uncharacteristic for a Delphi study of this type. That said, we would have appreciated a higher participation rate. Not all participants answered every round of the study, but we did not collect data to understand why those specific questions/rounds went unanswered. The findings from this study are not intended to be generalized for all mid-level student affairs professionals, yet the findings do elucidate some intriguing components that benefit students through potentially increased student and mid-level employee engagement. Additional information will need to be collected to better understand how institutional bureaucracy, budgets, and leadership contribute to mid-level professionals' ability to develop engaging programming for campus activities. Studies focused on mid-level student affairs professionals warrant more attention, as literature is scarce. Specifically, more data should be collected to learn what mid-level student affairs professionals require to be more effective, such as resources, professional development, training, supervision, and other forms of support. Some of the findings leave more questions than answers and extrapolating what these findings mean for student affairs professionals post-COVID could benefit campuses across the country.

Additional qualitative and quantitative research is needed around what it means for mid-level professionals to be authentic in their work. Our expert panel came to 100% consensus on how important it is for practitioners in their roles to be authentic, yet authenticity can be hard to define for professionals who balance student-facing responsibilities, supervisory duties, and administrative reporting. Mid-level professionals traverse a variety of spaces and structural layers of their organization in which they interact with students, oversee operations in their office or department, and report to high-level administrators at their institution. Balancing authenticity with professionalism in each of these spaces assuredly looks different depending on with whom they are working and in what context. We believe their relationships with authenticity, especially considering their proximity to leadership and community building with students, is an area that deserves further exploration.

Collaboration on already-planned events with student groups and areas across campus is another promising area for further research. While our expert panel came to consensus around the value of contributing to these events, it raises questions about whether this effort aligns with the goals of the event, and if contributing to the event in a limited capacity gives professionals the space they need to meet their area's objectives. Though we view these opportunities for collaboration as important for increasing student engagement and enhancing visibility, we believe that exploring these questions further could provide insight into how means of collaboration with students, offices, and departments are shifting post-COVID.

Conclusion

Understanding the strategies and approaches perceived to be useful for mid-level student affairs professionals to increase student reengagement in campus activities to foster student learning and

development following virtual-only programming due to COVID-19 serves a vital role in supporting student success and demonstrating confidence in the expertise of this group of esteemed professionals. Equipping campus activities units with appropriate tactics and strategies to reengage students may empower mid-level professionals to continue their efforts to support students, target specific approaches, and collaborate more readily and intentionally with other campus partners. Students connect differently now, not just with offices and activities, but with each other. The critical role that authenticity plays reifies Renn's (2020) notion of the "embodied self" both for professionals and students alike. If student affairs professionals expect students to trust us to shepherd and guide them, we must also be trusting and comfortable enough to do the same for one another.

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STUDENT LEADERS' PERCEPTIONS OF PEER MENTORING IN AN INCLUSIVE CAMPUS ORGANIZATION

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Peer mentors facilitate access and social integration for college students with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) in inclusive postsecondary programs. There is limited research regarding how these experiences are shaped within student-led campus activities rather than a formal staff-facilitated mentorship structure. This study used a multi-year survey to explore how two cohorts of college student leaders in a registered student organization (N = 69) perceived the personal, professional, and relational impact of their peer mentoring roles during the COVID-19 pandemic. Mentors reported high levels of perceived impact in the areas of interpersonal connection, advocacy, and personal development. Mentors described their relationships with students with IDD in ways that reflect elements of friendship, while noting tensions with role expectations and boundaries. These findings suggest that student-led mentoring organizations may serve as unique contexts for co-curricular engagement and leadership development. Implications are discussed for campus activities professionals and university staff.

The landscape of modern higher education emphasizes the role of co-curricular engagement in promoting student success, leadership development, and a sense of belonging (Astin, 1997; Strayhorn, 2018). Registered student organizations serve as primary vehicles for this engagement, as they provide avenues for college students to grow and refine their leadership skills, build peer networks, and navigate diverse social ecosystems (Dunkel et al., 2014). Involvement in student organizations offers college students an opportunity to co-create and navigate peer-to-peer environments that mirror broader societal contexts, such as workplaces or community spaces with embedded hierarchies and expectations.

Many student organizations are formed based on the traditional models of shared interests, hobbies, ideologies, or professional goals. Student organizations are often a “safe space” to support

minoritized or historically marginalized student populations (Museus, 2013). In campus programming, peer leaders are frequently utilized to scale student support services, facilitate orientation activities, and broker campus life for incoming students (Shook & Keup, 2012). Although these interventions are highly effective, there is an inherent tension regarding the professionalization of peer relationships that reduces the “peer” element. In other words, when volunteers are placed in a formalized “peer mentor” or “support role,” an artificial social hierarchy emerges that can transform the possibility of an organic friendship into a transactional, compliance-driven task for the peers involved (Newton & Ender, 2010). It is important to examine how this hierarchy emerges in the context of student organizations developed with the explicit mission of promoting friendships and inclusion on campus for non-traditional, marginalized students. Specifically, this need is made more essential given the rapidly evolving nature of inclusive postsecondary education (IPSE) programs, which have introduced an entirely new subset of diverse learners to college campuses who have historically been excluded from collegiate pursuits and activities (Grigal et al., 2022).

The expansion of inclusive higher education in the United States for students with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) has made an indelible impact on college and university campuses within the past two decades. The passage of the Higher Education Opportunity Act (HEOA, 2008) extended access to individuals with IDD by providing incentives for institutions to offer collegiate opportunities for individuals with IDD (Lee, 2009). There are now more than 375 postsecondary programs in the United States serving students with IDD housed at institutions of higher education (Think College, n.d.). The “inclusive” element of most IPSE programs is often orchestrated by a network of peers without IDD who are also enrolled at the institution as degree-seeking undergraduate or graduate students. Although the exact model varies across programs, peers typically serve in a variety of paid or unpaid roles, including academic tutors, residential mentors, job coaches, or social support networks (Grigal et al., 2022).

Prior research in inclusive peer mentoring programs demonstrates personal and professional benefits for the mentors without IDD (e.g., Culnane et al., 2016; Griffin et al., 2016). Mentors describe their experiences as transformative, whereby they gained more knowledge, eliminated their biases about students with IDD, built close friendships with their mentees, and improved their social skills and networks (Wilt & Morningstar, 2020). Carter and McCabe (2021) conducted a systematic review of the rapidly growing body of literature focusing on peer perspectives within IPSE programs. Although many peers describe their mentor-mentee relationship with similar qualities of “friendship,” it is important to note that much of this literature is situated within staff-directed program models in which peers often receive an incentive to participate, such as monetary compensation, course credit, or service hours (Carter & McCabe, 2021). Thus, even when friendships do emerge, the inherent nature of the formal role implies a hierarchical structure that labels the peer without IDD as a “mentor” and the peer with IDD as a “mentee.” Although the

formal structure of peer support is valuable for the consistency and predictability it provides for mentees, the hierarchy hinders the extent to which reciprocal relationships can blossom based on authenticity and equity (Singh & Gilson, 2020). Prior literature suggests that reciprocity in peer relationships is shaped not only by compensation structures but also by role expectations, organizational context, and opportunities for shared decision-making (Newton & Ender, 2010).

However, far less is known about how mentors conceptualize relational impact within co-curricular settings and how these perceptions map onto broader theories of student involvement and belonging. Based on the knowledge that student organizations can serve as spaces for co-creation and leadership development (Dunkel et al., 2014), this represents an ideal setting to understand the potential for cultivating inclusive relationships. Despite their central role in fostering engagement and belonging, less is known about how student-led organizations structure peer relationships when inclusion is the mission, rather than shared interests. In particular, there is a need to better understand how these environments navigate the balance between organic relationships that blossom from shared experiences and structured support roles inherent to mentor/mentee dynamics.

Purpose of the Study

In the present study, we sought to understand the ways that student leaders conceptualize the impact of peer mentoring and how the characterization of impact differs based on whether they are considering impact on themselves or their mentees. We were particularly interested in understanding the impact within the context of the COVID-19 global pandemic, given that its longstanding disruption to typical campus life changed how college students navigated relationships. The central aim of the study was to examine how peer mentoring functions as a form of student engagement in a registered student organization. Specifically, we addressed the following research questions:

1. How do student leaders perceive the impact of their involvement in an inclusive peer mentoring student organization?
2. How do student leaders perceive the impact of their mentorship as a mechanism for facilitating access to campus life for peers with IDD?
3. How do these perceptions differ across cohorts, particularly when disrupted by a global pandemic and major institutional crisis?

Method

Setting

All participants in the study attended a large, public research university in the south-central United States that housed a four-year IPSE program for students with IDD. The peer mentors are members of a registered student organization operating under the purview of the institution's campus activities office and supported by a faculty advisor. It is open to all undergraduate and graduate students of all majors and disciplines. Importantly, all recruitment, selection, and training of the peer mentors are led by the officers of the student organization, rather than staff members in the IPSE program. This is a key defining feature that distinguishes the context of this study from others previously explored in research (Carter & McCabe, 2021).

The primary mission of the organization is to broker campus life, facilitate social integration, and foster institutional belonging for college students with IDD enrolled in the IPSE program on campus. Specifically, the mission statement of the organization is to “help students accomplish their goals of the program and build friendships with them by providing them with individualized support and mentorship.” The mentoring structure is guided by the Circle of Support model, which involves a group of people who volunteer with “varying levels of formality to support a single individual through relationships of trust and intimacy” (Bigby & Araten-Bergman, 2018, p. 3). Each IPSE student receives a circle of peers who fulfill a variety of roles across traditional collegiate routines and activities, based on their individual interests and needs. Formally assigned roles include: (a) *academic mentors* who assist with academic coursework and promote good study habits, (b) *lunch and dinner partners* who focus on social skills and healthy eating goals, (c) *wellness partners* who engage in a workout or game to encourage safe and healthy exercise habits, (d) *planning partners* who focus on organizational skills, self-advocacy skills, and financial management. Additionally, the organization has less-defined roles, broadly called “members at large,” to participate in group activities or substitute for peers who cannot make their scheduled time for one week. Weekly commitments average two or more hours, depending on the peer mentor's role and how many IPSE students they support.

Participant Recruitment

All study procedures were approved by the Institutional Review Board. Participants were recruited from the membership roster of the student organization across two distinct operational cycles: Cohort 1 (Spring 2020) and Cohort 2 (Spring 2022). The organization had approximately 100 active members registered each year. First, we distributed a flyer, which included information about the study, the online survey link, and the researchers' information, to all members of the peer mentoring organization. We also asked the leadership team to distribute the flyers at their monthly meetings and include the study information in their weekly communications. We asked three IPSE students to distribute the study information to their circles using text messages and emails. Recruitment occurred at the end of each spring semester (e.g., March-May) and typically lasted

two months. Of note, the analysis for the present study drew from an annual survey given by the IPSE program to understand the experiences of peer mentors. Although a survey was administered to peer mentors in Spring 2021, the data related to the present analysis were limited and not usable due to a substantial amount of missing data.

