

# UTC Industrial-Organizational Psychology Alumni Mentoring Program: Fostering Connections across I-O Generations

Ashton Adams, Celeste Bremmer, MS, Alejandra Corominas, MS, Christopher Cunningham, PhD  
The University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, Psychology Department



## Background

The UTC Industrial-Organizational (I-O) Psychology graduate program sought additional ways to engage their alumni and better connect them with current students. Some of the previous methods to connect alumni with students included networking events, conferences, and panels. While all created informal spaces for connection, there was not a way to facilitate strong one-on-one relationships over a long period of time. With the success of a peer-to-peer mentoring program between second year graduate students and first year graduate students, the program developed a formal mentoring program for alumni and students.

Mentoring can be defined as a “relationship in which a more experienced or more knowledgeable person helps to guide a less experienced or less knowledgeable person via advice, opinions, strategies and policies focused on career advancement” (HR.com).

The relationship is intended to facilitate advancement towards mentees goals and focuses on personal and professional development (Wefald et al., 2021). Specifically, mentee and mentor relationships can help the mentee learn to navigate in the unfamiliar world of work and provide he or she with advice and instruction about jobs, career planning guidance, instruction to enhance the mentee’s growth and development, and overall support (D’Abate & Eddy, 2008).

Mentees aren’t the only ones to benefit from a mentoring relationship. Mentors reap benefit as the relationship provides an experience of openness and the opportunity to support and develop relationships with future leaders. A study by Stuckey et al. (2019) found that mentor participants believed they received just as much out of the relationship as they gave.

As stated above, mentoring programs benefit all participants involved. Through the implementation of a mentoring program between students and alumni, the goal was to facilitate strong connections across graduate classes, providing students with the opportunity to take ownership of their development and gather insights on practicing I-O psychology, and providing alumni with the opportunity to coach someone and gain a new perspective on I-O trends and research.

## Program Evaluation Results

Mentees found the largest strengths in the program to be hearing the practitioner-perspective and gaining skills in networking (see figure 3). Mentors found strengths in the mentoring relationship concerning the flexibility and clear expectations within the program (see figure 5). 88% of mentees and 82% of mentors agreed they were matched with someone whose interests aligned with theirs. The satisfaction of both the mentees and the mentors increased from the end of Cohort 1 to the end of Cohort 2 (see figure 4, figure 6).

