Article

Building and Patching a Pipeline: Establishing Viable Pathways from 2-Year Institutions to Graduate School for Aspiring Mental Health Professionals

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Abstract: Students at 2-year colleges who wish to enter the mental health professions, particularly students of color in urban community college environments, often lack opportunities for internships and experience-building programming relevant to their field. Some programs targeting such students do exist, but little research has been performed on these models. In addition, while pipeline programs in 2-year college settings often focus on successful transitions to senior colleges, many students in such programs also seek to eventually enter graduate school. The purpose of this case study is to bridge this research gap by focusing on a community college-based peer support and psychoeducational outreach program in the northeastern United States, serving as a career development internship for aspiring mental health professionals. Qualitative data in the form of student participant feedback was analyzed to determine the impact of the program on their experiences later in their educational careers. Results from this qualitative analysis indicate the substantial importance of such a program to the successful academic progress of its student participants, providing insights into how pipeline programs can accommodate student preparation and support, not only toward successful senior college transition, but also specific to graduate school program entry.

Keywords: pipeline programs; mentorship; 2-year college; career development; mental health education; peer education

1. Introduction

The current state of the mental health professions in the United States, as is the case with health professions in general, is that its workforce is comprised of service providers who are either not themselves Black or indigenous people of color (BIPOC) or have been educated within overwhelmingly non-BIPOC contexts [1]. Given that the service needs within communities of color are increasing, the importance of cultivating a larger number of minority-identifying mental health professionals has become abundantly clear to institutions devoted to service provision; BIPOC providers can enhance the availability of culturally competent care, thereby improving outreach to and outcomes for communities of color [2]. In terms of impacting mental health care and general health care disparities among minority populations, there is great community value in working with providers who share in the life experiences of those they serve and understand their cultural context on a personal level, all of which promotes trust in provider services and adherence to recommendations [3]. Considering the role that higher education serves as the source of new talent in the field of mental health, and given the high number of urban community colleges providing degrees either akin to or preparing for mental health professions, pipeline programs in 2-year institutions can serve to support the aims of diverse students to enter...
the workforce in the field of mental health. The end goal is to create a more diverse pool of new mental health professionals that will better reflect the increasingly multicultural populations they serve. The role of a pipeline program therefore becomes essential to increasing the number of mental health professionals, and health professionals in general, both coming from and serving marginalized and underserved minority communities.

Over the last few decades, urban 2-year colleges have served as an accessible and viable means to attain higher education goals among BIPOC communities [4]. In many regions with larger community college systems, community college student enrollment numbers either match or exceed those of their four-year counterparts, and approximately half of the students who enroll in community colleges do so with the goal of transferring to a four-year institution [5]. Because of this obvious trajectory, it becomes of vital interest to both community colleges and four-year institutions that the transition from one to the other be supported by reliable and sustainable means. While there are obvious benefits to BIPOC students enrolling in two-year colleges, there are also significant barriers and challenges, especially for those seeking to earn degrees beyond the associate’s level by way of transitioning to four-year colleges. Approximately 40% of the students who enter community colleges with the intention of transferring on to a senior college fail to do so, and this statistic has remained fairly consistent over time; recent findings have shown that, when accounting for all community college enrollment regardless of intent to transfer on, as little as 35% of community college students manage to transfer to senior colleges within 6 years [5,6]. This is relevant to the mental health professions because students wishing to enter the field typically aspire to psychotherapy or counseling as an eventual profession, and this is generally not possible without the acquisition of at least a Master’s degree. For many BIPOC students from economically challenging circumstances, community colleges often provide the most accessible pathway to reaching those aims. The option of community college is sometimes presented to graduating high school students who lack either appropriate preparation or financial means to enter a four-year institution outright. When community college is chosen as one’s pathway to higher education, there are often gaps in guidance regarding trajectory planning and academic goal setting toward various career fields, particularly those requiring advanced degrees via post-secondary educational experiences [7].