Participants

Survey respondents included 69 peer mentors, with 40 participants at Cohort 1 in Spring 2020 (C1) and 29 at Cohort 2 in Spring 2022 (C2). All participants had been mentors for at least one academic year, with 34.5% of participants in C2 who had mentored for two or more years. Most participants in both cohorts identified as white (90% in C1; 100% in C2) and female (85% in C1; 82.8% in C2). Mentors were varied in their major of study, including education (40% in C1; 24.1% in C2), health sciences (20% in C1; 27.6% in C2), liberal arts and social sciences (17.5% in C1; 17.2% in C2), biological sciences (10% in C1; 20.7% in C2), business (10% in C1; 3% in C2), and engineering (2.5% in C1; 0% in C2).

All peer mentors with formal roles were paired with one IPSE student at C1. During C2, they were paired with either one (69%) or two IPSE students (31%) and served in a variety of roles. They served in various mentoring capacities, including as lunch or dinner partner (32.5% in C1; 27.6% in C2), wellness partner (22.5% in C1; 20.7% in C2), academic support (15% in C1; 27.6% in C2), planning partner (17.5% in C1; 13.8% in C2), and officer in the organization (5% in C1; 17.2% in C2). A smaller group (22.5% in C1; 6.9% in C2) participated as members at large, engaging informally with multiple students without specific assignments to IPSE students. See Table 1 for the full demographic summary table.

Table 1

Survey Participant Demographics

Item	Spring 2020 (C1)		Spring 2022 (C2)	
	N	(%)	N	(%)
Gender				
Female	34	85	24	82.8
Male	6	15	4	13.8
Other	0		1	3.4
Race/Ethnicity				

Item	Spring 2020 (C1)		Spring 2022 (C2)	
	N	(%)	N	(%)
White	36	90	29	100
Asian	1	2.5	0	0
Other	3	7.5	0	0
Mentorship Entry Time				
Fall 2019	40	100	6	20.7
Spring 2020	0	0	4	13.8
Fall 2020	0	0	3	10.3
Spring 2021	0	0	5	17.2
Fall 2021	0	0	11	37.9
Class Year				
Freshman	6	15	1	3.4
Sophomore	11	27.5	8	27.6
Junior	15	37.5	12	41.4
Senior	7	17.5	7	24.1
Graduate Student	1	2.5	1	3.4
Mentor Role				
Planning Partner	7	17.5	4	13.8
Academic Support	6	15	8	27.6
Wellness Partner	9	22.5	6	20.7
Lunch/Dinner Partner	13	32.5	8	27.6
Member at Large (non-assigned role)	9	22.5	2	6.9
Officer/Leader	2	5	5	17.2

Item	Spring 2020 (C1)		Spring 2022 (C2)	
	N	(%)	N	(%)
Major				
Business	4	10	3	10.3
Education	16	40	7	24.1
Health Sciences	8	20	8	27.6
Liberal Arts and Social Sciences	7	17.5	5	17.2
Biological Science	4	10	6	20.7
Engineering	1	2.5	0	0

Note. The percentages of mentor roles may exceed 100% as individuals may have assumed multiple roles simultaneously.

Survey Instrument

We adapted an existing measure (Carter et al., 2019) to develop a survey that could be used annually to evaluate the experiences and perspectives of the peer mentors. The survey had six sections focused on the following topics: (a) Demographic Information, (b) Motivations for Peer Mentoring, (c) Summary of Experiences as a Peer Mentor, (d) Future Expectations of Peer Mentees, (e) Impact of Mentorship on Self, Mentees, and Campus, and (f) Feedback on IPSE Program Support. The present study's analyses focus primarily on Section E of the original survey, which relates to the impact of the peer mentor role on students, self, and the broader campus community. Participants were asked to report the perceived impact by indicating the extent of their agreement with statements provided using a 5-point Likert-type scale (5 = *Strongly Agree*, 4 = *Agree*, 3 = *Neutral*, 2 = *Disagree*, 1 = *Strongly Disagree*). In the first part of this section, participants rated the perceived impact on IPSE students (e.g., stronger academic support, more engaged in class, sense of belonging, greater feelings of inclusion on campus). There were open-ended items in which participants were given a text box to share any positive or negative impact of peer mentoring on the IPSE students. In the next section, participants rated the perceived impact on themselves using the same Likert-type scale (e.g., professional growth, developed friendships, decreased stress level, improved study skills). Similarly, there were two open-ended items in which participants could write about other positive or negative impacts that being a peer mentor had on themselves. Participants could also comment on whether or how being a peer mentor has shaped their career path or influenced future plans.

The first survey was administered in March 2020, during a period in which the world was still beginning to understand the long-term impact of the pandemic. As such, the peer mentors' responses describing their involvement in the present academic year were mostly framed *before* the onset of the pandemic, when most students were abruptly sent home for "spring break" and did not return to campus until August 2020. We revised the survey prior to C2 to add items related to online/virtual interactions to better understand the experiences of peer mentors within the virtual context. Specifically, we refined the items asking about peer mentor responsibilities and time spent with their mentee to include "virtual time" together, such as talking on the phone, video calls, or text messaging.

Before administering the first surveys in 2020, we asked two peer mentors from the leadership team (e.g., president and vice-president) to pilot the survey for feasibility, language, consistency, and contextual appropriateness. They offered suggestions to simplify the language of the survey items, add options for open-ended responses, and define intellectual and developmental disabilities for participants. The complete online survey took approximately 25-35 minutes to complete. Survey peer mentors had the option to enter into a drawing to be one of 20 participants randomly selected to receive a \$25 Amazon gift card.

Research Design and Analysis

Quantitative Analysis

We conducted a descriptive, multi-year survey using trend grouping and repeated measures (Lynn, 2009). In trend grouping, similar samples are surveyed at each time point with repeated measures, but the peer mentors in the sampling units may be different. This approach allowed us to track overall trends and compare changes between groups while accounting for the differences in cohorts. We used descriptive statistics (quantitative) for ordinal responses and direct content analysis for open-ended responses (qualitative).

We analyzed the quantitative data using SPSS. First, we conducted Cronbach's alpha for survey items related to the perceived impact on peer mentors. Survey items assessing the impact on mentees demonstrated strong reliability ($\alpha = .827$, $N = 13$). Similarly, items measuring the impact on mentors demonstrated robust reliability ($\alpha = .817$, $N = 13$ items). Second, we calculated descriptive statistics, including mean and standard deviation, to understand peer mentors' perceived impact of the program. Given the modest sample size and ordinal nature of the data, we used the Mann-Whitney U test to explore the perceived impact between the two mentor cohorts (C1 vs. C2). This test was selected considering the non-normal distribution of the data as indicated by significant results from both Kolmogorov-Smirnov and Shapiro-Wilk tests ($p < .001$ for all variables) and the ordinal nature of the survey responses. This non-parametric test was selected due to its appropriateness for comparing two independent samples where the assumption of normality is not met (Hart, 2001). We grouped the data based on the survey timepoints and examined differences in responses using the selected test criteria.

Based on a review of the extant literature (e.g., Carter & McCabe, 2021), we developed a priori hypotheses, in which we hypothesized that peer mentors would report higher levels of impact related broadly to societal and professional influences for themselves (e.g., increased awareness, increased advocacy skills) and higher levels of direct social impact (e.g., having fun) and academic growth (e.g., class engagement) for the mentees.

Qualitative Analysis

We used qualitative content analyses to code the open-ended responses in which participants described the positive and negative impact of being a peer mentor on themselves, the mentees, and the broader campus community (Strauss & Corbin, 2008). Participants also commented on how these mentorship experiences shaped their career paths or plans. The first author reviewed the open-ended responses and clustered them into primary and secondary code categories, where applicable. The third author reviewed the categories and indicated agreement or disagreement. We discussed disagreements to establish consensus.

Results

How do Student Leaders Perceive the Impact of their Involvement in an Inclusive Peer Mentoring Student Organization?

Peer mentors' perceptions of impact were compared across two time points to explore how they evolved over time. Overall, mentors indicated the highest degree of agreement with the following types of impact: having fun ($M = 4.95$; C1), growing as an advocate for people with IDD ($M = 4.90$; C2), and developing friendships with their mentees ($M = 4.88$, C1). Areas with the lowest levels of impact reported pertained to the extent to which the experience of being a mentor improved their social status ($M = 3.15$; C1); improved their study skills ($M = 3.24$; C2); and decreased their stress levels ($M = 3.41$; C2). Table 2 summarizes the perceived impact of being a peer mentor on themselves in professional and personal ways at C1 and C2.

Peer mentors could use the open responses to share any other types of impact of being a peer mentor that they considered to be “positive” or “negative.” “Positive” impact was related to friendship ($n = 6$), social connection ($n = 4$), patience ($n = 3$), learning to advocate ($n = 2$), shared passion ($n = 2$), stress relief ($n = 1$), and positive outlook ($n = 1$). One peer mentor wrote, “My relationship with my [mentee] is something that will last a lifetime. I am very confident that I will invite my [mentee] to my wedding one day.” An education major commented, “I think it is really important for future teachers to learn how to advocate for all students. I think [my peer mentoring experience] helped me understand students with IDD better.”

A small group of mentors described the negative impacts of being a peer mentor ($n = 8$). These comments pertained to the mentees refusing support, mentees not respecting their mentors' time or personal boundaries, and the tension between trying to have a “genuine friendship” and also

being “good stewards and models.” As one peer mentor wrote, “I want to provide as much support as possible, but sometimes the students did not want help or were not communicative of their needs and wants.”

Participants were also asked how being a peer mentor shaped their career path or influenced their future plans. Six participants responded that the peer mentoring experience had no impact on their professional goals. Several participants described the impact of the organization on their career path of becoming a teacher ($n = 5$), working in medicine, allied health, or related fields to support people with disabilities ($n = 4$), or becoming advocates for inclusion in a different field ($n = 6$). One participant wrote, “It just showed me how much I love caring for other people in need and has shown me how rewarding it feels to be able to serve other people in the ways they need it most.”

