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Mentors for Sustainable Success

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Mentors for sustainable success

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NNGO 495 Capstone

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Northern Illinois University

Introduction

This research focuses on DeKalb High School and the low-performing students struggling with attendance and academics while also having a higher rate of suspensions and dropouts compared to other high schools in the area. These types of students were chosen because there is a need to create a space of empowerment, motivation, encouragement, and management of emotional and behavioral issues. Students face different adversities, and DeKalb High School students show the need for help to overcome obstacles in their daily lives. Within the last decade, graduation rates have gone down, higher education enrollment rates have decreased, and the gateway of drugs and alcohol use has increased (Patrick, M. E., Schulenberg, J. E., & O'Malley, P. M. (2016). 48(3), 425-447). DeKalb High School is stretched thin with 2037 students and 124 teachers, averaging 17 students per class (D428). Many students now depend on online credit recovery courses and despite having the possibility to continue in the online credit recovery courses feel too defeated to continue. There have been attempts by certain organizations like Family Service Agency and the DeKalb County Mental Health Board to help but none have seemed to have stuck. Also, programs through Northern Illinois University like Black Male Initiative, Vanguardia Afirmativa de Latin@s Unidos (VALU) have also tried mentoring programs, yet again the programs lacked sustainable programming to make a lasting impact on DeKalb District 428.

What does a mentorship program need to be sustainable? To create a sustainable program that makes a lasting impact the community must come together and bridge the many mentorship programs across the DeKalb area into one by becoming one entity there will be a higher chance of sustainability. The way sustainability was defined was by catering itself over a long-term period and doing so by continuing to support its mission. Sustainability is not just for the program but for the students who need the structure a mentorship program could offer and by providing guidance

and resources through a mentorship program, some of these students will receive the things they need to succeed and move forward in their education and lives.

In order to evaluate mentorship programming in the city of DeKalb, surveys were sent to DeKalb High School students, DeKalb High School administration and staff, and NIU students in Greek organizations. These populations were chosen because they are all connected to mentoring programs in one way or another. For the students, they are the ones participating in the programs. The administration and staff are often the ones who recommend the students who would benefit from mentoring programs. The NIU Greek organizations are students who are often involved with the centers around the Northern Illinois University campus and participate in these already established mentoring programs.

In conjunction with the survey's community organizers, school staff, school board members, and nonprofit professionals who conduct mentor programming were all invited to a focus group to see where the disconnect lies between nonprofit organizations, NIU mentor programming, DeKalb High School, and the DeKalb community. Not only does a focus group help shine light on the differences between the way each group is running their mentoring program but also helps connect the programs and create a stronger community within themselves. These organizations build stronger communities by bridging the gap between their programs which are all trying to make a lasting impact on the youth of DeKalb.

Literature Review

School District Plans

DeKalb School District 428 mission is to “provide an equitable and inclusive education that supports students holistically, providing the tools they need to thrive by partnering with families and supporting staff to meet the needs of each of our students.” The district's priority in its strategic plan is student achievement. According to the district website, the district plans to

give professional learning opportunities for faculty, parents, and students to improve the learning environment and engage students and their families to aid student success. The district projects that within three years 95% of high school students will be graduating on time, as well as the number of students receiving discipline referrals, will drop to 10% (D428 website).

Mentorship Programming in DeKalb

Family Service Agency of DeKalb has been operating in the DeKalb area since 1956 adapting to the ever-changing community they work in. They offer five main programs: children's advocacy center, youth mentoring, senior services, center for counseling, and the community action program. While conducting their own programs, they coordinate with local nonprofits to provide added services the community may need. The Family Service Agency has 38 staff members, all run different programs and host 18 interns. Their latest annual report available is from June 2021 where they served 2,529 people throughout their various programs. Also, FSA has a mentoring program in place where they served 15 people from July 2020 to June 2020. One should consider that the report was published amidst the COVID-19 pandemic and mentoring programming was not a main priority in a time of uncertainty.