Despite these challenges, community colleges continue to provide one of the most reliably accessible and fruitful pathways to a college degree for many BIPOC students, particularly those facing financial challenges, first-generation college experience, and numerous types of immigration status. What remains an issue is that many students in community college settings aspire to begin within the two-year context and its benefits, then transfer beyond to senior colleges and graduate study, unaware of the challenges that often face transfer students from two-year college contexts. Meanwhile, often in the interest of fiscal sustainability in the face of financial scarcity, the focus of many two-year institutions is on retention efforts and expedient completion of associate-level degrees without as much effort allocated to students’ successful transition to senior colleges and graduate programs [8]. If the promise of two-year institutions is social mobility for the economically challenged student, then the importance of an associate’s degree is certainly noteworthy, but more so the addition of education beyond that, which further substantially enhances earning potential, personal quality of life, and the wellbeing of their families and communities [7].

Pipeline programs aim to fill a gap in the provision of professional support for community college students by giving them specialized opportunities and resources specific to their transition into senior college and graduate school within certain fields. These programs can be an effective means by which to increase the likelihood of higher numbers of BIPOC students entering the mental health professions, and health professions in general, within a community college setting that might not otherwise offer such concentrated support [9–11]. Despite the promise such programs offer, there has been very little research on these pipeline programs evident in the literature, especially those promoting advanced
degrees in mental health or the broader health field specific to serving community college students. What is known thus far is that these specialized pipeline programs demonstrate a positive influence on graduation rates, transfer to four-year institutions, and general academic success [12,13]. Additionally, implementing these programs in predominantly BIPOC-serving institutions can potentially increase much needed diversity across care professions [9,14,15]. This diversity is not only limited to those of BIPOC identities, but also those from immigrant and refugee populations, first-generation students, second language learners, and older nontraditional students [16,17]. Increasing the number of minority care providers, specifically from a pool of qualified BIPOC workers from low-income backgrounds, enhances culturally competent care on the whole and improves the health care experience and outcomes of minority populations [2]. All of this lends value to whatever research can be performed to better understand these programs, so that more might take hold in two-year institutions, even establishing common evidence-based elements and frameworks for program construction and praxis [18].

There is some qualitative work in the extant literature that focuses specifically on the general experiences of students who have made transitions to senior colleges, taking interest in the process of acclimation [11]. A significant research gap exists in terms of any studies that have utilized qualitative methods to examine the experiences of students preparing to transfer to senior colleges from two-year institutions, even in hindsight [6]. As such, little to nothing can be found in the research literature to date that explores student experiences of pipeline programming and its personal impact on various elements of academic and social experience relevant to the transfer process. The purpose of the current project is to contribute to this literature via a qualitative case study exploration of a community college peer support and psychoeducational pipeline program, thereby bridging this gap in the research and engaging in a new dialogue focused on student experiences.

History of the Case Study Program: Get PSyCh’D

The Peer Support and Career Development Program (Get PSyCh’D) serves as an internship for aspiring mental health professionals and a pipeline program to senior college placement. This pipeline program serves two main purposes: (1) to enhance general mental health literacy in the campus community of an urban community college in the northeastern United States; and (2) to provide, through training, internship experience, and customized mentorship, an enrichment opportunity for students wishing to enter the mental health fields. The internship opportunity is also meant to combat student experiences of imposter syndrome, also known as imposter phenomenon; the first known mention of imposter syndrome/phenomenon in the literature is in the work of Clance and Imes [19] when they coined the terminology to describe the experience of feeling intellectually fraudulent and inadequate despite being contrary to reality, and it has since been found to adversely impact student success and wellbeing [20]. Additionally, the program aims to foster a sense of belonging between fellow peers working in the program, forming connections that could result in meaningful and beneficial interpersonal networks [21].

Outreach on college campuses for enhancing mental health literacy is crucial to mental health destigmatization, the lack of which has been found to be negatively associated with reporting suicidality and self-injury, medicinal treatment adherence, therapy visits, and even seeking out informal support options [22]. The original concept for the program came about in 2014 as it became evident, both anecdotally and through campus-based internal research, that students at the campus had needs that required focused attention. Students were found to be suffering from higher levels of stressors, anger, and suicidality than the levels reflected by national averages among college students; they reported being less likely than the national average to have received mental health support from campus providers, as well as less likely to seek out such assistance [23]. Prompted by these findings, focus group research was conducted among enrolled students to determine perceived needs and mental health-related concerns among the student population. Findings from the focus group research indicated that students were unwilling to seek out mental health services on
campus due to fear of mental health stigma, an underestimation of their stressors, lacking understanding of their available resources, general time constraints, and the perception of help-seeking as a sign of weakness [24].