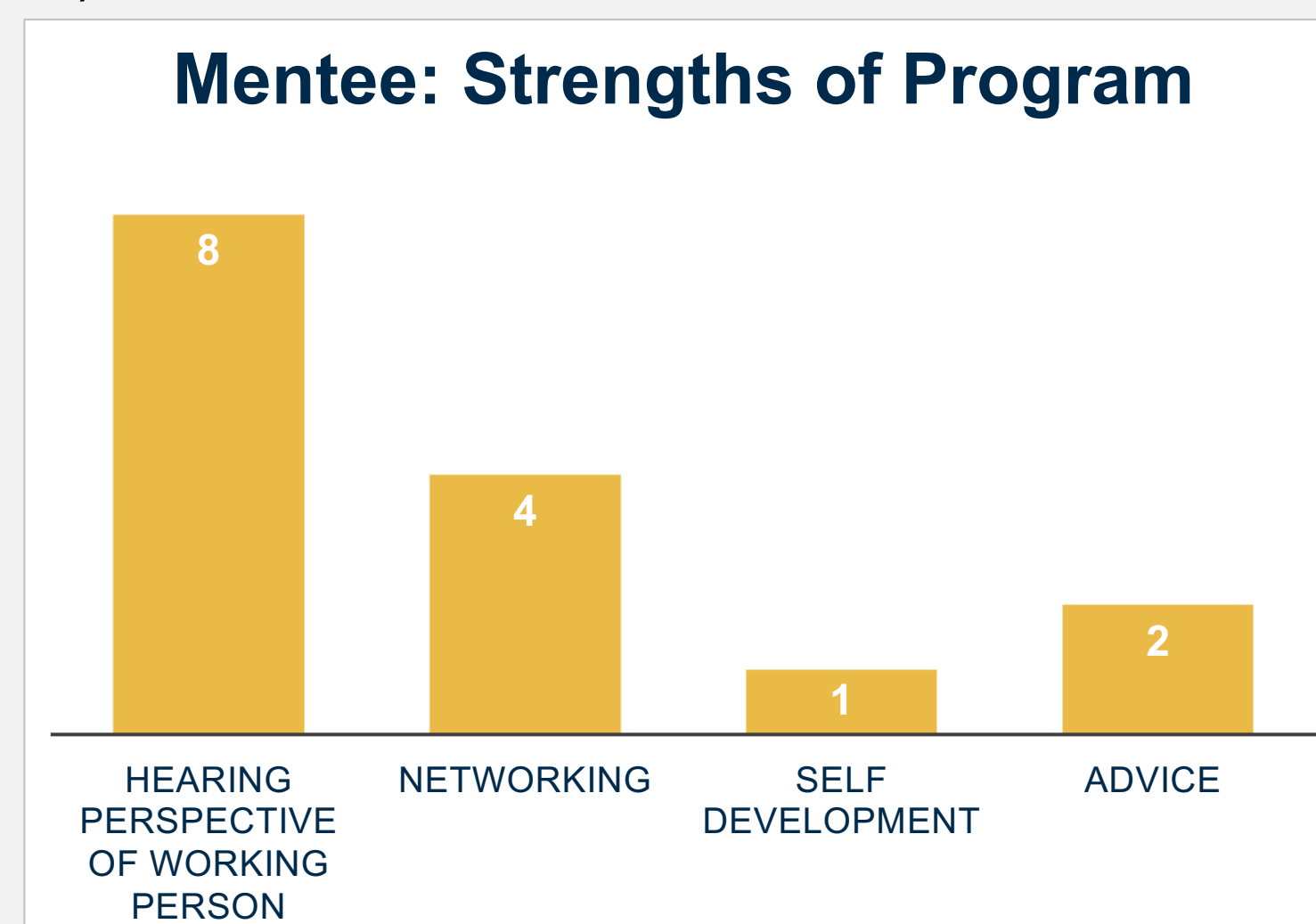


Figure 3: Students were asked what the strengths of the program were in their eyes.

*“Being a part of the alumni program gave me confidence about myself and my ability to succeed in the workplace. My mentor is great, and we are continuing to stay in touch.”*  
– Mentee, Cohort 2