In addition, Northern Illinois University has several mentoring programs through different centers on campus. One being the VALU (Vanguardia Afirmativa de Latin@s Unidos) program through their Latino Resource Center which aims to "create a safe space for students to express their culture, issues and break stereotypes." The program set up in 2007 at DeKalb High School had over 25 mentors. In 2015 the Latino Resource Center also extended the program into Sycamore High School as well. Similarly, the Center for Black Studies along with the Black Male Initiative run a mentoring program themselves which aims to "assists in retaining collegiate black males in achieving their academic, social and personal goals on their journey to graduating with their chosen academic degree. The goal of BMI is retention and ultimately graduation." Unfortunately for both

programs through the University the 2020 global pandemic halted all programming and has since struggled to keep and sustain its members.

Student Demographics

When comparing Fig.1.a and Fig.1.b we can figure out that DeKalb High School is more diverse than Sycamore High School, for example, DeKalb High School only being 39% white and 80% of Sycamore High school students being white and DeKalb High School has six times as many students needing to learn English. The question presented here is “Whether the schools provide enough resources for those students who represent the minority group? A professor of Psychology at the City University of New York claims, “representation can allow students of color to personally connect to school, potentially making their educational pursuits more meaningful. (2021)” Considering mentoring can impact the way student think and act “by serving as a sounding board and providing a model of effective adult communication, mentors may help youth to better understand, express, and regulate their emotions (McDowell, Kim, O’Neil, & Parke, 2002)” representation matters even if it is through mentoring and not directly through the faculty at the student’s school.