Table 2

Self-Perceived Impact of Peer Mentoring on Personal and Professional Development

Survey Item	Cohort	Extent of Agreement with Statement					Mean (SD)
		Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree	
I grew professionally.	1	70.0%	15.0%	15.0%	0%	0%	4.55 (.75)
	2	62.1%	31.0%	3.4%	3.4%	0%	4.52 (.74)
I became a better advocate for individuals with IDD.	1	82.5%	7.5%	7.5%	0%	2.5%	4.68 (.83)
	2	89.7%	10.3%	0%	0%	0%	4.90 (.31)
I had fun.	1	95.0%	5.0%	0%	0%	0%	4.95 (.22)
	2	86.2%	10.3%	3.4%	0%	0%	4.83 (.47)
I learned much more about myself.	1	65.0%	22.5%	10.0%	2.5%	0%	4.50 (.79)
	2	79.3%	13.8%	6.9%	0%	0%	4.72 (.59)
I developed friendships with [my mentees].	1	87.5.0%	12.5%	0%	0%	0%	4.88 (.34)
	2	86.2%	13.8%	0%	0%	0%	4.86 (.35)
	1	87.5.0%	10.0%	2.5%	0%	0%	4.85 (.43)

Survey Item	Cohort	Extent of Agreement with Statement					Mean (SD)
		Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree	
I became more comfortable interacting with [my mentees].	2	86.2%	13.8%	0%	0%	0%	4.86 (.35)
My stress level decreased.	1	42.5%	27.5%	17.5%	10.0%	2.5%	3.98 (1.1)
	2	20.7%	24.1%	34.5%	17.2%	3.4%	3.41 (1.1)
I became more informed about the challenges and barriers faced by [my mentees].	1	77.5%	22.5%	0%	0%	0%	4.78 (.42)
	2	82.8%	17.2%	0%	0%	0%	4.83 (.39)
I gained a greater appreciation and understanding of diversity.	1	82.5%	12.5%	5.0%	0%	0%	4.78 (.53)
	2	82.8%	17.2%	0%	0%	0%	4.83 (.38)
My social status on campus improved.	1	15.0%	22.5%	40.0%	7.5%	15.0%	3.15 (1.23)
	2	31.0%	24.1%	34.5%	6.9%	3.4%	3.72 (1.10)
I developed more positive attitudes toward people with IDD.	1	67.5%	27.5%	5.0%	0%	0%	4.63 (.59)
	2	86.2%	13.8%	0%	0%	0%	4.86 (.35)
I enjoyed my college experience more.	1	87.5%	10.0%	2.5%	0%	0%	4.85 (.43)
	2	86.2%	10.3%	3.4%	0%	0%	4.83 (.47)
My study skills improved.	1	22.5%	22.5%	47.5%	0%	7.5%	3.53 (1.09)
	2	20.7%	13.8%	44.8%	10.3%	10.3%	3.24 (1.22)

Note. Cohort 1 = 40 participants. Cohort 2 = 29 participants. Percentages are rounded to the nearest tenth decimal point. Percentages are based on the number of respondents to each item.

How do Student Leaders Perceive the Impact of their Mentorship as a Mechanism for Facilitating Access to Campus Life for Peers with IDD?

Table 3 summarizes the perceived impact that their mentorship has on their mentees in personal and professional ways at C1 and C2. Most of the types of impact evaluated were extremely high (i.e., means higher than 4.5). Mentors considered the impact on mentees to be highest across the following areas: having fun ($M = 5.00$; C1); strong social support ($M = 4.95$; C1); feeling included in campus life ($M = 4.95$; C1); and developing new friendships ($M = 4.95$; C1). The areas with relatively lower levels of mentee impact reported were related to exhibiting fewer behavior challenges ($M = 3.93$, C1); higher class engagement ($M = 4.28$; C1 and C2); and developing career-related skills ($M = 4.45$; C2).

In the open-ended responses, peer mentors described the perceived benefits of the peer mentoring relationship on their mentees in the IPSE program. Their responses related to friendship ($n = 6$), college immersion and a gateway to broader social networks ($n = 8$), fostering a sense of community ($n = 3$), and supporting the transition to college ($n = 3$). One peer mentor wrote, “[We] help [IPSE] students get to have the college experience like any other student.” Another peer mentor commented, “I think the students feel a lot more included and accepted because of the [peer mentors]. They feel treated more ‘regularly’ like they should be.”

Nine peer mentors provided examples of the negative impact of the peer mentoring experience on the IPSE students. These comments related to an overdependence on the peer mentors ($n = 4$), lack of reciprocity in friendship ($n = 3$), and an unequal college experience ($n = 1$). One peer mentor wrote, “Students can rely too much on [peer mentors] for tasks they could be completing independently.” Another peer mentor commented:

Some [mentors] might allow the [IPSE] students to do things that shouldn’t be done or just allow them to sort of push the limit more than the ‘normal’ real world would allow... I think a lot of [mentors] are just very loving and patient with their assigned student, and this might cause more allowance for babying, whining, and things of that nature.

Table 3*Peer Mentors' Perceived Impact on Mentees with IDD*

Survey Item	Cohort	Extent of Agreement with Statement					Mean (SD)
		Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree	
My mentees accessed strong academic support.	1	80.0%	20.0%	0%	0%	0%	4.80 (.41)
	2	69.0%	20.7%	10.3%	0%	0%	4.59 (.68)
My mentees were more engaged in class.	1	52.5%	25.0%	20.0%	2.5%	0%	4.28 (.88)
	2	41.4%	44.8%	13.8%	0%	0%	4.28 (.70)
My mentees had access to strong social support.	1	95.0%	5.0%	0%	0%	0%	4.95 (.22)
	2	86.2%	13.8%	0%	0%	0%	4.86 (.35)
My mentees developed social and communication skills.	1	90.0%	10.0%	0%	0%	0%	4.90 (.35)
	2	89.7%	10.3%	0%	0%	0%	4.90 (.31)
My mentees developed virtual and technology-assisted social and communication skills.	1	72.5%	25.0%	2.5%	0%	0%	4.70 (.52)
	2	79.3%	20.7%	0%	0%	0%	4.79 (.41)
My mentees had fewer behavior challenges.	1	20.0%	55.0%	22.5%	2.5%	0%	3.93 (.73)
	2	37.9%	48.3%	13.8%	0%	0%	4.24 (.69)
My mentees developed independent skills.	1	82.5%	15.0%	2.5%	0%	0%	4.80 (.46)

Survey Item	Cohort	Extent of Agreement with Statement					Mean (SD)
		Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree	
	2	72.4%	24.1%	3.4%	0%	0%	4.69 (.54)
My mentees developed self-determination skills.	1	67.5%	22.5%	10.0%	0%	0%	4.58 (.68)
	2	62.1%	34.5%	0%	3.4%	0%	4.55 (.69)
My mentees developed career-related skills.	1	60.0%	27.5%	12.5%	0%	0%	4.48 (.72)
	2	48.3%	48.3%	3.4%	0%	0%	4.45 (.57)
My mentees developed new friendships.	1	95.0%	5.0%	0%	0%	0%	4.95 (.22)
	2	86.2%	13.8%	0%	0%	0%	4.86 (.35)
My mentees developed a sense of belonging.	1	92.5%	7.5%	0%	0%	0%	4.93 (.27)
	2	86.2%	13.8%	0%	0%	0%	4.86 (.35)
My mentees had fun.	1	100.0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	5.00 (.00)
	2	93.1%	6.9%	0%	0%	0%	4.93 (.26)
My mentees felt included in the campus activities and culture.	1	95.0%	5.0%	0%	0%	0%	4.95 (.22)
	2	93.1%	6.9%	0%	0%	0%	4.93 (.26)

Note. Cohort 1 = 40 participants. Cohort 2 = 29 participants. Percentages are rounded to the nearest tenth decimal point. Percentages are based on the number of respondents to each item.

How Do these Perceptions Differ Across Cohorts?

Collectively, the level of impact did not change significantly across cohorts, even with the pandemic influencing how the peers could convene and communicate with one another. The only

statistically significant difference observed was between the decreased stress levels reported by mentors in 2020 compared to 2022 ($U = 412.00$, $Z = -2.120$, $p = .034$).

While not statistically significant, other interesting trends emerged. For instance, mentors in C2 reported a greater improvement in their social status ($U = 432.50$, $Z = -1.867$, $p = .062$) and more positive attitudes toward people with IDD ($U = 467.50$, $Z = -1.823$, $p = .068$). Other measures, such as professional growth, self-awareness, and advocacy skills, remained relatively stable across time, suggesting that the benefits of being a mentor were consistent regardless of the year. However, enjoyment and the perception of personal growth showed a slight decrease, although not statistically significant. One notable, though not statistically significant, trend was the belief that students exhibited fewer behavioral challenges in C2 compared to C1 ($U = 448.00$, $Z = -1.761$, $p = .078$). While there were no significant changes in academic support, social engagement, or skill development, mentors in both years consistently perceived their role as beneficial to student success. However, slight declines were observed in areas such as perceived social support and fun. The summary tables for the inferential statistics are available on Open Science Framework in a folder titled “Supplemental Tables” at https://osf.io/pmgyx/?view_only=52216128e8a742d1b1b3246c57eb69b8

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine how college student leaders within a registered student organization perceived the personal, professional, and relational impact of their involvement in an inclusive peer mentoring program for college students with IDD. As the number of IPSE programs continue to grow exponentially across the United States (Think College, n.d.), these types of peer mentoring opportunities will become more abundant for college students across a wide variety of campuses and institution types. The context of this peer mentoring model within an entirely student-led organization (i.e., rather than staff-facilitated) presents a unique opportunity to situate the study in the context of campus activities and student leadership, rather than staff-facilitated support as is typically the case in IPSE programs. Moreover, the findings of this study are especially relevant to scholars and professionals in the field of college student engagement in several important ways.

First, peer mentors characterized the impact of peer mentoring as overwhelmingly positive for themselves and their mentees. They consistently reported that their peer mentoring experience shaped their own lives in emotional, social, and professional ways, including increased opportunities for personal growth and empathy and a deeper understanding of disability. These findings align with foundational theories of student involvement, which signify the importance of meaningful engagement in campus life on identity development, skill acquisition, and social integration (Astin, 1997). Mentors emphasized relational aspects, which mirrored elements of authentic friendships more closely than fixed social hierarchies. Although these findings echo previous literature on peer mentors of students with IDD (e.g., Griffin et al., 2016; Jones et al.,

2020), the context of an entirely peer-led student organization suggests that these relationships can develop organically even in the absence of staff-imposed structures. The student organization served as a structured yet flexible environment through which peer mentors could foster connections that extended beyond task-oriented mentoring roles.