2. Materials and Methods

A carefully executed qualitative approach is appropriate for this type of inquiry, to gain a rich understanding of participant experience of the pipeline program and its impact on later senior college endeavors. Qualitative methods provide a means by which to undertake in-depth consideration of individual experience for assessment and comparison to that of others, in addition to delving deeply into elements of participant perspectives regarding the benefits of their involvement in the program on their later academic experience. There are various qualitative methods that can be used to explore and organize data such as those collected for this project, yet thematic analysis [25–27] was chosen because it can serve to discover convergent themes within raw data, which can then present a consolidated thematic depiction of participant experience, consolidating themes throughout the data while honoring participant meanings.

2.1. Research Methods

Interviews lasting between 25 and 45 min were conducted with minimal guidance from the interviewer. All interview sessions consisted of open-ended questions and occasional follow-up questioning to seek out clarifying statements, as necessary, for correct understanding and recording by the interviewer. The interview protocol included questions centering on participant experience since participation in Get PSyCh’D and moving on to senior college or, in some cases, graduate school and subsequent employment. Interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed for analysis; in the case of one participant, a portion of their data was submitted as an additional written response, sent directly to the research team for analysis, due to the participant’s inability to complete the interview in one sitting.

2.2. Participants

The data for this study were provided by 37 participants (25 female, 3 nonbinary), who were all alumni of the Get PSyCh’D Program, the aforementioned pipeline internship program for aspiring mental health professionals at an urban community college and Hispanic-serving institution in New York City. Participants voluntarily took part in interviews to provide data for research and inform the pipeline program curriculum, and no one who volunteered was excluded from the study. Since this project is examining the impact of program participation on senior college experience, data for the current project were collected only from interviewees who had moved on to senior college upon having graduated from the community college where the internship program is housed. All participating students provided consent for their comments to be applied to the purposes of this study, and all understood that analyses of their contributions would inform not only this research on a pipeline program’s impact toward senior college experience, but also any subsequent program designs and implementations toward bolstering pipeline efforts and creating additional programming.

2.3. Research Instrument

The following prompts were asked as part of a longer interview protocol in order to encourage participants to reflect on their experiences and share their opinions on how their involvement in the Get PSyCh’D Program was relevant to future academic and internship pursuits. These open-ended prompts were intended to provide freedom for the participants to answer in a variety of ways, with no influencing guidance:
1. Please describe the impact (if any) that the Get PSyCh’D program had on your experience at your 2-year college.
2. Please describe the impact (if any) that the Get PSyCh’D program had on your application process for or experience at senior college.
3. Please describe the impact (if any) that the Get PSyCh’D program had on your application process for or experience in graduate school.
4. Please describe the impact (if any) that the Get PSyCh’D program had on your application process for or experience at external internships.
5. Please describe anything that Get PSyCh’D could do to further assist you.

Any additional questioning related to these items remained minimal, taking place solely to encourage elaboration when clarification was needed for a response. Participants were invited to speak freely on each question to whatever length or extent they chose, and when clarification was needed it was asked for without directing or influencing participants’ response content.

2.4. Data Collection and Analysis

Transcriptions of the audio-recorded interview data, collected for this study with informed consent of all participants, were analyzed using thematic analysis, a method of identifying the thematic content within raw qualitative data [25,26], resulting in numerous thematic findings. The data in their raw, verbatim form were read and re-read by three different readers trained in thematic analysis processes for the purposes of this project, after which a collaborative analysis in the form of group coding sessions took place to determine consensus on findings across coders. Each theme presented in this research emerged from the data during analysis as capturing a significant, overarching meaning endorsed by a majority of research participants; agreement over how themes were to be classified and organized were a result of discussion between the primary investigator and the two research assistants taking part in the data analysis process.

The structure of many qualitative studies, including the current project, is such that a specific research question is not relied upon to guide the process of inquiry. Rather, the methodology of the project proceeds with the intention of drawing forth themes from the data as presented, unfettered by any preexisting assumptions on the part of researchers regarding what those themes should be. A phenomenon of experience is unearthed as a result of the inquiry, which a researcher cannot predict or presume in advance of the analysis, nor with the supposition of an a priori approach, such as the use of a research question. Using thematic analysis as a methodology allows for one to investigate the perspectives of different research participants in search of topically convergent elements, resulting in the core themes and insights presented as the fruits of the analysis [27]. This qualitative approach functions such that the validity of its process relies on the consistency of coding behaviors during the analysis, achieved by adhering to the rules set forth in the design of the coding methods for the project. As for the themes arising from the data, their validity relies on their accuracy in portraying the meanings expressed by the participants [28].