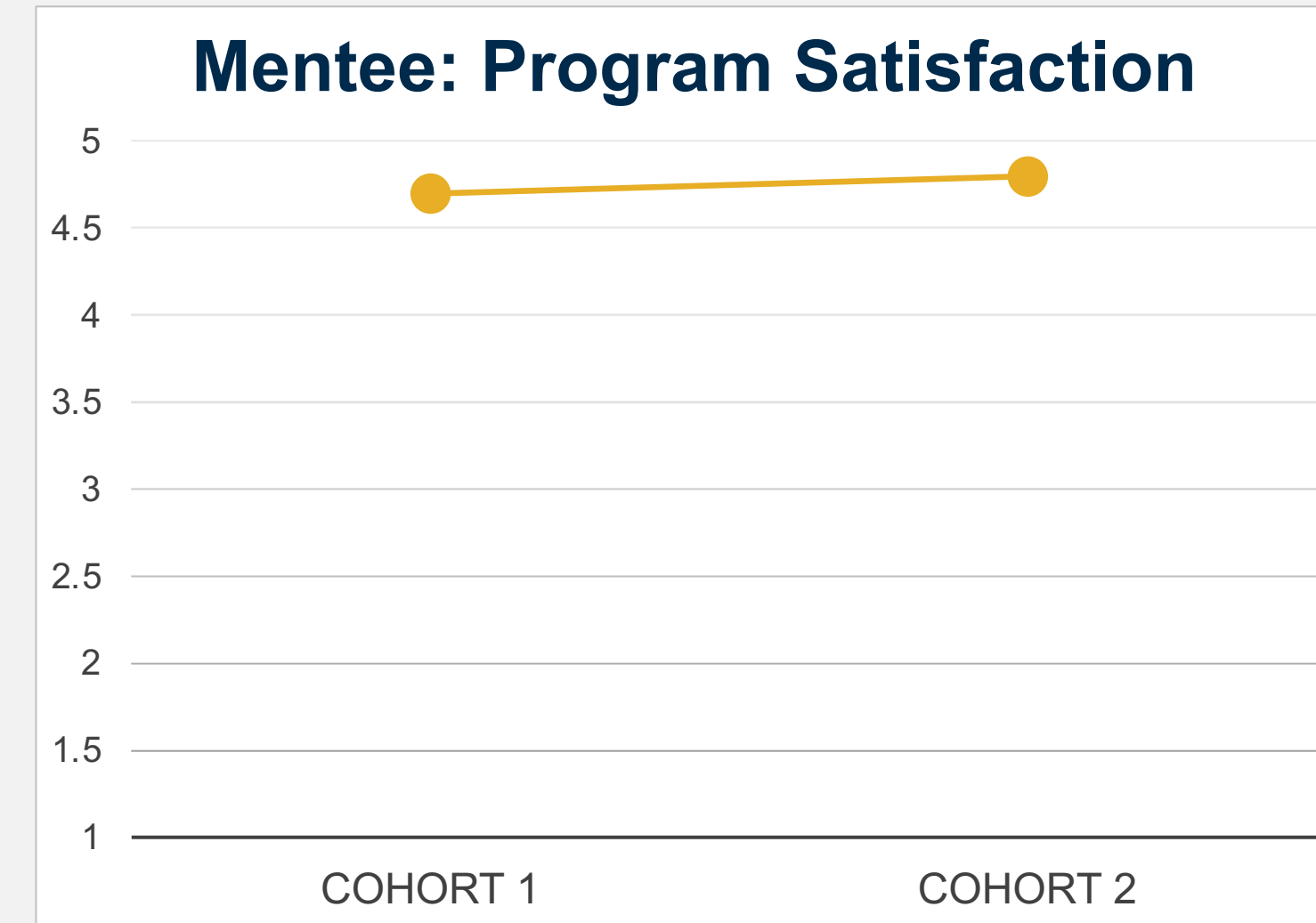


Figure 4: Students were asked to rate their overall satisfaction with the program.