Second, perceptions generally remained positive across cohorts, even amid the COVID-19 pandemic in which increased isolation and social distancing disrupted the natural dynamic of interpersonal connections on college campuses. The stability is surprising given the added logistical challenges of sustaining relationships when campuses were closed and lockdowns were in place. However, this finding is consistent with other literature broadly examining social resilience of other age groups during this time period, underscoring how relationships grounded in reciprocity and shared purpose can serve as protective factors against loneliness (e.g., Loades et al., 2020; Strayhorn, 2018). Indeed, the mentors collectively reported a decrease in perceived stress levels during the pandemic, which may indicate that the expectations of communication and interaction set by the peer mentoring program may have actually helped mentors and mentees retain a sense of campus connection and interpersonal engagement during a period fraught with upheaval and uncertainty.

Third, situating these findings within a student organization context provides a more nuanced understanding of how hierarchical norms may be understood differently in peer-led environments. Unlike many IPSE programs that rely on professional staff to assign roles and structure interactions, the organization in the present study was governed entirely by volunteer student leaders, which indicates intrinsic motivation (Carter & McCabe, 2021). This is noteworthy, considering the implication that staff facilitation may not be required for strong relationships to blossom. However, our findings indicate that the absence of compensation does not remove the hierarchical dynamics embedded within mentoring roles. Even in this context, mentors expressed difficulty in balancing the formal mentor-mentee relationship with the desire for a genuine friendship. While many mentors reported developing close, meaningful friendships with their mentees, the inherent dynamic of the mentor role often complicated this process. Mentors emphasized the importance of setting clear boundaries in their relationships with mentees, including holding mentees accountable socially and academically to ensure the mentoring experience remained effective. Even in a student-led environment where mentors would ostensibly have greater latitude to blur the boundaries between formal and informal relationships, they still experienced challenges with maintaining a “genuine” friendship alongside fulfilling the responsibilities of being a mentor. These challenges underscore the importance of providing student leaders with training on maintaining the balance between supportive relationships and healthy boundaries. Training should include guidance on how to navigate these complex interpersonal dynamics and how to manage expectations while promoting independence among mentees.

Limitations and Future Research

The findings of this study should be considered alongside its methodological limitations. First, although the goal of the study was to understand how peer mentors conceptualize impact for themselves and the mentees, the study's findings are framed only by the peer mentors' self-reported reflections. The omission of direct input from the mentees with IDD limits the extent to which the impact may be fully reciprocated in the same way that the mentors envisioned it to be. Future research should include the dyadic perspectives of mentors and mentees to capture a more balanced understanding of the reciprocal impact.

Second, the study was conducted at a single institution, which reduces the generalizability of the findings. The homogenous sample of mostly white females may not be representative of other institutions or IPSE programs with different peer mentorship models. Institutional culture, training models, program structure, and mentor incentives can all shape the mentor experience. Relatedly, although it is a strength of the study to focus on unpaid mentors, many of whom are more likely to be naturally predisposed toward inclusive values, this could introduce a form of selection bias. That is, mentors with less positive experiences may have opted not to participate in the survey. Future research should explore other ways to assess the impact of peer mentorship that transcend self-report measures, such as social network analysis or observational methods. These tools could help map patterns of inclusion and friendship development in tangible ways that would allow researchers to assess whether the social capital expended to students with IDD by peer mentors ultimately leads to broader campus integration.

Finally, while the multi-year design allowed for broad comparisons across cohorts, the data were collected at two distinct time points with different mentor cohorts. Although a survey was administered to peer mentors in Spring 2021, the data related to the present analysis were limited and unusable due to a substantial amount of missing data. A related limitation to the timing of distribution is that six peer mentors in C2 were eligible for the survey in C1 (i.e., served as a peer mentor since Fall 2019), but it is unclear whether those peer mentors took the survey twice because we did not directly ask this question. Thus, it is difficult to determine how many participants had their perspectives reflected in both time points. This limits our ability to draw longitudinal conclusions, as differences may reflect cohort variation rather than changes over time. Future studies should collect a unique sample identifier to allow for accurate tracking of research participants over time. Additionally, allowing for follow-up with participants would help researchers understand whether these relationships sustain into the mentors' and mentees' professional and personal spheres beyond the college time period.

Implications for Practice

The findings of this study highlight important considerations for practice within campus activities professionals, student organization advisors, and IPSE program staff seeking to expand opportunities for inclusive co-curricular experiences. First, the findings highlight the potential of

registered student organizations as critical contexts for inclusive engagement. For mentors, these relationships contribute to personal growth, greater disability awareness, and a deeper understanding of inclusion, which can extend into their future careers (Astin, 1997). These connections remained stable even during the period of disruption caused by the global pandemic. For campus activities professionals, this suggests that championing the development of mission-driven organizations focused on inclusion and belonging may be an effective strategy to engage students in on-campus and virtual contexts, even when shared physical spaces may not be viable, such as for distance learners.

Second, the findings underscore the importance of intentionally navigating the balance between structure and flexibility in peer mentoring programs. Although staff involvement should be minimal, one important area of interjection is in the initial training period for peer mentors. This training should focus on role expectations and skill development, including boundary-setting and the complexities of interpersonal dynamics. It is important to note that while comprehensive training helps ensure mentors feel equipped and confident in their roles, over-training could inadvertently interfere with the natural development of friendships.

Third, for university and IPSE staff, the findings emphasize the need to create spaces that facilitate reciprocal friendships. This means that IPSE program staff should carefully consider the level of infrastructure and support provided to mentors. Given the unique context of the present study, the findings suggest that using the already established vehicle of a registered student organization may be just as effective and more inclusive than placing peer mentors in paid positions managed by program staff. This is an important consideration for programs seeking to maximize the impact of their peer mentoring initiatives while minimizing costs.

At the policy level, continued funding and support for peer mentoring programs are essential for their sustained success. Supporting the growth of peer mentorship programs at a macro level will ensure that the positive effects of peer mentoring can be sustained and expanded. Given the low cost and high impact of these programs, continued investment at state and federal levels will play a key role in fostering inclusion within communities and workplaces.

Conclusion

The study examined how college student leaders within a registered student organization perceived the impact of their involvement in an inclusive peer mentoring program for students with IDD. This study reframes peer mentorship as a form of student leadership embedded within campus activities, emphasizing the potential and challenges of this model.

Overall, peer mentors perceived their roles with high levels of positive impact across personal and professional domains. The high levels of impact remained stable even amid the disruptions of the COVID-19 pandemic, suggesting that structured yet flexible peer support models can promote resilience and belonging during periods of remote access or societal uncertainty. As colleges and

universities continue to expand inclusive postsecondary opportunities for students with IDD, attention to how student-led modalities shape peer relationships will be an essential key to foster meaningful and sustainable inclusion.

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HARMONIZING WELLNESS: HOW COLLEGIATE MARCHING BAND PARTICIPATION SHAPES STUDENT WELL-BEING AND DEVELOPMENT

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This qualitative study explores the experiences of collegiate marching band students, with particular attention to how participation influences their emotional well-being and cocurricular engagement. Using a phenomenological approach, the research examines how students perceive the emotional impact of marching band participation, including the stressors, supports, and structural barriers that shape their mental health. Ten students from multiple institutions participated in semi-structured interviews, with three major themes emerging: the emotional highs and lows of participation, the role of community and belonging, and challenges accessing mental health resources. Findings suggest that targeted support strategies, enhanced training for band staff, and improved access to campus resources can strengthen student well-being and developmental outcomes in collegiate marching band settings. The study offers actionable insights for campus activity professionals and music program leaders seeking to foster healthier, more supportive cocurricular environments.

College students can engage in various extracurricular activities, with marching band being a popular option during football season, when band members perform weekly and face high expectations. These students endure intense physical and competitive demands, often practicing for hours to perfect music and field shows (Giardina, 2016; Matthews, 2017). Still, they are frequently overlooked in conversations about student development, well-being, and the impact of cocurricular participation. Marching requires significant physical exertion, relying on both cardiovascular stamina and muscular strength to carry instruments and perform on the field (Granata & Benardot, 2009; Washington III, 2019). Band members often report fatigue, heat-related illness, and muscle soreness, and their physical demands rival those of student-athletes, placing them at risk for dehydration and other health concerns (Moffit et al., 2015).

Beyond physical demands, marching band also requires sustained mental focus to memorize music, marching techniques, and routines while maintaining tempo and performance precision (Washington III, 2019). However, research on how these demands affect the emotional well-being of collegiate marching band students remains limited, especially compared with the extensive literature on student-athletes. This gap is particularly concerning given the similarities in time

commitment, physical strain, and performance expectations. This lack of research is especially pressing in light of broader trends in higher education, where emotional and mental well-being concerns among college students have become increasingly common.

Emotional and mental health concerns are on the rise among college students, with more than 60% reporting at least one mental health issue during their academic journey (Flannery, 2023). National data also show a sharp increase in the severity and frequency of these concerns over the past decade (Lipson et al., 2022). In response, 87.3% of college counseling center directors have expressed alarm about the growing demand for services and the escalation of serious psychological issues on campus (Levine et al., 2020). These challenges can interfere with students' academic performance, relationships, and participation in extracurricular activities. As collegiate marching bands take on a central role in campus life and events, students are investing substantial time and energy to meet the demands of participation. As a result, many may lack the time or capacity to seek out and utilize campus mental health resources. These circumstances raise important questions about how marching band involvement shapes student emotional well-being and mental health and what institutions can do to better support this population.

This study explored the experiences of band students who participate in collegiate marching bands and the perceived impact of such participation on band students' emotional well-being and mental health. The purpose of this research was to give voice to an understudied student population and contribute to conversations about how high-intensity collegiate activities shape student development and well-being.

This study was guided by the following three questions:

1. How do collegiate marching band students describe their lived experiences participating in a marching band?
2. How do students perceive the effects of marching band participation on their emotional well-being and mental health?
3. What contextual or structural factors do students identify as influencing their emotional well-being and mental health during the high-intensity times in a marching band?

Literature Review

Emotional Well-being and Mental Health

Emotional well-being and mental health concerns among college students have increased significantly over the past decade (Lipson et al., 2022). Common issues include depression, anxiety, and suicidality, which can impact academic performance and engagement in campus activities (Abrams, 2022). Access to campus counseling services has been shown to help students manage stress and develop coping strategies, making them a critical support for students

navigating mental health challenges (Vidourek et al., 2014). These trends illustrate the importance of understanding how specific student groups, such as collegiate marching band members, experience and navigate the intensive demands of cocurricular participation.