3. Results

The following are emergent themes discovered in the data regarding program alumni perspectives on the impact of their involvement in the program on their senior college experience. The individual themes emerged as evident within one of three distinct categories: Themes related to overcoming self-doubt and imposter syndrome (also known as imposter phenomenon), themes related to navigating higher education systems, and themes related to empowerment through the experience of a peer community (Table 1). The descriptions presented here depict all emergent themes from the data, accompanied by example quotes drawn from the raw data to demonstrate the fundamental character of each theme more clearly.
Table 1. Emergent themes from participant interview data.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes related to overcoming self-doubt and imposter syndrome/phenomenon</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Realizing personal capacity to achieve academic goals in the face of doubt</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Learning about and combatting imposter syndrome/phenomenon</td>
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<td>3. Experiencing consistent peer support as helpful to combatting imposter syndrome/phenomenon</td>
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<td>1. Gaining confidence toward self-advocacy</td>
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<td>2. Demystifying expectations within senior college and graduate school</td>
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<td>1. Recognizing the value of peer connection to future success</td>
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<td>2. Program peer and mentor connections serving as a guide for future networking</td>
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<td>3. Understanding the value of mentorship beyond involvement in the program</td>
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3.1. Themes Related to Overcoming Self-Doubt and Imposter Syndrome/Phenomenon

3.1.1. Theme 1: Realizing Personal Capacity to Achieve Academic Goals in the Face of Doubt

All participants expressed a specific perception of themselves as having felt less sure of themselves academically prior to entering the pipeline program, then directly crediting their involvement with the program for successfully challenging their self-doubt as scholars. Some participants referred to previous experiences of having received messaging that enhanced their doubts about being able to succeed academically as community college students, leading them to general pessimism regarding any further educational attainment beyond a two-year degree. One student described her experience of receiving feedback from her family members prior to her involvement with the program, as well as how she felt the program provided her an opportunity to hear an alternative message about her potential:

I always wanted to do something with helping people, I always wanted to do mental health, but my family thought that was a terrible idea. They said that I was wasting my time with wanting to go to grad school, that I couldn’t cut it. I think they never really saw me that way... like a person who could have a graduate degree. It wasn’t until I got into Get PSyCh’D that I realized I really could do it. I was getting encouragement; I was finally starting to think it was possible. Without those other voices, without people in (the program) believing in me, I don’t think I would have ever seen myself even going for my bachelors, and now I know I can get my masters. I know I can become a social worker.

This sentiment was echoed among most participants, often specifically related to a lack of family support or understanding being contrasted by supportive experiences within the program. In some cases, experiences of lacking support were with friends who did not fully grasp the student’s goals or ability, but family members were most often cited in this regard. Another participant described how the work performed in the program was the means by which she discovered her potential:

I remember getting into Get PSyCh’D and thinking that I was going to be the worst one in the whole group when it came to presentations. I thought there was no way I was going to sound like I knew what I was talking about. I had only taken one psychology class, how was I going to teach other students about depression and anxiety and everything else? But then I started to practice, and the other peers in the program gave me a lot of encouragement, and I realized that I ready did know my stuff. I just never thought of myself as someone who could teach anything, especially mental health topics. And then I noticed people listening to me, and then asking me questions that I could help them understand. So I really did know these things, and I really can do more in this field.

This example illustrates a feature of many participants’ data pertaining to experiencing something about the program as pivotal in changing their self-perception and appraisal of their abilities from a largely doubtful and negative position.
3.1.2. Theme 2: Learning about and Combatting Imposter Syndrome/Phenomenon

Over half of the study participants mentioned that they valued the program’s explicit instruction and support around imposter syndrome, also known as imposter phenomenon. Imposter syndrome is something experienced by a great many students in community college settings, regardless of academic ability and acumen, and including those in special programs such as Get PSyCh'D; this includes feelings of concern that they will be discovered to be inadequate and lose access to opportunity. One student noted that her participation in the program was instrumental in overcoming her reluctance to even consider various opportunities:

Because I was in the program, I have basically been able to do things that I would have never even tried to do before. I’ve been applying to private schools. I’ve been talking with people that I used to be afraid to speak to, like professors and people at conferences, because I used to think, “who am I to talk to anyone?” Now I know I can give presentations for my classes about things because I gave classroom presentations when I was in the program; that showed me that I actually can do this. Thanks to (the program), I have learned to recognize that I’m capable of achieving a lot of things, even if at the moment I may doubt. I have also learned to talk and network with others, because you never know what the future holds.