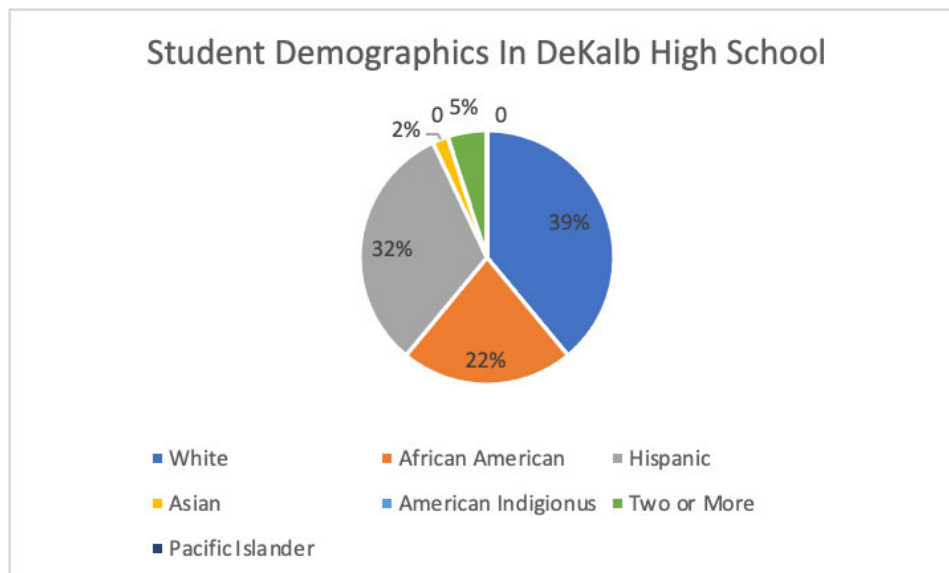


Fig.1.a

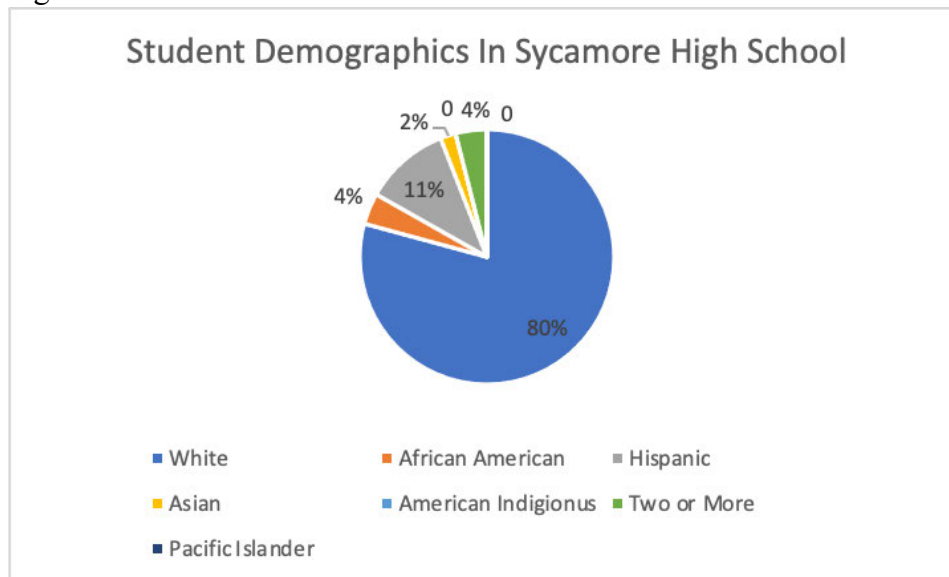


Fig.1.b

Student Characteristics

When comparing Fig.2.a. and Fig.2.b. we can see that there is a higher percentage of low-income students at DeKalb High School. The U.S. Census Bureau describes low incomes as a family of four bringing in less than 30 thousand dollars a year. Comparing the 55% of high schoolers in DeKalb High School and the 24% of high schoolers in Sycamore High School, that is about three times more in DeKalb High School. There are differences in the size of schools, the percent of low performing students, and the percent of students who are non-English speaking across the schools that are being compared. Test score gains are affected by concentrations of these types of students at the schools. Students at these schools in this sample with higher concentrations of non-English speaking students achieve lower test score gains than students in other schools. Another "concentration effect" appeared from the analysis of high-performing students in the sample. Programs that work in a tiered system have also shown to positively affect these students, "multi-tiered mentorship models are effective at improving the graduation and retention rates of

underserved students, as well as improving their acceptance rate into graduate programs.” (Smell & Newman, 2020)

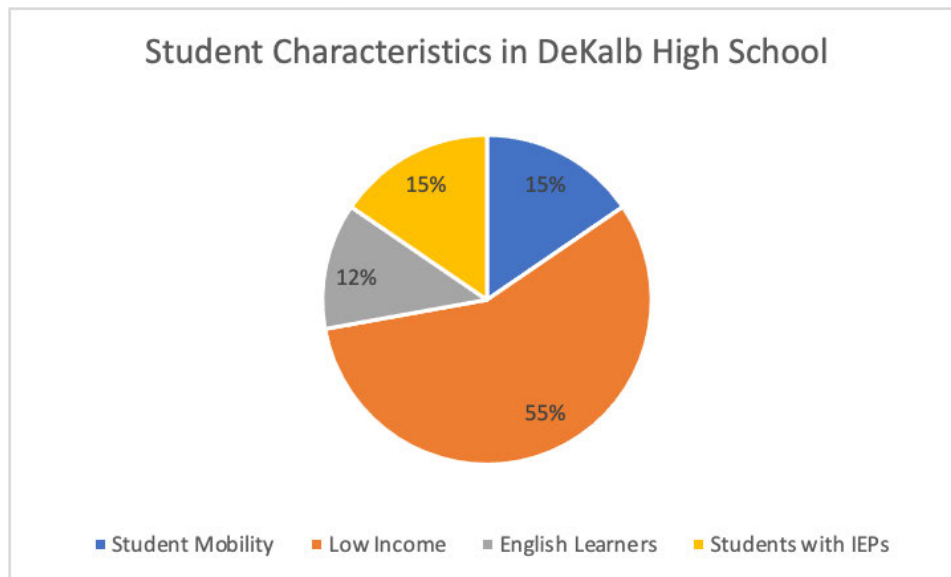


Fig.2.a.