Several risk factors trigger emotional well-being and mental health issues among college students, including the pressure to succeed, homesickness, financial difficulties, and competition for job and internship opportunities (Woof et al., 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic and the lack of socialization associated with the pandemic further added to the array of factors that impact college students' emotional well-being (Chenneville et al., 2023). As marching band students often face time constraints and social isolation similar to those exacerbated during the pandemic, this population may be especially vulnerable to compounding mental health stressors.

Diathesis-Stress Model

This study is grounded in the diathesis-stress model, which posits that mental disorders result from the interaction between a predispositional vulnerability (diathesis) and environmental stressors (Monroe & Simons, 1991). Social and cognitive predispositions can also be associated with diathesis (Heeringen, 2012). Psychopathology, or the study of abnormal mental states, is brought on by stress, and negative events precipitate disorders that can impact an individual's mental health without biological and psychological components (Heeringen, 2012). In this context, diathesis is referred to as an internal predisposition to a disorder. Stress is the emotional and mental response to a difficult situation (National Institute on Mental Health [NIMH], 2023). An individual experiencing diathesis responds to external stimuli abnormally, which can indicate mental health concerns (Heeringen, 2012).

According to Patton (2013), an individual who has experienced childhood adversity is at risk of developing a mental health disorder as an adult due to additional stressors that the individual may deal with in addition to past trauma. A broader perspective has been adopted by Swearer and Hymel (2015), who argued that stressful life events can trigger the onset of anxiety, depression, and other trauma-related mental health disorders such as post-traumatic stress disorder. Other factors, such as personality traits and situational stressors, may be considered diathesis, hence possibly giving rise to different responses to emotional distress. Starting college is a major transition for many college students, which may trigger high-stress levels. Stress and mental health concerns are not separate from one another and tend to exist together as conditions that impact college students' overall well-being (Levine et al., 2020).

Marching Band as a College Activity

Marching band is one of the most popular extracurricular activities for students (Heath, 2017). Many students can begin participation in marching band as early as the sixth grade. Research documents a positive correlation between high school marching band participation and the continuation of such involvement at the collegiate level (Heath, 2017). This phenomenon has been

attributed to the students' intrinsic enjoyment of participating in marching band activities, as marching band participants feel like they receive a sense of notoriety comparable to that of student-athletes. Marching band students also benefit socially by feeling connected to other band members, by being a part of a team, and working with a group (Cumberledge, 2017).

Existing research suggests that marching band participation fosters both musical growth and social-emotional development. Students often continue from high school to college marching band due to the intrinsic enjoyment and sense of connection they experience (Heath, 2017). Marching band involvement was also found to support students' self-awareness, self-management, and relationship skills (Carver, 2019). Because band members spend significant time together, strong interpersonal bonds often form, creating a sense of community and emotional support, factors shown to positively influence student well-being. These social-emotional benefits highlight the dual nature of marching band participation, as both a protective factor and a potential source of stress, making it a relevant context for studying college students' emotional well-being and mental health.

Collegiate Marching Band Members' Health

Marching band students endure physical demands, injuries, and other health risks like collegiate student-athletes. Many NCAA Division I institutions participate in the Power Five conferences, whose games are televised and must remain on a strict schedule (Emerson et al., 2021). Games, practices, and other performances are often held during hot times of the day, which can contribute to the risk of heat-related illnesses among the band members. Emerson et al. (2021) examined collegiate marching band students' core body temperatures and their risk of heat-related illness and found that it was heightened by fixed performance times for games, parades, and other events. Such environmental and scheduling constraints are important to consider when examining how the physical demands of band participation intersect with emotional and mental health outcomes.

Prior research has also focused on the biomechanical demands of collegiate marching band students. These students are exposed to various weather conditions, increased noise levels, and sometimes long travel times to games and performances, which can result in muscle and joint pain. Additionally, they may experience shortness of breath, chest pain, musculoskeletal pain, and exhaustion, which are all associated with holding and playing instruments and marching and moving in various ways (Hatheway & Chesky, 2013). Collegiate marching band students were also found to experience high levels of musculoskeletal pain (Hatheway & Chesky, 2013). These physical stressors, when combined with academic responsibilities and performance expectations, may elevate emotional strain among band students.

There is a scarcity of literature regarding college band students and student emotional and mental health well-being. The numerous activities that collegiate marching band students are involved in, such as learning field shows and music, pep rallies, parades, field shows and stadium stand performances, increase the possibility of burnout and mental strain (Cumberledge, 2017). Hazing

behaviors, such as degrading and verbal humiliation, further impact college band students' mental health (Matthews, 2017). Despite these documented concerns, limited research has qualitatively explored how collegiate marching band students experience and interpret the mental health impacts of their participation - an area this study aims to address.

Methodology

This study employed a transcendental phenomenological research design to explore the lived experiences of collegiate marching band students and the meanings they ascribed to those experiences. Rooted in the philosophical writings of Edmund Husserl (1970) and advanced by Clark Moustakas (1994), transcendental phenomenology seeks to describe the essence of a phenomenon by focusing on participants' experiences while encouraging researchers to engage in reflexivity and bracket their own assumptions. This approach was especially suited for understanding the depth and complexity of participants' lived experiences and the meanings they assigned to those experiences (Moustakas, 1994; van Manen, 2014). Given the limited research on collegiate marching band students' emotional well-being and mental health, a transcendental phenomenological design was well suited to explore how students perceived and made meaning of these experiences. This design allowed us to center students' voices and generate a rich, experience-based understanding of a unique student population rarely addressed in mental health research.

Participants and Recruitment

Participants in this study were collegiate marching band students recruited from two sources. The first was a medium-sized university in the Southeastern United States, where the marching band includes nearly 300 students and performs throughout the academic year, especially during football season. This institution was selected based on accessibility and an existing professional connection between the researchers and the marching band director. This connection aided direct recruitment and convenience sampling at this site, by having access to a large, engaged group of student participants in a high-intensity collegiate marching band environment.

To expand the sample and enhance participant diversity, additional students were recruited nationally using purposeful sampling. The researchers distributed the recruitment flyer via open-access social media groups on Facebook and LinkedIn that are frequented by collegiate marching band students and related communities. This dual recruitment strategy supported a broad perspective on students' experiences with collegiate marching band participation.

Procedures

Prior to data collection, the researchers obtained approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at their affiliated institution. All participants provided written informed consent before taking part in the study. Interested students could scan a QR code on the flyers to complete a brief

screening questionnaire to confirm eligibility. The inclusion criteria required that they be currently enrolled college students, at least 18 years old, and actively participating in a collegiate marching band. Eligible participants were invited to sign up for an individual interview.

The interview protocol for semi-structured interviews consisted of 13 questions that asked about participants' experiences of collegiate marching band participation, general knowledge about emotional well-being and mental health, and specific emotional and mental health concerns, such as anxiety and stress. The remaining questions were designed to address the study's three research questions, which focused on students' experiences in collegiate marching band, their emotional and mental well-being while participating, and the contextual or structural factors that contribute to the impact of marching band on their emotional well-being and mental health. The full interview protocol is included in Appendix A.

The data were collected in the fall of 2024. Because participants were geographically dispersed, all interviews took place via Zoom with one of the researchers. The interviews lasted between 45-60 minutes and were recorded and transcribed using Zoom's automatic transcription feature. The transcripts were then reviewed and edited for accuracy and clarity.

Positionality

The research team brought complementary perspectives to this study. The primary researcher is a former collegiate marching band member. Her lived experiences with the physical, emotional, and social demands of collegiate marching band informed her interest in exploring the emotional well-being and mental health of marching band students. At the same time, she engaged in ongoing reflexivity and bracketing (*epoché*) throughout data collection and analysis, consciously examining and setting aside personal assumptions to focus on participants' lived experiences (Moustakas, 1994). To strengthen the rigor of the study, she collaborated with a second researcher who had no prior experience with collegiate marching band but has extensive expertise in research mentoring, qualitative research, and data analysis. The second researcher provided a critical review of the study and data analysis and helped challenge any assumptions that could arise from the primary researcher's lived experience.

Data Analysis

This study used thematic data analysis, following a phenomenological approach. Thematic analysis is a flexible and widely used method in qualitative research for analyzing and reporting patterns within data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Given the study's emphasis on students' lived experiences and meaning-making related to their emotional well-being, mental health, and participation in collegiate marching band, thematic analysis provided a systematic yet flexible framework for organizing participants' narratives.

A phenomenological orientation was maintained throughout the analysis to ensure the findings reflected participants' own perspectives and subjective realities (Moustakas, 1994). The primary researcher read transcripts multiple times to achieve immersion in the data and identify meaningful units of text. The primary researcher developed initial codes manually based on recurring ideas and patterns identified across the transcripts. These codes were then compared, refined, and grouped into broader themes that aligned with the study's research questions. These included mental and emotional experiences, peer and institutional support, and barriers to emotional and mental health resource access.

To enhance the trustworthiness of the findings, the second researcher reviewed the coding framework, theme development, and supporting participant excerpts. During this process, the second researcher independently evaluated whether the codes and themes accurately reflected the interview data and provided feedback on their organization and interpretation. The researchers compared their interpretations, discussed discrepancies, and reached consensus on the final themes. Participants were also offered the opportunity to review their interview transcripts to verify their accuracy. No participants requested corrections or identified discrepancies in their transcripts. This approach enhanced the credibility and confirmability of the analysis by ensuring that the findings faithfully represented participants' narratives and lived experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Results

Ten collegiate marching band students volunteered for an interview. All participants were full-time, actively enrolled college students and members of their university marching bands. Six were recruited from the primary recruitment institution, and four from other universities nationwide. Participants represented a range of demographics, including varied academic classifications (freshman through senior), instrumental sections (woodwind, brass, percussion), racial identities, and gender identities. Table 1 provides a summary of participants' characteristics.

Table 1

Participants' Characteristics

	Gender	Age Range	Race/ Ethnicity	College/ University	Instrument Type	Classification
Participant 1	Non-Binary	18-20	Black	University 1	Woodwind	Junior
Participant 2	Female	18-20	Black	University 1	Woodwind	Junior
Participant 3	Female	18-20	Black	University 1	Woodwind	Freshman
Participant 4	Female	20-22	Black	University 1	Woodwind	Junior

Participant 5	Male	18-20	Black	University 1	Brass	Freshman
Participant 6	Female	20-22	Black	University 2	Woodwind	Senior
Participant 7	Male	18-20	White	University 3	Brass	Freshman
Participant 8	Female	18-20	Black	University 2	Woodwind	Sophomore
Participant 9	Female	18-20	White	University 4	Brass	Freshman
Participant 10	Male	18-20	Black	University 1	Percussion	Sophomore

Thematic Results

Three major themes emerged from the data, capturing the mental and emotional complexities of marching band participation: 1) mental and emotional impact of band participation, 2) community, belonging, and support in the band environment, and 3) barriers and support structures for emotional well-being and mental health resource access. The following sections provide an overview of each theme, supported by participants' reflections and examples that illustrate the varied ways collegiate marching band participation influences emotional well-being and mental health.