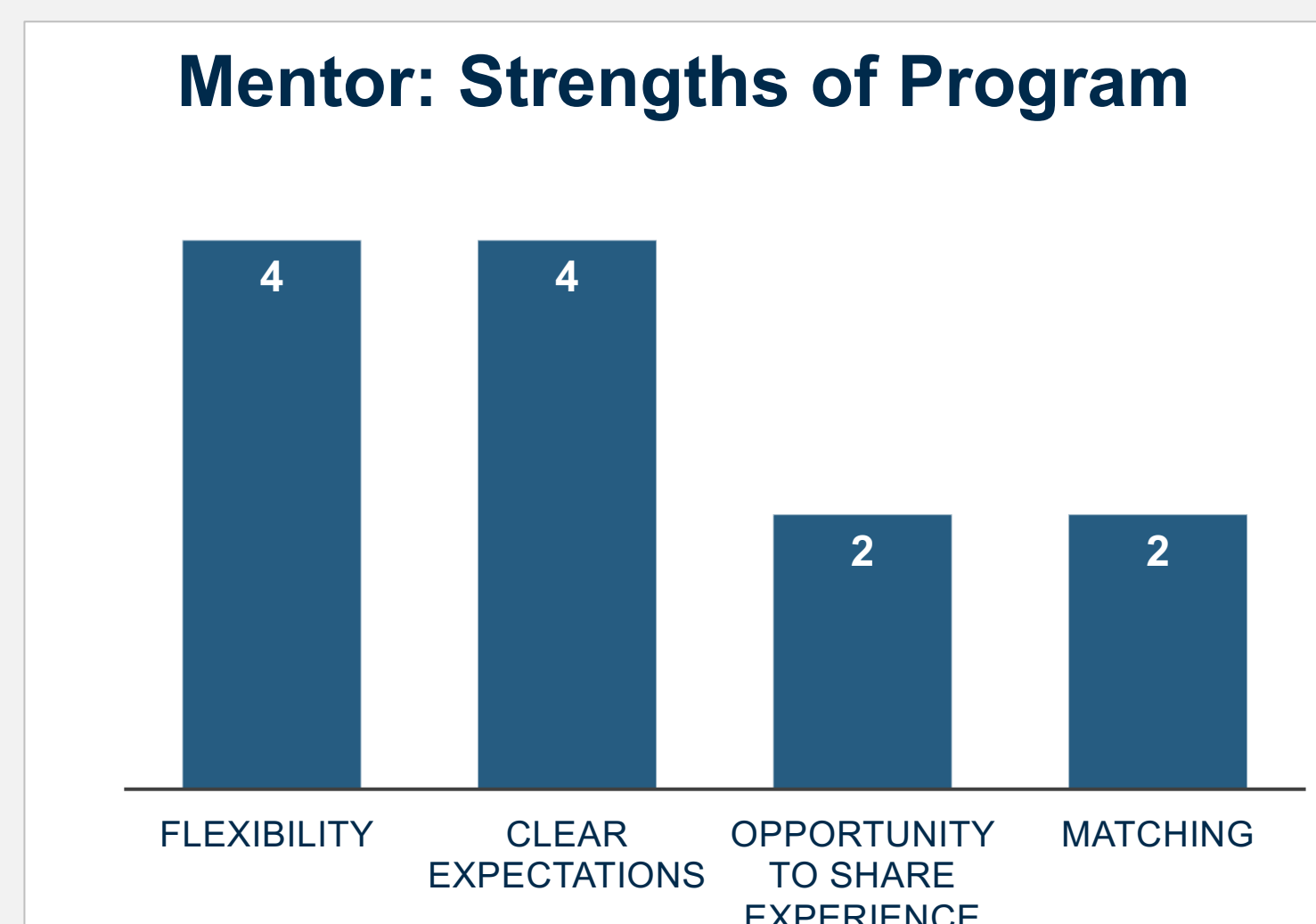


Figure 5: Alumni were asked what the strengths of the program were in their eyes.

*“The alumni program gave me an opportunity to help, insight into what students are thinking about, and a fresh perspective on things I’m working on.”*  
– Mentor, Cohort 2

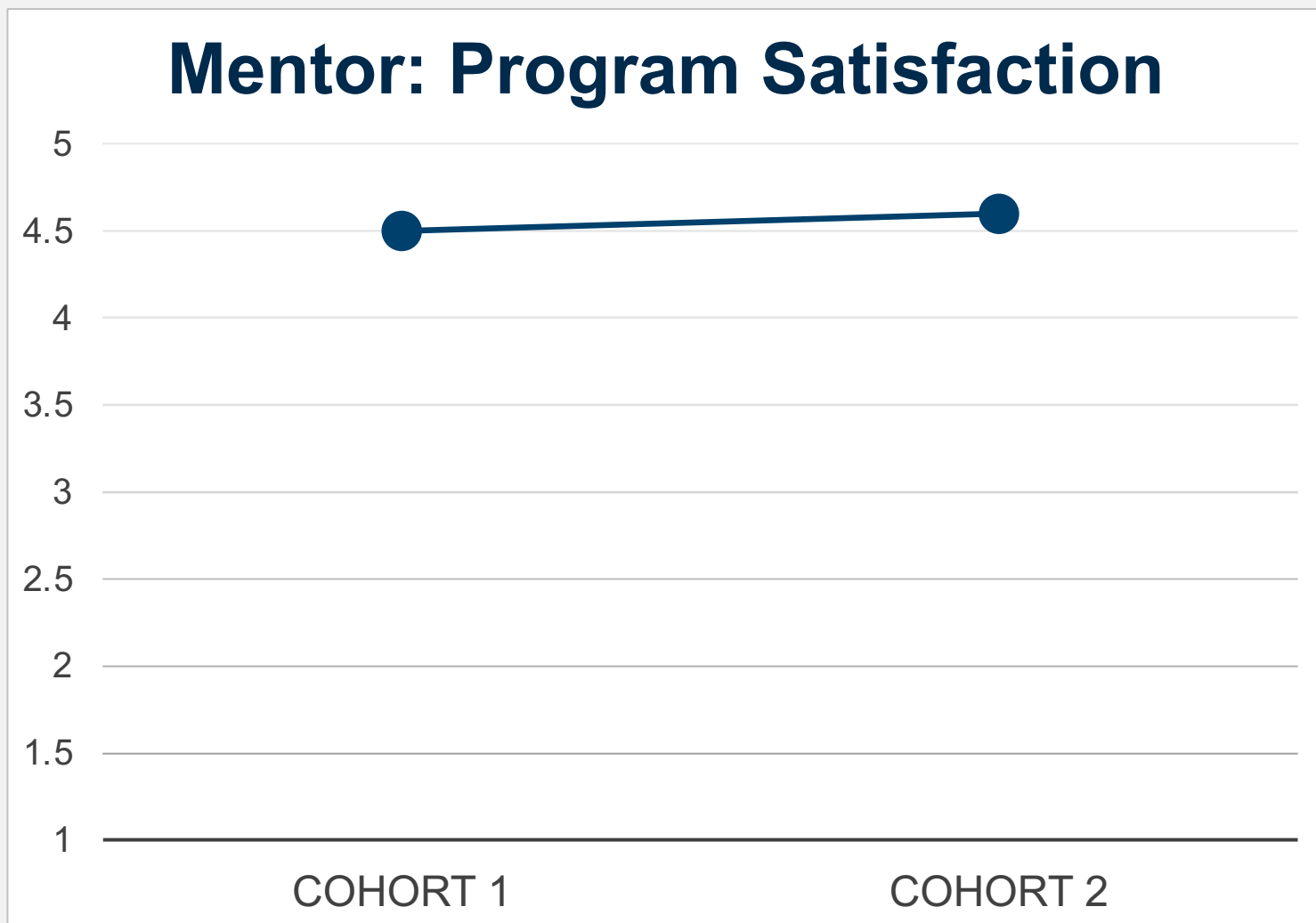


Figure 6: Alumni were asked to rate their overall satisfaction with the program.