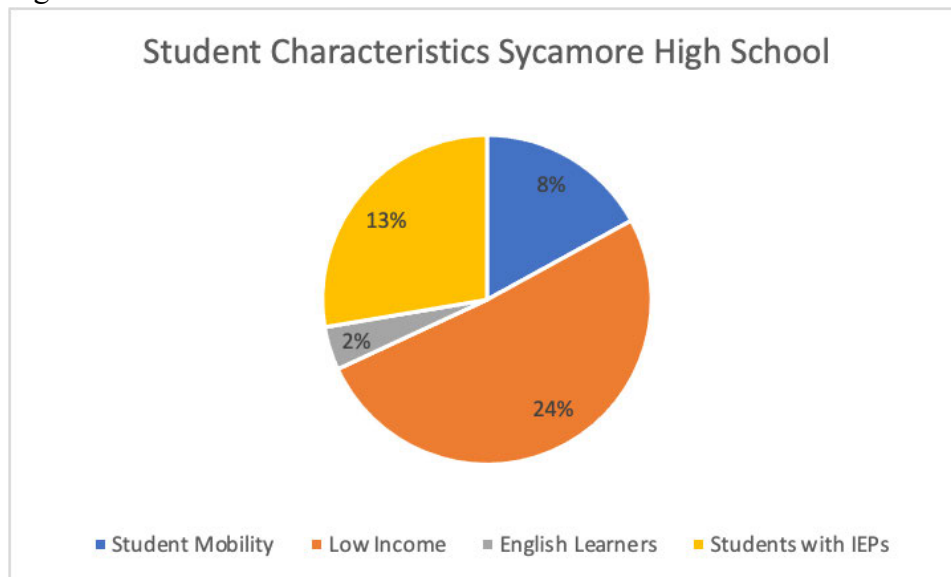


Fig.2.b.

College and Career Readiness

Among strategies that look to improve the efficiency of schooling, some strive to change school organization, curriculum, and instructional practices in very specific ways. These reforms operate at level one or the school/ classroom level. Sycamore uses efficiency-oriented strategies

that's aim may be seen as “macro” or “structural” aspects of schooling Figure 3.a. These reforms do not prescribe specific practices but rather seek to change the market structure and/or incentives within which educators work, under the assumption that given the proper incentives and/or institutional arrangements, school administrators and teachers will be able to implement the reforms best suited to their particular needs (Neighborhood and Life Chances: How Place Matters in Modern America, Newburger, 2013). Compared to DeKalb High School Figure.3.b. where the focus is on “meso”, or “Intermediate” aspect of schooling is working to improve institutional systems, structures, procedures, rules, and guidance that decide ‘the way we do things’ within their home institution. We look at both results and compare whether these aspects of learning contribute to the 15% difference in graduation rates.

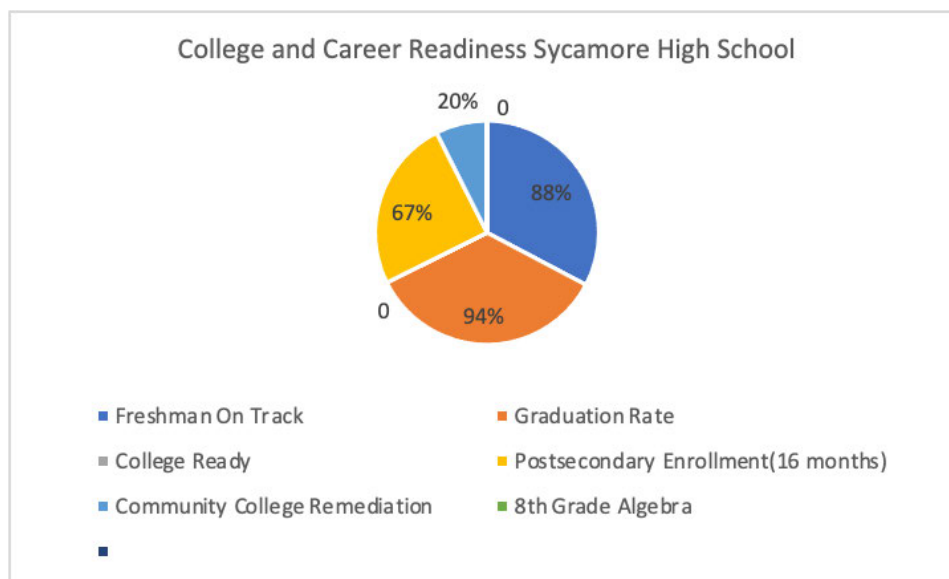


Figure 3.a.