Theme 1: Mental and Emotional Impact of Band Participation

The first identified theme was students' mental and emotional experiences while participating in a collegiate marching band and the perceived impact of these experiences on their mental health. Anxious and stressful periods were prevalent at different times during the marching band season, including band camp. Many students recalled being physically and mentally exhausted during band camp. As Participant 2 noted: "It was definitely a shell shock. We had to get our bodies acclimated to the schedule and the amount of physical exertion. Field shows are no joke. Marching in [the stadium] is no joke."

Participant 1 echoed this sentiment by stating that physical training during band camp takes not only a physical toll on their bodies but also a mental toll. Participant 8 supported this stance by stating that band camp was very intense because of the tight schedule, the large amount of musical content, marching style, dances, and field show that had to be learned within a couple of weeks.

In addition to the challenges of band camp, students described how these stressors continued and evolved throughout the marching band season. Participant 7 shared that factors like finding time to complete academic assignments, spending several hours in marching band rehearsals, and learning and practicing music can overwhelm a marching band student.

Performance anxiety emerged as another frequent concern, particularly related to the pressure of field shows and the fear of making mistakes. Participants reported feeling anxious and, as a result,

experiencing negative thoughts about their ability to play the music well and perform well during field shows without stepping off on the wrong foot or going to the wrong spot. Participant 9 recalled that one of her marching band peers got confused about where to go during a halftime performance, which contributed to another member getting injured. Because of this experience, she developed anxiety and a fear of causing someone else to get hurt.

Participants also noted that these mental and emotional pressures were especially acute for newcomers to collegiate marching bands. They all shared that heightened stress and anxiety are most common during a student's first year in collegiate marching band, particularly for newcomers transitioning from high school band, regardless of their academic classification. Participants also noted various times when anxiety and stress increased, such as weeks when rivalry games took place or large performances such as Battle of the Bands. These experiences of anxiety, stress, and depression throughout this marching band season were often associated with the difficulty of compartmentalizing outside stressors.

This was especially evident in the experiences shared by participants who described visible signs of emotional distress during their interviews. Participant 6's mood and affect appeared sad and dysphoric throughout the interview. Her eye contact and posture changed noticeably when discussing her mental health and collegiate marching band participation. Similarly, Participant 3's eye contact decreased, and her affect was more labile while expounding on her experience during the marching band/football season. Participant 3 expressed how she experienced a panic attack during her first performance with the band:

I remember just standing at attention, panicking during our first performance. Our section leader had to take me to a private location to help me calm down. I ended up having to take a little week break after that, but the band staff were understanding and gave me time to get myself together so that I could come back to the marching band.

Participant 8 appeared anxious while explaining the pressure she felt trying to manage personal concerns and marching band participation. Participant 1 disclosed mental health concerns they experienced prior to becoming a member of a collegiate marching band and revealed practicing self-regulating tactics to manage those concerns.

Despite these challenges, participants also reflected on moments of joy, pride, and emotional uplift throughout their marching band experience. Although they experienced negative mental and emotional health concerns, they also shared meaningful positive moments that contributed to their overall emotional well-being. As Participant 4 explained:

It is rewarding to see that we are actually impacting somebody. I love seeing the high school students cheer for us. They will turn up every time we play. They will have their hands out on the sidelines or in the stands, and we give them high-fives and fist bumps.

Participant 2 was very excited as she shared their experience of traveling to cities she thought would never have the opportunity to visit and being afforded opportunities to meet celebrities. Overall, participants reported feeling happy and excited while in various collegiate marching band spaces, including rehearsals, football games, and performances within their campuses' communities.

This sense of enjoyment was closely tied to how students viewed marching band spaces as supportive environments. They described marching band spaces, such as rehearsals, football games, and other performance locations, as safe spaces, temporary escapes, and stress relievers. As Participant 2 explained:

Participating in the marching band helps me to dedicate my energy and focus on what I have a passion for - playing music. Rehearsals are where I can perfect my craft, and the performances are where I can play my heart out.

These findings, reflected in this theme, align with the first and second research questions by illustrating how students describe their lived experiences in marching band and perceive its impact on their mental health and emotional well-being. Overall, this theme highlighted the emotional highs and lows students experience as members of collegiate marching bands. Participants described stress, anxiety, and mental fatigue, particularly during high-pressure events like band camp and performances, as well as moments of pride, joy, and emotional fulfillment.

Theme 2: Community, Belonging, and Support in the Band Environment

The second theme generated from the data was positive connections made while participating in collegiate marching band, leading to a sense of belonging and feeling supported. Participants agreed that they developed meaningful connections with others in their marching bands and were grateful to be members because these settings fostered a supportive environment. All participants attributed this feeling to the time they spent with their marching band peers. Participant 5 stated:

The traveling and memories made are some of the most rewarding things that make my marching band experience exciting. The jokes, the laughter... it is so fun, and it makes me so happy to be a part of this band. We were forced to become friends with our brothers and sisters in our section because we spent so much time together.

In a similar fashion, Participant 7 described how traveling out of state with the marching band and spending a lot of time in marching band spaces, such as rehearsals and performances, led to building strong positive connections with marching band peers. He recalled hanging out with his marching band peers on band trips and having the most fun he ever had. Participant 10 shared spending most of his day throughout the week with his percussion peers because several of them had the same classes. This ultimately led to developing close relationships.

Nine participants reported that collegiate marching band participation facilitated their first significant friendships in college, contributing to their social integration and sense of belonging. Participant 2 shared that she likely would not have made such close friends in college if she had not joined the marching band. Comparably, Participants 6 and 9 spoke about their fear of making friends when first starting college but were able to develop and maintain friendships with their current roommates, who are also part of their collegiate marching band. Participant 7 shared that he formed friendships with members of other collegiate marching bands in the same conference, citing shared experiences and a mutual passion for music as the foundation of those connections.

Building on these meaningful connections, a strong sense of belonging emerged as a central factor that most participants valued and identified as contributing to their continued participation in collegiate marching band. As Participant 1 explained:

I feel safe. This is a safe space for you to come in and be accepted. They don't look at me differently. They don't treat me any different. They don't treat me as less than a human being. Aside from my [non-binary] identity, the band has always accepted how I show up as a person, and it makes me feel so good because at home, I didn't have that space. I feel free. I feel loved, and it is such a great thing. It is amazing. The band is so accepting. The band staff and my peers will make sure they get my pronouns right. The band is very inclusive. Very inclusive.

Several participants described their collegiate marching bands as family to them. As shared by Participant 4: "When you're down, your siblings pick you up. They [band staff] are really big on us forming relationships so that we can have them to lean on." Participant 9 also compared the close bond among the band members with having a family. The common denominator in this type of family, as she described, is their love for playing music. A particularly interesting detail came from Participant 1, who shared that their band even established a mentorship program to support freshman and transfer marching band members. They further shared that the program has been especially helpful to new band members.

All participants shared the common sentiment regarding the support they received from their band directors and staff. Although the band directors and staff expected hard work, dedication, and commitment to the marching band programs, they also encouraged their members to take care of themselves. As Participant 4 stated: "Our band staff, especially this year, have had talks with us about mental health and what it means to take care of ourselves when we have the opportunity to do so."

Participants 1 and 10 expressed how their band directors discussed the importance of mental health during their auditions, band camp, and throughout the marching band/football season. Participants 3 and 5 mentioned that their band directors ended rehearsals early some nights so that the members could take a mental break and rest. Participant 5 also noted that his band directors showed empathy, especially during the weeks of the rivalry games when collegiate marching band participation is

mentally and physically taxing. Participant 6 shared that her marching band staff were available when the members needed to vent about their personal concerns. Overall, all participants expressed their appreciation for their band directors and staff for recognizing the importance of mental health and supporting their members' well-being.

These findings align with the second and third research questions, demonstrating how supportive community structures influence emotional well-being and mental health. This theme illustrated how the structure and culture of collegiate marching bands, such as mentorship programs, rehearsal dynamics, and leadership practices, serve as contextual factors that influence students' sense of belonging. Participants emphasized how the social connections formed within the marching band community helped create a sense of support and inclusion. Many described the band as a family and credited peers and staff with helping them navigate college life.

Theme 3: Barriers and Supports for Accessing Resources

The third theme reflects participants' awareness of emotional well-being and mental health resources, as well as the supports and barriers that influenced their ability to access those resources. All participants were knowledgeable about the emotional well-being and mental health resources available at their universities. Most reported learning about these resources through proactive efforts by their band directors and staff, who invited representatives from campus counseling and wellness centers to speak during band camp or early in the marching band season. As Participant 6 explained:

Panel speakers from the counseling center and wellness center came to talk to us about wellness resources during band camp. Our band directors and section leaders kept telling us about the mental health resources on campus during marching band season.

These efforts demonstrated that emotional well-being and mental health were openly acknowledged within many marching band programs rather than treated as taboo.

Participants further emphasized that learning to prioritize self-care and resource utilization is an important developmental skill for managing the demands of collegiate marching band participation. Participant 9 mentioned that band directors informed all members about the counseling services available on campus, encouraged them to utilize them if needed, and excused their tardiness or absence from rehearsals for these purposes. Participants also reported using the emotional well-being and mental health resources and services offered by their counseling and wellness centers during normal business hours, as their band directors and section leaders approved them arriving late to rehearsals. Participant 3 shared: "I went to the counseling center on campus and got help. It helped me to get myself together so that I could get back in the marching band after taking a brief break." Participants also described band directors as helping normalize help-seeking. Participant 8 explained that one band director openly shared their own experience of

seeking counseling while participating in marching band, reinforcing that accessing mental health services was both acceptable and encouraged.

Despite these supportive efforts, however, participants consistently described structural barriers that limited their ability to access mental health resources. The combination of demanding rehearsal schedules, academic responsibilities, and counseling center hours often made it difficult to seek support when it was most needed. Participant 6 explained, "It was hard to balance being in band and going to get help for my mental health, especially during band camp because we were in rehearsal for like 16 hours a day for two to three weeks." Similarly, Participant 4 shared, "Between class and rehearsal start time at 4:00 pm, we really don't have time to go to counseling, but mental health resources are available."