Several students made statements indicating that they were unaware that their feelings of self-doubt were shared by others in the same way, or that it was even something that could be named and actively combated. One student remembered a specific event during which this experience was particularly salient:

We were in our training, right at the beginning, and there was a whole conversation about imposter syndrome. I was so surprised, I had no idea it even had a name! And then I was so relieved, because I started to understand that it wasn’t just me, and that I wasn’t weird for doubting myself. I just always thought that doubting myself meant that I wasn’t listening to the people that believed in me, like it was my fault that I didn’t have confidence like I was supposed to. Turns out I wasn’t the only one that goes through this, and that was so good to hear.

Feeling less isolated in the experience of imposter syndrome was commonly described by participants as a benefit of program participation, as well as the resulting change in behaviors that each participant saw as directly connected to this phenomenon.

3.1.3. Theme 3: Experiencing Consistent Peer Support as Helpful to Combating Imposter Syndrome/Phenomenon

Over half of the participants reported that, specific to the experience of imposter syndrome, fellow program participants were instrumental in providing much needed empathy. Participants were overwhelmingly appreciative of the support and understanding extended to them by other students, all within the context of a program that created the framework through which such interactions were possible and frequent enough to be impactful and reliable. In the case of one participant, it was this consistency of experience that made a difference in feeling supported through experiences of imposter syndrome:

I remember talking about (imposter syndrome) a lot that semester with other students in the program. That really changed things for me. I guess it never really came up for me before, but then when I got into the program, it was like there were people who were like me, but also wanting to show me that I was wrong when I was being so hard on myself. I think it worked on me because it came up a lot, and people would keep telling me that I would be able to do big things because they believed it about me, so eventually I started listening to them more. If it hadn’t been for them reminding me all the time about my imposter syndrome making me more afraid than I needed to be, I don’t know how I would have pushed myself to keep going.
Several students mentioned experiencing a sense of community specific to imposter syndrome, not only when being explicitly supported by peers, but also when listening to peers and sharing experiences similar to those of others in the program. There was a repeated endorsement among participants of experiencing conversations that featured the experience of imposter syndrome described by other program participants, which would then lead to their own eventual sharing of similar experiences, resulting in more tangible support. A participant describes one such event, during one of the program’s routine informational tabling events, as especially pivotal in making him question his self-perception and tendency to self-deprecate in comparison to other students:

I remember being with a few of the other (program peers) at tabling, I think close to the end of the semester. I remember everyone was really tired, everyone was studying for exams and finishing their papers. And then one of them said that she was feeling scared because she was transferring to a four-year college and didn’t know what it was going to be like. We were all telling her that she was going to be okay, and especially this girl, because she was so smart and we all knew that, but she was always so hard on herself. And at one point I was saying, “Hey, are you serious? Look at your grades! Look at how much you help people with their work! How can you not see how awesome you’re going to be?” And then she surprised me, because she turned around and said, “Well, the same as you! Look at your grades, look at you always being awesome, and you’re scared, too!” And we both started laughing, because she was right, but it really got me thinking about why I did that, and how it looked when she was doing it. I saw that happening with me for sure. There were other people there too, and they were saying the same thing to me. I just kept thinking, yeah, I don’t know why I’m doing that. It made me sad, but it also felt really good when that happened, and it made me think a lot.

This example illustrates how involvement in the program not only provided structured opportunities for students to engage in guided explorations of imposter syndrome, but also enabled students to engage with one another in more casual and semi-structured ways on the topic of imposter syndrome and its impacts. Given the nature of the program and the contexts it calls upon participants to engage in, supportive discussions and empathic connections around imposter syndrome occurred both as intentional activities and organic, less prompted discussion, and in either case it was seen as impactful by those partaking in these discussions.