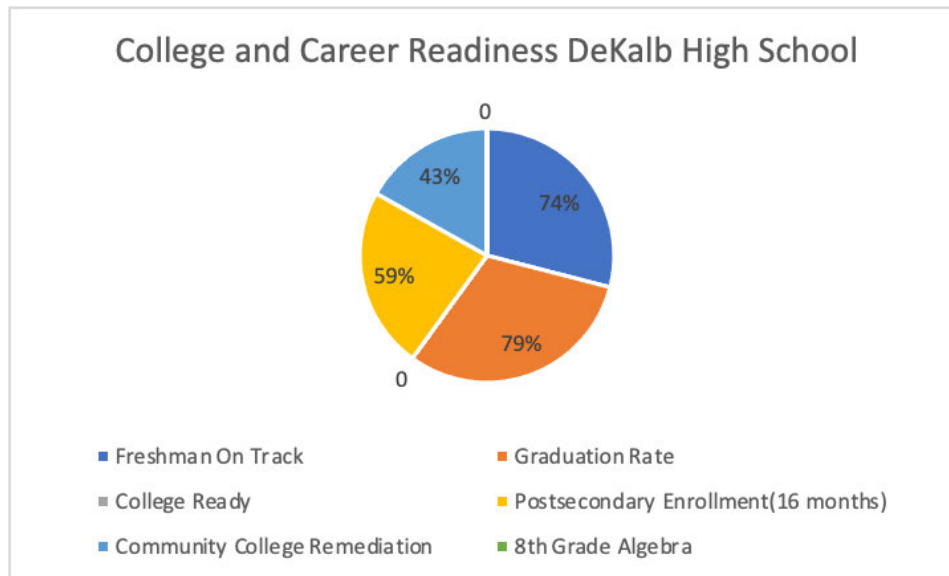


Figure.3.b.

Methodology

Through our research findings show that students who succeed from having a mentoring program are those who choose to be a part of it willingly, “The capacity and willingness of youth to forge close connections with nonparent adults may also vary as a function of their developmental stage.” (DuBois 2011) Our goal is to conduct a focus group consisting of students to gauge what would make them interested in a mentoring program, as well as in what ways to keep their participation in the program. In addition to a focus group of students we would also like to do one with community leaders those who have connections in the school and those who have been a part of other mentoring programs in the past to create a better understanding of things that have worked in the DeKalb community and the things that have not worked. In doing so, we plan to create a sustainable mentoring program where students choose to take part instead of being forced to be involved.

During uncertain times that have followed the COVID-19 pandemic as a collective, we must be honest and have open conversations about taking action, we can create change, especially in

our education system. It does not take just one group or just one person. It takes a community or “It takes a village”. Working with multiple mentors is a critical way for students to expand their network, gain opportunities, and better prepare for future endeavors. However, students from underrepresented groups are less likely to be mentored or have access to mentors. We are developing and implementing training, to provide the necessary foundation for students to be better prepared for setting up future mentorships throughout High School. We are focusing on the mentee-mentor-mentors relationship where NIU (Northern Illinois University) Greek Life takes over days and focuses on certain support the mentees might have. The mentors have experienced similar struggles in their journey, and they can use this experience to listen to the student and provide encouragement. With that in mind, we are developing and implementing a workshop that aims to address issues related to students using multiple mentors, gaining networking experience, and opportunities. This is creating a mentoring relationship cycle where it highlights the importance of sustaining a healthy mentee-to-mentor relationship comes with its own challenges for both mentees and mentors. While some students may have an idea of what a mentor should be, they often lack the deeper understanding of what a mentor specifically is, what a mentor does, how to foster a healthy mentee-to-mentor relationship, and how to work with multiple mentors at one time (Saito and Blyth 1992, Amaral and Vala 2009). This program sought to better fill these gaps in knowledge to, ultimately, create students well-equipped for healthy and productive mentorships.

Surveys

In order to assess the research question, two methodologies were used. One being the review and analysis of three populations through surveys and the other being the review and analysis of a focus group with community leaders, specifically those who have connections in the high

school and/or those who have been a part of other mentoring programs in the past. The focus group is to create a better understanding as a collective of the things that have worked in the DeKalb community and the things that have not worked in the community.

Once the goals and objectives were established, it was determined that the surveys should be used to measure the parameters of what ways the program should be built upon. Looking at the quantitative data, the difficulty of measuring metrics like retention and promotional rates is presented. Retention and promotional rates can help quantify the success of the mentoring programs by comparing specific segments of those programs. For example, comparing the opinions of all participants of the program who want to participate versus those who do not. With the opinion of stakeholders and colleagues, it was decided for the surveys to focus on the Greek life population, the students at DeKalb High School, as well as administrators and staff of DeKalb High School.