These accounts illustrate that although resources were available and encouraged by band leadership, scheduling conflicts remained a persistent obstacle for many students. Some participants also described institutional efforts to improve access. For example, Participant 9 noted that their counseling center extended its hours during marching band season, making it easier for students with demanding rehearsal schedules to seek support.

This theme contributes to the third research question by identifying contextual and structural factors, such as rehearsal schedules and counseling center availability, that shape students' ability to prioritize and access emotional and mental health support. Students reported being aware of campus resources but described barriers such as rehearsal conflicts and limited availability that affected their ability to use these services. Some participants were able to prioritize their emotional well-being and mental health with the support of band staff, but others struggled to make time for self-care.

Discussion

This study explored the intersection of collegiate marching band participation and student emotional well-being and mental health, offering new insight into how participation in this cocurricular activity shapes emotional experiences, peer support, and student development. Using a phenomenological approach, the study captured the complex realities experienced by collegiate marching band students as they balanced academic demands, physical rigor, emotional well-being, and limited access to institutional resources. The findings shed light on both the stressors and supports that shape marching band members' mental health, revealing patterns of struggle and resilience.

Participants described both positive and negative impacts of collegiate marching band participation on their emotional well-being and mental health. This finding aligns with the diathesis-stress model that served as the framework for this study, as well as the prior research showing that the onset of mental abnormality is triggered by stressful events and experiences (Heeringen, 2012; Monroe & Simons, 1991). Participants with pre-existing mental health concerns described heightened

vulnerability during stressful periods, while others without prior concerns tended to report fewer negative outcomes, consistent with the diathesis-stress model (Heeringen, 2012; Monroe & Simons, 1991).

This research revealed several factors that contributed to the negative and positive impacts of collegiate marching band participation on participants' emotional and mental health. First, the pressure of learning numerous musical selections, marching styles, dances, and field shows during band camp, football season, and competitions triggered stress and anxiety for some participants while intensifying stress and anxiety for others. This accords with the findings of Washington III (2019), who indicated that a significant amount of mental energy is necessary for the tasks mentioned above. At the same time, participants noted the opportunities that participation in collegiate marching band afforded them, including traveling across the country to cities, participating in mainstage performances with celebrities, and engaging in nationally broadcast events, making them feel recognized in ways comparable to student-athletes – a sentiment that aligns with the work of Heath (2017).

A significant factor influencing participants' well-being was the availability and use of campus support services. While some participants reported that access to emotional and mental health services helped them manage stress and remain in the marching band, others noted that limited hours of operation and conflicts with rehearsals and classes prevented them from seeking needed support. This aligns with Vidourek et al. (2014), who found that counseling services help students manage stress and build coping skills. However, this study highlights that institutional constraints, particularly inflexible service hours, can create structural barriers to care. Several participants advocated for extended hours of the wellness and counseling center to better meet the needs of students engaged in high-demand extracurricular commitments. These findings reinforce the need for policy changes and institutional responsiveness to ensure that relevant resources are accessible and prioritized for all student populations.

This study also extends prior research by deepening the understanding of how collegiate marching band environments function as high-impact cocurricular settings that foster both performance excellence and supportive peer communities. While Cumberledge (2017) and Carver (2019) emphasized the social-emotional benefits of marching band participation, such as relationship-building and emotional growth, the current study advances these findings by illustrating how those same settings can also intensify anxiety, especially during high-stakes events like rivalry games and band camp. Additionally, Hatheway and Chesky (2013) identified elevated stress levels among marching band students but did not explore how students coped with these stressors or accessed mental health resources. By incorporating student narratives about both institutional barriers and informal support systems, this study contributes new insight into how access, advocacy, and structural limitations interact with individual emotional and mental health needs.

What sets this study apart is its focus on emotional and mental health among collegiate marching band students – a topic that remains underexplored in existing literature, which has traditionally emphasized physical demands or performance-related outcomes (Emerson et al., 2021; Hathway & Chesky, 2013). While prior studies have touched on stress or social aspects of participation, few have examined emotional and mental health holistically and from students' perspectives. By using a phenomenological approach, this study provided a deeper, more personal understanding of the emotional realities and institutional constraints that shape the emotional and mental health of this unique student population.

Implications

These findings offer important insights for student affairs professionals, campus activity staff, and music program leaders seeking to enhance student well-being through cocurricular engagement. Understanding how high-demand cocurricular activities such as marching band influence student development can inform more responsive and inclusive practice. First, institutions should increase access to services, promote utilization through proactive outreach and peer support, and equip staff with tools to recognize and respond to the emotional and mental health needs of marching band students.

Institutions must improve access to emotional wellness and mental health services to ensure students can use them, especially during high-stress periods such as band camp and football season. While it may be ideal for institutions to dedicate full-time professionals to support this student population, such staffing expansions could be unrealistic. Rather than creating entirely new positions, music department leadership and marching band staff could collaborate more closely with existing campus wellness and counseling centers to designate liaisons or develop targeted outreach efforts tailored to student performers. As an alternative solution, colleges could invest in 24/7 online mental health services tailored to student performers. Staff should support students in accessing both in-person and online services, including during rehearsal times or performance days when needed.

Encouraging the utilization of services is equally important. Music department leaders and marching band staff can establish mental health committees to strategize awareness campaigns and normalize help-seeking behavior. Involving student leaders in these efforts could help ensure the messaging is relatable and widely accepted. Additionally, small peer-led groups or buddy systems can foster safe spaces for students to talk about emotional and mental health concerns and coping strategies. These groups could also facilitate structured discussions on stressors specific to the marching band environment.

Training staff is another key implication. Marching band staff and music department leadership should be trained to identify early signs of distress and understand how marching band culture intersects with mental health challenges. Training such as Mental Health First Aid and trauma-informed care could be facilitated on a semester basis. University counseling staff or newly hired

mental health professionals could provide ongoing in-service workshops to ensure consistency of knowledge and skill development. Finally, institutions should implement mechanisms to evaluate the effectiveness of these efforts and inform ongoing improvement. These could include initiatives such as tracking service utilization, student satisfaction, and retention within the band program.

Limitations and Future Research

While this study offers important insights into the mental health experiences of collegiate marching band students, several limitations should be acknowledged when interpreting the findings. Although participants were recruited from multiple universities, the sample included a limited number of institutions, and the majority of participants were from one institution. This limits regional or institutional diversity and may reduce the transferability of findings to students from other geographic regions, institutional types, or marching band cultures. Further, the sample was largely female, with only two males and one non-binary participant. This gender imbalance may limit the study's ability to explore potential gender-based differences in mental health experiences.

With respect to recommendations for future research, an ideal progression of this research would be to explore targeted interventions for collegiate marching band students' emotional and mental health needs. Specifically, focusing on the stress diathesis model, which this research was rooted in, would help examine the predispositions that interact with the unique stressors experienced by collegiate marching band members. A deeper exploration of unique stressors identified in this study, such as time constraints and performance anxiety, is also needed in further research and could assist with developing targeted interventions for this population. A longitudinal study could be conducted to learn about how stressors and coping strategies evolve throughout the duration of band students' participation in collegiate marching band. This would help marching band directors and staff know how to pivot or develop specific programming as their marching band members' mental health needs shift. Furthermore, longitudinal research could also help understand how a sense of belonging and peer connections impact collegiate marching band students' emotional and mental health. Studies focusing on these components could guide collegiate marching band staff in fostering resilience and supporting the long-term emotional and mental well-being of their members.

Conclusion

This study explored how collegiate marching band participation influences student well-being, offering insights for campus professionals working with student organizations and cocurricular programs. Through participants' narratives, it became evident that while marching band participation can be a source of pride, connection, and personal growth, it can also bring about intense stress and anxiety, particularly during demanding periods such as band camp and football season. The findings emphasized both individual and structural factors that shape students' well-being, from personal coping mechanisms to the accessibility of campus mental health resources.

By amplifying student voices, this research contributes to a more holistic understanding of the challenges and supports within the collegiate marching band environment. As colleges and universities continue to prioritize student emotional well-being and mental health, this study calls attention to the unique needs of marching band students and offers actionable recommendations for creating more responsive and supportive systems.

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Appendix A: Interview Protocol

1. What marching band program are you currently a member of?
2. Why did you want to become a member of the marching band?
3. What do you enjoy most about participating in the marching band?
4. How would you describe your experience during band camp?
5. How would you define the concepts of mental health and emotional well-being?
6. How would you define stress and anxiety?
7. How would you describe your general experience in the marching band?
8. Have you experienced any stress and anxiety since participating in the marching band? If so, can you explain?

9. Do you think that marching band participation can help distract a member from worrying about stressors outside of band? (Prompts: Why not? How so?)
10. Have you been able to develop friendships and connections with other students while participating in the marching band? (Prompts: Why not? How so?)
11. Are mental health and emotional well-being discussed among the marching band members and staff? If so, how often? (Prompt: Which ones?)
12. Are you aware of any support resources available to marching band students who may experience mental health or emotional well-being concerns? (Prompts: Which ones?)
13. How can mental health and emotional well-being of marching band participants be improved? Do you have any practical recommendations?



UNPRECEDENTED ADVISING: ACTIVATING NURTURED CO-CURRICULAR ADVISING TO SUPPORT BLACK STUDENT LEADERS IN AN ANTI-DEI ERA

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As anti-DEI legislation expands across the nation, higher education is experiencing a profound shift in campus climates, heavily impacting minoritized student populations. While much of the dialogue surrounds academic administration, this shifting reality deeply disrupts the co-curricular sphere, particularly leadership development and student involvement at Primarily White Institutions (PWIs). This theory-to-practice brief positions campus activities professionals and student organization advisors as vital institutional agents who can bridge the gap Black student leaders face in these restrictive climates. Fusing the HBCU-derived model of nurtured advising with the Social Change Model of Leadership Development, this article introduces a framework for nurtured co-curricular advising. This approach operationalizes proactive care, cultural validation, and community connection to empower Black student leaders, sustain their organizational efficacy, and safeguard their holistic well-being. Actionable recommendations are provided for co-curricular advisors working to adapt their advising strategies, navigate the shifting legal landscapes, and foster resilient student-led communities.

The phrase "unprecedented times" has echoed across headlines and campus conversations, capturing the turbulence now shaking higher education. Colleges and universities are navigating uncharted waters, facing challenges that set this era apart from any before (Major, 2020). While the landscape of higher education is always evolving, since 2023, a dramatic cultural shift has emerged on campuses, fueled by a surge of legislation targeting diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts (Harper et al., 2024). These rollbacks have become a nationwide reality, fueled by the Trump administration's federal crackdowns and a wave of restrictive state laws (Chronicle of Higher Education, 2026). For years, DEI programs have aimed to celebrate unique student backgrounds, ensure fair opportunities, and create inclusive campus spaces. (Lang & Lee, 2024).