3.2. Themes Related to Navigating Higher Education Systems

The following themes were found to be emergent in the data specific to participant perceptions of the program and its role in helping them to better understand and navigate higher education systems, both in a general sense and specific to individual academic pursuits. This included not only their experiences while enrolled at the 2-year institution attended while initially part of the pipeline program, but also pertaining to the navigation of senior colleges and/or graduate programs after graduation from the associate degree level.

3.2.1. Theme 1: Gaining Confidence toward Self-Advocacy

Just over half of the respondents in this study reported a sense of confidence that grew from engagement with the program, and that this new-found confidence resulted in an increased sense of capability in self-advocacy within academic settings. The implication was evident in participant descriptions that they had experienced a personal lack of confidence toward interaction with the college (professors, department personnel, and the college system in general) prior to their involvement in the program, after which there was a notable increase in the experience of confidence and subsequent self-advocacy within the college system. One student describes her experience after leaving her 2-year college and how she felt the program helped her in her senior college experience:
(The program) gave me my confidence and voice. Through this experience I was able to gain the confidence to view myself as someone who can get things done for myself in these colleges. It helped me develop the tools that I need to network and grow, to talk to administrators myself, especially being a first generation student. (The program) was always preparing me for the next step and the next step, because it made me see myself as someone who can go in and get the answers I need so my needs are met.

Another student shared her experience of transferring to a senior college and how her involvement in the pipeline program reassured her of her capacity to navigate her new institutional context:

I had always heard that when you transfer to a 4-year (college), they don’t hold your hand the way you’re used to in community college. They weren’t lying! I did feel like I was ready for it, though, because (the program) gave me some really helpful tools. I knew I could just look for help, and I knew I could ask the right kinds of questions and get things handled. You don’t really know how important things are to learn until you have to really use them, and that’s how I feel about what we learned. I know now how much I got from (the program) now, looking back; it made me so much more confident about what I was going into.

When considering the role that the program specifically had on building confidence and a sense of capability for the purpose of self-advocacy in college contexts, several students mentioned the topic of self-advocacy being discussed explicitly during training, including the following student:

I remember hearing back in high school about how hard college would be and that no one really helps you, they won’t hold your hand, but I don’t think I really understood what that meant. When I got into (the program) and we went through training, it was like a lightbulb went on. I thought, okay, this is what they meant. Only now I was hearing about it in detail, but I was given real information that really matters to me, to what I want to do in my actual future. It almost felt like they gave me superpowers, and now I could go into my 4-year college and know to handle all that.

3.2.2. Theme 2: Demystifying Expectations within Senior College and Graduate School

Among all respondents, the anxiety surrounding institutional and experiential expectations in 4-year colleges and graduate study was a dominant issue. Specifically, participants described having relatively little information about the academic processes that awaited them beyond their 2-year college, despite being certain in their intent to pursue degrees and professions requiring Master’s-level education. Regardless of student age or college experience prior to involvement in the program, participants reported an overwhelming concern with not knowing what awaited them in a 4-year college experience and graduate school beyond. One student described how the program helped him grapple with his lack of awareness regarding 4-year college and graduate programs:

When I started the program, I was pretty sure that you just went into a major and then came out the other end as a therapist once you were done with your bachelors. I know that sounds really silly, but I really thought that, and a lot of other people I knew thought the same way. I didn’t know what it would be like at all. And I was really nervous about what the process would be to get into a “social work” program, because I had no idea what that even meant. And the length of time you spent in college for each thing was totally new to me. I didn’t even know I needed a masters, but then when I found out I did, I had no clue how long that would take. Once I went through the training and asked a lot of questions, that really helped me figure things out.

Another student described her feelings of anxiety about processes specific to transitioning to a 4-year college, and how that pressure was alleviated due to interactions with the pipeline program:
I knew that 4-year college was going to be harder, but I didn’t know what about it would be harder, you know? Not, like, the classes being harder... I mean, that, too, but not only that. I think I was worried about being in a bigger place and not knowing the different places I would have to go, like the different steps I would need to go through to make sure everything I needed would work. I always thought that the 4-year school would be a lot more to deal with, just navigating it all. I felt nervous just thinking about it. But I realized when I started talking to other peers in the program that I wasn’t the only one, and that started me talking about the things I was scared about. Everyone was really patient with me and helped me out a lot, so by the time I did go on to another campus, I was in a much better place with my anxiety about going there.