Population:

As stated previously the surveys were focused on three groups being the Greek life population at Northern Illinois University, the students at DeKalb High School, and administrators and staff of DeKalb High School. With mentoring programs, it has been studied that these types of programs can help youth as they go through challenging life transitions, including dealing with stressful changes at home or transitioning to adulthood. Close, healthy, supportive relationships between mentors and mentees that last for a significant portion of time (i.e., more than one year) are central to success (Jekielek et al., 2002; Rhodes & DuBois, 2006).¹

¹ “Benefits of Mentoring for Young People.” Benefits of Mentoring for Young People | Youth.gov. Accessed April 8, 2024. <https://youth.gov/youth-topics/mentoring/benefits-mentoring->

What was being researched was whether the students would be interested in a mentorship program and what would be beneficial for the students. The survey questions asked are below:

- How likely are you to join a mentoring program?
- What would stop you from joining a mentoring program?
- Would you prefer 1-on-1 mentoring or group mentoring?
- What would you need a mentor for? (pick multiple)
- What things would you like to gain from a mentoring program?
- How many hours per month would you be willing to commit to a mentorship program?
- How likely are you to commit to a lunch time mentoring program?

The second group to be assessed through a survey is the Greek organizations. Collecting information from potential mentors provides an important perspective on both the mentees' and mentors' experiences. Information collected from prospective mentors can be seen as extremely beneficial when enhancing recruitment efforts. The assessment and measurement of mentorship should integrate how and why mentors participate in mentorship and what they would gain from successful mentorship. For example, one qualitative case study found that graduate students and postdoctoral researchers who mentored undergraduates in research reported improved career preparation and qualifications, cognitive and socioemotional growth, improved teaching and communication skills, greater enjoyment of their own apprenticeship experience, and twice as many benefits as challenges (Dolon & Johnson, 2009). The questions asked in the survey are as follows:

[young-people#:~:text=Mentoring%20can%20help%20youth%20as,year\)%20are%20central%20to%20success.](#)

- How likely are you to join as a mentor into a mentorship program?
- How likely are you to do mandatory mentoring training to become a mentor?
- What would prevent you from being a mentor? (please click all that apply)
- Why do you want to be a mentor? (please click all that apply)
- Would you prefer 1-on-1 mentoring or group mentoring?
- How many hours would you be willing to commit to a mentorship program a month?

The third population evaluated is staff members and administrative members. This group was included in the research because the students are often referred to by their teachers, counselors, and other staff members. These staff members spend most of their time with these students and recognize things others may not recognize. The questions asked in the survey are as follows:

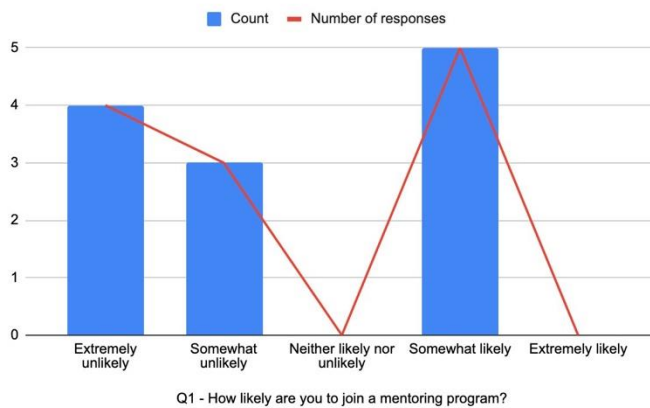
- How likely are you to support a mentoring program?
- How much of a concern is the quality of mentor?
- In what ways do you want the mentorship to benefit the students? (please click all that apply)
- What do you believe would disengage students from joining a mentorship program? (please click all that apply)

The focus group would be key when defining the elements used in creating the design and procedures applied in implementing sustainable mentoring programs. Through the Department chair's help, they organized a focus group of community leaders, hoping to create a sustainable plan for each program according to the demographics focused on in Dekalb County.