## Program Structure

The alumni mentoring program is a one-on-one mentoring relationship between an UTC I-O psychology alumnus or alumna and second year student. The relationship follows an academic year, starting in late August and ending in April. The summer months (May – August) are used for planning for the upcoming cohort and matching alumni with students.

The program is co-led by a Student Coordinator and Alumni Coordinator with advisement and collaboration with the Graduate Program Director (see figure 1). As a result, the mentees and mentors have their own point of contact to receive support and discuss any issues that may arise. Collaboration with the Graduate Program Director ensures alignment with other program activities and helps to maintain strong relationships between alumni and the program.

Throughout the duration of the mentoring program, there are required monthly check-ins between mentor and mentee. The coordinators also host one to two group events each semester to promote additional networking and connections amongst students and alumni (see figure 2).

Feedback is informally requested throughout the process, but formal feedback is requested through anonymous evaluation surveys at midpoint and at the end of the program. This feedback is crucial to continual improvement and expansion of the mentoring program.

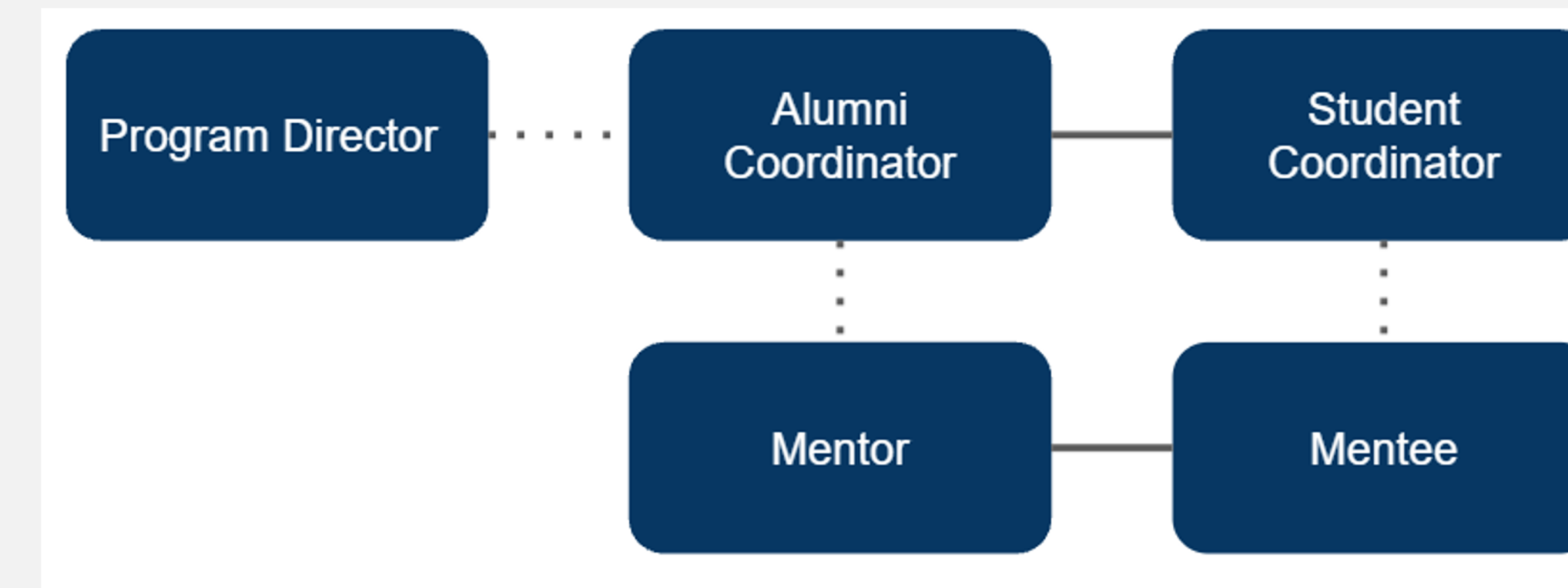


Figure 1: Roles and structure of the UTC I-O Alumni Mentoring Program.