From logistics and processes to academics and general navigation, participants shared a common experience of experiencing a decrease in anxiety related to their lack of understanding related to their future 4-year and graduate school plans.

3.3. Themes Related to Empowerment through the Experience of a Peer Community

The emergent themes from the data specific to connectedness to peers in the pipeline program were overwhelmingly prominent. Participant statements consistently featured endorsement of the forging of meaningful peer relationships through program activities and mutual participation in general resulted in benefits stretching beyond the interactions themselves. There was also much mention of how participation in the program enabled socialization for many members that they believed would have never happened otherwise, both in terms of the type of networks formed and with whom.

3.3.1. Theme 1: Recognizing the Value of Peer Connection to Future Success

More than half the participants mentioned their understanding of peer connectedness achieved through involvement in the program as being helpful to them in their future academic and employment aims. Such comments were made in response to an explicit question about the value of connecting with other peers in the program, and they were also inserted throughout other answers and interviews. The following quote from one of the participants is illustrative of the sentiment endorsed by many others regarding the perceived value of peer connections via the program:

When I joined the program, I had no idea I would end up making so many amazing friends along the way. These people are my family now, we even meet up now even when we’re all at different schools and doing our own thing. I don’t know where I would be if it wasn’t for being able to meet such great friends through (the program); I know I would have never had such a good experience at school if I hadn’t met them. We really grew together, that meant a lot.

Similarly to this student, many credited their involvement with the program with enabling their connections with fellow program participants, as well as the benefits of those connections stretching into their future endeavors.

3.3.2. Theme 2: Program Peer and Mentor Connections Serving as a Guide for Future Networking

This theme arose when participants highlighted their experiences of not only forming friendships through the program, but also seeing those friendships as an avenue to forging future connections with others beyond the program by helping them cultivate a new networking skill set. Participants expressed an increase in confidence in the very act of connecting with others because of having been connected to peers in the pipeline program. One of the participants distinctly related his experiences connecting with peers in the pipeline program as revelatory of his capacity to achieve the same thing elsewhere:
The greatest benefit of (the program) for me would have to be the confidence and determination I was able to learn so much about myself from being in an environment where I could be around students like me. It was so good to be in a situation where we all had the same basic dreams and goals in life, to be in mental health and help people. It always felt very welcoming and gave me a sense of belonging. That showed me what it was like to have those kinds of people around me, and made me feel like I could find more. And I did, once I moved on to my 4-year. I had truly great friends and mentors who helped me push through obstacles and saw me succeed in continuing school and finally getting my degree.

3.3.3. Theme 3: Understanding the Value of Mentorship beyond Involvement in the Program

One-on-one mentorship with both supervisors and more experienced students in the pipeline program was a specific element of the program structure, and all participants remarked on its impact. More than half focused specifically on the role of mentorship in cultivating their future academic and career paths directly after their 2-year college enrollment:

*Just having that mentorship through (the program) helped me to figure out what I wanted in a school and the specific path I wanted to go; it really, really helped. There was always advice, information, and personal experience given that helped with transitioning from my (community college) to (senior) college. If it wasn’t for having conversations about my path, I’d probably never would’ve taken the path of social work, and I’m happy that I took the opportunity to listen and ask questions. It pretty much cleared up where I was going to go next and what I wanted out of a senior college, if they fulfilled the requirements I finally understood I needed.*

In addition to mentorship providing academic and career guidance, participants also remarked on the importance of a reliable and consistent mentorship experience, which several individuals reported as personally fulfilling.

*The mentoring has really helped me with my senior college experience, as I was able to learn so much more than just what my potential career options could be. Talking to my mentor... has allowed me to better prepare myself for my next steps in life, and not just on my academic journey. I’ve actually learned so many personal skills that help me in my everyday life. The active listening skills I saw my mentor use, and the confidence I’ve gained from working through challenges with my mentor’s guidance, all of that helped me with new friendships, and to deepen important connections. My mentor always encouraged me to continue pursuing my education and to be a better and more knowledgeable person, because she knew that’s where I wanted to be and how I wanted to see myself.*