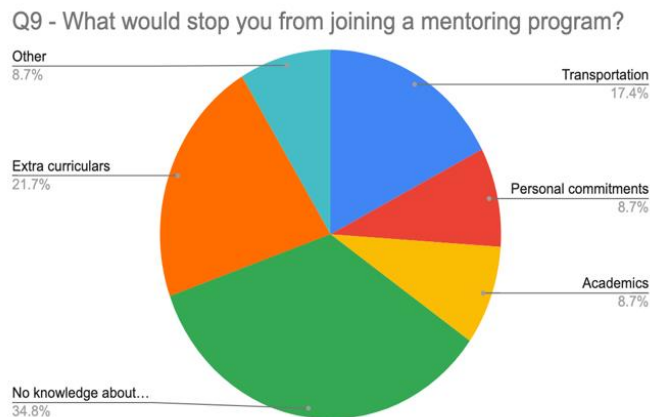
Unfortunately, due to many scheduling conflicts, the focus group was unable to meet before publishing this paper.

Results:

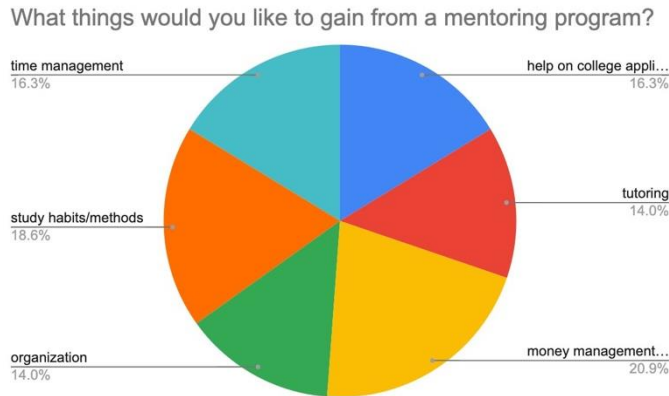
To conduct the student survey a parental consent form was sent out. If parents agreed to their student taking the survey they sent it. This resulted in 16 students' responses out of 24 parents agreeing to them taking the survey.



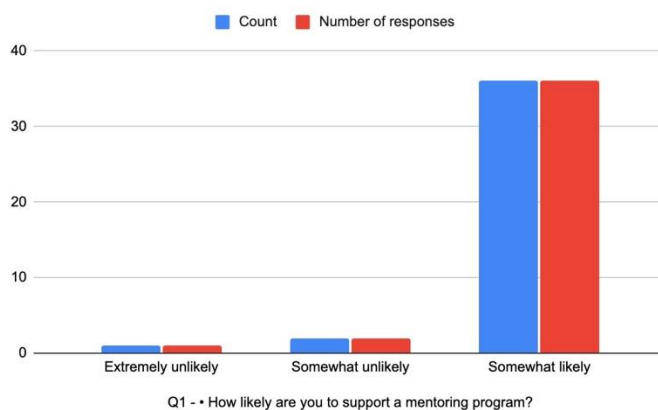
7 of the students said they were unlikely to join a mentoring program. While 5 students said they would like to join a mentoring program.



Furthermore, this graph shows how most students note the reason they would not join a mentoring program is because of their lack of knowledge of them.