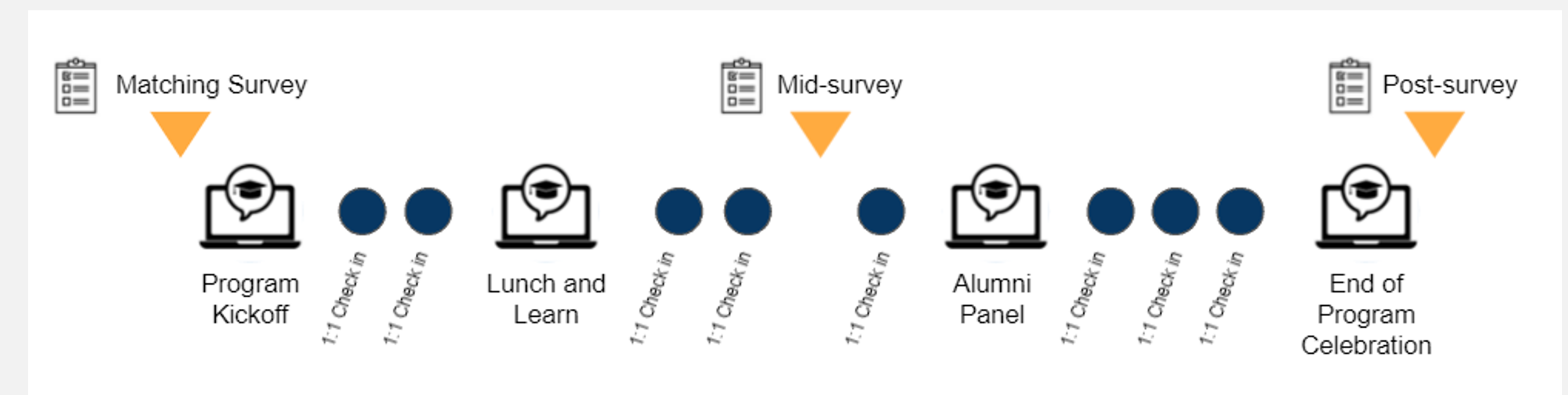


Figure 2: Outline of the mentoring process, which includes check-in’s, group events, and surveys.

## Recommendations

The alumni mentoring program is now in its third year, improving each year through the evaluation surveys. Below are some recommendations for implementing an alumni mentoring program:

- *Start small* – The program started with a pilot that had a smaller number of participants and lasted one semester. This provided the opportunity to work out any kinks in a low stake environment, while also allowing more time to build out the program for the following year.
- *Get buy-in from key stakeholders* – The program has been successful through the combined efforts of the students, alumni, and program director. Without each group’s support and commitment, the program would not be as effective.
- *Build a robust recruitment strategy* – Connecting with alumni across graduation classes can be challenging, so it is imperative to use different communication channels to recruit mentors. The Program Director has a well-established LinkedIn group and annual newsletter that is used to gather interest from alumni. In addition, the Alumni Coordinator utilizes their own network of peers to gather interest.
- *Evaluate and continue to iterate* – Gathering feedback has been vital to the program’s success and continued interest from students and alumni. Through the evaluation surveys, the program has incorporated more group events, structured resources, and has improved the matching process.

Lastly, the value of this program is evident through student testimonials, continued participation from the same alumni, and interest from new alumni. Hopefully, other graduate programs are encouraged to implement their own alumni mentoring programs and provide the same value to their students and alumni.

## References

1. D’Abate, C. P., & Eddy, E. R. (2008). Mentoring as a learning tool: Enhancing the effectiveness of an undergraduate business mentoring program. *Mentoring & tutoring: partnership in learning*, 16(4), 363-378.
2. *The state of coaching and mentoring 2021: Improve organizational culture by developing and hiring better coaches and mentors.* The State of Coaching and Mentoring 2021 Research Report - HR.com. (2021).
3. Stuckey, S. M., Collins, B. T., Patrick, S., Grove, K. S., & Ward, E. (2019). Thriving vs surviving: benefits of formal mentoring program on faculty well-being. *International Journal of Mentoring and Coaching in Education*.
4. Wefald, A. J., Hornung, M., & Burkhart, T. (2021). COACHING AND MENTORING IN A CAPSTONE LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM. *Journal of Leadership Education*, 20(3).