4. Discussion

The purpose of this qualitative case-study exploration of an associate-level student pipeline program was to bridge a notable gap in the research literature surrounding student experiences of such programs. While some evidence has been found to indicate the success of these programs [11], the personally experienced factors connected to such success have yet to be explored, which is why the findings outlined in this research contribute much to a better understanding of why and how these programs can result in success for their participants. The themes emerging from the research data illustrate an experience of one pipeline program defined by a context laden with connectivity and feelings of belonging and support. While endorsement of the elements specific to academic advancement and professional preparation were very much consistent with the aims of the pipeline program, there was overwhelming emphasis within the data of the importance of socialization and peer connection as a predominant positive component of program involvement. Social connections with other students in the program were mentioned as being pivotal and meaningful in virtually every emerging theme discovered in the data, regardless of the specific question being addressed within the interview protocol.
A sizable majority (75%) of the research participants mentioned that mentorship was not only heavily influential to forming student academic and career paths, but that mentorship continued beyond their formal involvement in the program. Students expressed an appreciation for the program supervisors and mentors “always being there,” encouraging their continued pursuits, providing guidance in navigating academic structures in schools beyond the one housing the program, and further cultivating and bolstering participants’ passions for the field of mental health. In addition to the clearly beneficial opportunity for students to gain preliminary experience through the applied internship component of the program, participants highlighted the facilitation of connectedness with other like-minded students with similar interests and passions, along with reliable mentorship and support, all stretching beyond the length of their stay within the 2-year college environment.

When considering the benefits of programs such as the one highlighted in this study, one of the most persistently emergent factors is that of program-specific student connectedness as a protective factor in the face of academic challenges, institutional obstacles, and insecurity-related adversities. The program structure allowing for, and even actively fostering, the formation of supportive connections between like-minded peers is among one of its most notable strengths, as per reports from its participants. In addition, the program’s mentorship component was frequently identified as a meaningful catalyst for important academic and career planning conversations. While the opportunity to undertake career-relevant tasks and gain exposure to important workforce experience is certainly crucial to the makeup of a pipeline program, the power of interpersonal networks built through the program seem to be just as important, perhaps even more so. Given these findings, the current program could consider potentially enhancing its framework by lending even more emphasis to its interpersonal elements, including allowing for more peer-to-peer engagement between students participating in the program.

A major challenge to address for pipeline programs in 2-year institutions, in light of the findings of this study, is to consider ways in which support might functionally and sustainably reach beyond a student’s enrollment in that institution. Although it is clear that students gain confidence toward self-advocacy by way of their program involvement, they also continue to rely notably on support from interpersonal networking, including mentor–mentee relationships, when attempting to navigate the transition to a senior college. Pipeline programs with a career focus, such as this one, must therefore consider not only working toward successful student retention and graduation with associate-level degrees, but also the ongoing support of students as they leave the 2-year setting and move beyond into graduate school environments. The capacity to undertake this kind of multi-level student support is only possible (and sustainable) with support from the institution, either by providing ongoing financial support or reliable staffing lines, along with the assurance that the program and its work is institutionally prioritized and valued.

5. Limitations

In light of the methodology used for this research, there are some limitations to its application that must be recognized. First, these data are isolated to a single case study, and therefore, not intended to be fully generalizable to other programs, regions, or populations. Second, the sample for this study was specifically drawn from a group of students who had already successfully completed the pipeline program and transferred to senior college. This research, therefore, does not seek to identify any specific program shortcomings, nor does it focus on any students who have failed to successfully transfer after completing the program. Since this study’s aim was to engage participants on program effectiveness toward their academic transfer, those who could speak to that achievement seemed the most appropriate target sample from whom to collect data.

6. Conclusions

The obstacles faced by students at 2-year colleges wishing to pursue professions in mental health are indeed notable and persistent, especially for students of color in urban
community colleges. By addressing their commonly lacking internship and experience-building access, mental health internships for this population play a most pivotal role in creating much needed windows of opportunity and equity. Since these programs are still uncommonly researched, this study provides a preliminary point of dialogue for the larger scope of programs beyond it, with special attention given to not only transitioning to senior colleges, but also eventual graduate school prospects for its students. The results from this study indicate powerful and nuanced benefits to students across both academic and social domains, providing notable insights on the impact that is possible through pipeline programming, not only in contributing to successful transitions for its students into senior college settings, but also eventually to graduate school.


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Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study prior to data collection interview.

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