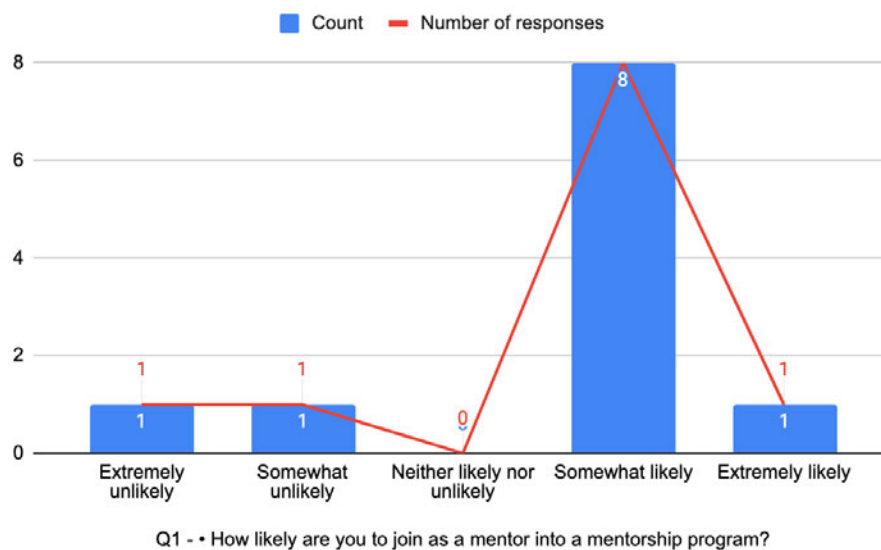


This graph shows how important money management strategies are to high school students as 20% of the responses note money management is one of the topics they would be interested in learning about. This graph also shows how they want that support to be more independent as they prepare to head into college with 18.6% of students wanting to learn better study habits as well as 16.3% of students wanting assistance with college applications.



It can be determined that the high school staff once they have more information on a mentoring program would support their students and the mentoring program.

With the Greek life at Northern Illinois University, 11 responses have been collected up to this point and results are still pending. But from what is seen as the amount of who would join a mentorship program, there will be support for it.



As the graph shows, 8 responses suggest that NIU Greek students are somewhat likely to join a mentorship program.

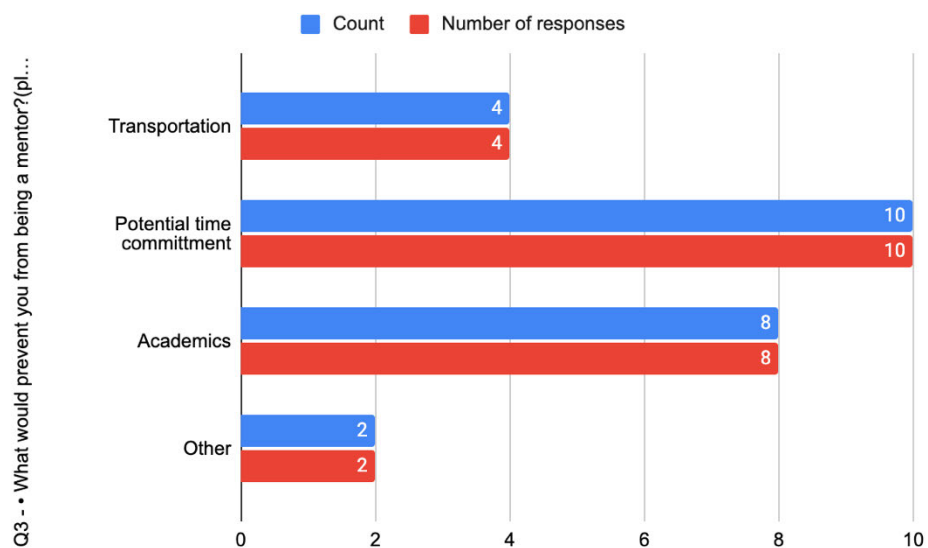
Implications:

The implications of the research are to create a more effective programming strategy to identify what students the program may appeal to, administrators' relationships need to be built, and local nonprofit organizations build a community within the county.

Recommendations:

This paper focuses on the different opinions of different populations that would get influenced to join programs like these ones and how they relate to the sustainability of formal mentoring programs implemented through Northern Illinois University. In the results section, the surveys show the program's expectations and future outcomes from participants from the survey results. Hopefully, the future data will provide a link between program sustainability and structure.

A recommendation that can be inferred from the data that addresses the potential drawbacks from the perspective of the Greek organizations.



If the program organizers focus on these limitations, it would draw more prospective students who would potentially want to become mentors. How can these issues be addressed when creating a sustainable mentoring program? When involving these potential barriers in the program design builds a stronger foundation also it will help communities identify, align, and

integrate resources so programs can strengthen their systems and partnerships to design high-impact programs.

Based on the data collected there is limited recommendation that can be provided. Due to the many scheduling conflicts, we were unable to get all the community leaders together to connect them and begin the bridging process. Regarding the data we were able to collect we found that organizations need to do more work in marketing their programs and making them seem less intimidating to students to increase their student participation. As our capstone came to a close we learned that BLAC Inc. an organization in DeKalb whose mission is “to provide mental health, leadership, community service and academic support to at-risk youth in DeKalb and the surround areas of Illinois.” just signed a contract with DeKalb School District 428 and while this is not directly a mentoring program they have already had an influx of new students and referrals from school staff to participate in their programming.

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