The era of anti-DEI measures now presents a defining challenge for colleges and universities, threatening to undo decades of progress in equity-based initiatives (Harper et al., 2024). In the face of this legislative backlash, institutions are forced to reconsider their commitment to diversity and inclusion amid rapid policy changes (Harper et al., 2024; Major, 2020). For example, states like

Florida have passed Senate Bill 266, prohibiting public colleges from spending state or federal funds on DEI programs; Georgia legislators introduced measures seeking to restrict DEI spending in higher education; and Ohio and Texas passed bills to limit DEI-related initiatives at public universities (Chronicle of Higher Education, 2026).

Recent legislation has created significant leadership barriers, notably for Black students, within the co-curricular domain, as student leaders experience the closure, erasure, and removal of campus centers, offices, and clubs that provided campus support and belonging (Beatty et al., 2025). Among Black student leaders (BSLs) at Primarily White Institutions (PWIs), legislative changes are leading to heightened vulnerability, organizational burnout, and compliance-related anxiety. In this rapidly evolving landscape, co-curricular advisors must be prepared to understand how the removal of DEI initiatives could potentially affect their daily practices within the campus environment.

This theory-to-practice brief encourages co-curricular advisors to use an advising approach grounded in nurtured co-curricular advising to navigate the unprecedented. This approach merges the HBCU-derived nurtured advising model (Williams et al., 2008), which centers student support and relationship building, with the Social Change Model (SCM) of Leadership Development (HERI, 1996; Harper & Kezar, 2021), which emphasizes collaborative leadership for a common value-driven purpose. Together, this conceptual framework provides actionable strategies to intentionally support and empower BSLs, helping them enhance their leadership abilities and adapt within changing campus climates.

Literature Review

This abridged literature review analyzes how anti-DEI mandates, driven by an evolving political landscape, shape institutional policies and shift co-curricular campus involvement. By synthesizing scholarship on anti-DEI legislation, Black student leadership, and student involvement, this review examines the broader influence of political environments on Black student engagement.

National Context of Anti-DEI Legislation

Nationally, critics of higher education view DEI as “divisive,” claiming that diversity-based initiatives lead to lower-quality education and unequal advantages for racialized minorities (U.S. Department of Education, 2026). As of May 2026, 152 anti-DEI bills have been introduced across 30 states, with 32 bills passing into law, eliminating DEI practices at several institutions. Critics have characterized these legislative outcomes as “victories for higher education” and “bringing back America’s Golden Age” (U.S. Department of Education, 2026, para. 1).

State Context of Anti-DEI Legislation & Co-Curricular Challenges

The political environment, especially in conservative-leaning states, plays a decisive role in whether institutions maintain DEI initiatives and centers (Coley et al., 2026). As a result, universities such as The University of Missouri and the University of Florida have closed diversity-centered offices and eliminated positions that previously demonstrated a commitment to campus diversity (Kabbany, 2024). Restrictive legislative actions not only threaten DEI infrastructures but also heighten institutional uncertainty, increase compliance demands, and reduce resources for

students, faculty, and staff whose needs continually evolve (Schachle-Gordon et al., 2025). Simultaneously, they found students of color are leading the charge to organize and engage in cultural activities despite the removal of DEI centers.

Briscoe and Ford (2024) highlighted that political environments shape the roles of student organization advisors, particularly for practitioners serving as advisors in conservative states. They noted that the role of advisors was shaped by the perspective of white legislators and administrators, noting that advising required more advocacy for students as campus atmospheres became tense, making students of color feel unwanted and not valued, negatively impacting BSLs' well-being.

Impact on Black Student Leadership and Student Involvement

Black college students connect their everyday campus experiences to the broader, systemic racial climate in the United States, and their leadership and activism are largely shaped by ongoing societal issues, such as the #BlackLivesMatter movement (Mwangi et al., 2018). Anti-DEI mandates not only restricted classroom curriculum but also curtailed diversity-based student involvement, resulting in frozen BSU budgets, limited cultural programming, and intensified hostile campus climate (Harper et al., 2024). On the one hand, Black student leaders are navigating burnout and fatigue as spaces that fostered belonging undergo title changes and are removed from campus (Beatty et al., 2025). Wilson et al. (2025) describe the reality of navigating anti-Black racism, such as police violence, as contributing to a perpetual state of grief and exhaustion for undergraduate Black students. Noting that systemic tools like white supremacy and anti-DEI laws block students from properly mourning the compounding trauma of state-sanctioned violence, which is constantly amplified on social media.

On the other hand, restrictive policies have mandated that advisors and campus leaders be innovative in maintaining inclusive learning environments that promote student involvement (Jackson, 2025). As campus environments shift, a successful advising relationship should be nurtured and adaptable and can be monumental in shaping BSLs involvement as they seek to find their leadership identity (Droste et al., 2006; Jackson, 2025). Wicker (2024) shed light on how institutional actors influence Black and Indigenous student retention as members of students' well-being networks. In this study, she found that Black students coped differently: men sought deeper institutional connections, while women relied on family/community.

Conceptual Framework

Nurtured advising combines high emotional support with high accountability, meeting students where they are academically and, at times, even physically, to provide care and instill the direction needed for long-term success (Williams et al., 2008). This approach, first recognized and commonly adopted in HBCU culture, emphasizes care beyond the typical role of the advisor and encourages students' growth and development. Hadley (2011) defines nurtured advising as "when students believe someone at the university cares about them, expects them to do well, and guides their steps, they are more motivated to do their best" (p. 135). The four components of nurtured advising include creating a family dynamic where students feel cared for, implementing high intentional expectations, engaging in "street advising" or pervasive engagement that meets students where they are, and holistic guidance and compliance that values the whole student and prioritizes their holistic well-being.

The SCM views leadership as a collaborative process that engages a common purpose and core values to create positive social change (HERI, 1996). These values are commonly known as the 7 C's which prioritize three domains: the individual (Consciousness of Self, Commitment and Congruence), the group (Collaboration, Common Purpose, and Controversy with Civility) and the community/society (Citizenship) (Komives & Wagner, 2009). Harper and Kezar (2021) argue that Black students often report greater interest in leadership, particularly in social change, than their white counterparts, and emphasize that, when engaging with BSLs' liberation, the model should incorporate storytelling, fellowship, system challenging, and support networks.

Incorporating nurtured advising into the model allows for prioritization of support networks that cultivate resilient student leaders in challenging environments by structuring advising in a culturally responsive manner, affirming the values and well-being of BSLs, and integrating radical care with leadership development. Together, these approaches enable advisors to embed care into leadership education by setting high expectations and fostering meaningful connections, transforming vulnerable students into empowered citizens capable of cultivating positive societal change.

Recommendations

As diversity programs become more limited at PWI institutions, Black students face more obstacles to their well-being and leadership development (Beatty et al., 2025). As a result, advisors need to focus on relational leadership by creating support networks that can sustain BSLs' leadership development when tangible supports like programs, physical spaces and grants are eliminated. The following recommendations engage intentional care practices into individual, group, and community dynamics to provide support in changing campus climates.

Individual: Holistic Wellness Check-Ins

A key aspect of nurtured advising is building a relationship that emulates a concerned family member, which can help students feel a sense of security (Williams et al., 2008). Diverse students often face environments that lack identity affirmation, which can lead them to withdraw from leadership, which can be exacerbated by anti-DEI legislation (Lang & Lee, 2024). Advisors can counter this by using teachable moments based on life experience to help students build leadership efficacy (Williams et al., 2008), cultural storytelling to create a shared vision, (Harper & Kezar, 2021), and active reflective listening (King, 2022) to validate student emotions without judgment. Practicing what King (2022) terms 'serving as a mirror' allows advisors to observe and reflect a student's emotional state, creating a supportive, empathetic space before pivoting to organizational business. Additionally, holistic wellness check-ins allow students to deeply explore their personal values (i.e. consciousness of self), time and energy (i.e. commitment) and consistency of their beliefs and actions (i.e. congruence).

Group: Coalition Building and Student Empowerment

Rather than leaving students to navigate these policy changes on their own, advisors can empower them by setting high expectations. These expectations allow BSLs to build leadership efficacy, which Guthrie et al. (2021) defined as "the belief in one's ability to engage in leadership using learned knowledge, skills, and values" (p. 48). For example, advisors can set expectations that students engage in cross-campus collaboration with historically dominant student organizations,

such as Student Government. Advisors can encourage students to co-sponsor events, share risks, and pool resources, which might otherwise be unavailable to a culturally specific organization. By equipping students with these tools, building deep relationships, and implementing strategies such as weekly campus collaboration meetings for peer support, advisors enable students to advocate for themselves and navigate evolving campus environments. Thus, incorporating controversy with civility as students learn to speak across differences and engage in collaborative practices.

Community: Strategic Policy Translation

SCM emphasizes the importance of developing citizenship. In other words, students must effectively handle conflict and contribute to a larger society. DEI work must extend beyond DEI centers on campus (Harper et al., 2025). Teaching BSLs how to navigate complex compliance language amid shifting state mandates can incorporate hands-on learning and teachable moments into student organizations. A pedagogical approach could be incorporating state, federal, and institutional policy translations into student leader executive board meetings. Emphasis should be placed on equipping student leaders to negotiate institutional bureaucracy without compromising their collective values, ultimately empowering them to sustain their civic engagement and continue community advocacy.

Institutional Implementation

While navigating legal restrictions is challenging, continuing this work is viable through deliberate, targeted action (Harper et al., 2025). Anti-DEI legislation places genuine burdens on co-curricular advisors, including compliance fears, professional pitfalls, and care fatigue. To effectively support student leaders, campus leadership should provide legal literacy workshops to clarify statutory boundaries and reduce anxiety, alongside trauma-informed training to navigate heightened student emotions. Additionally, Harper et al. (2025) note the crucial need to build broad coalitions and collaborative networks locally and nationally. This work cannot exist in silos. Student leader support must be collaborative, creative, and extended beyond traditional DEI offices. NASPA, the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, provides online learning and professional development opportunities focused on understanding anti-DEI legislation and supporting student leaders (NASPA, 2026).

Conclusion

The leadership development of BSLs at PWIs within an anti-DEI era demands an intentional departure from hands-off advising toward an active model that blends intentional care with a value-driven leadership process. This reality issues a definitive call to action for co-curricular advisors to radically reframe their institutional purpose. Practitioners must act as vital institutional agents of preservation, care, and social change. By adopting this proactive framework, advisors can safeguard cultural organizations and equip BSLs to navigate systemic barriers.

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