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Pro Se: Speech & Debate Mentoring Program for Justice-Impacted Youth Community-Engaged Learning Experiences of Cornell University Students

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Cover Page Footnote

Funding for the Program thus far was provided by the Community Foundation of Herkimer and Oneida County and the David M. Einhorn Center for Community Engagement at Cornell University. At Cornell University's ILR School, the Program is a collaborative between the K. Lisa Yang and Hock E. Tan Institute on Employment and Disability, the Criminal Justice and Employment Initiative, and the Speech and Debate Program.

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Pro Se: Speech and Debate Mentoring Program for Justice-Impacted Youth: Community-Engaged Learning Experiences of Cornell University Students

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Introduction

This paper describes the successes and challenges of three peer-aged mentors providing mentoring services to justice-involved youth with disabilities in central New York State. A phenomenological approach is used to describe mentor experiences through personal narratives. This information is supplemented with data from other program evaluation tools to triangulate findings and make recommendations for program improvement.

Mentoring support and supplemental educational opportunities are demonstrated best practices for justice-involved youth generally, and specifically for justice-involved youth with disabilities (Brown & Ross, 2010; Baltodano et al., 2005; Hagner et al., 2008; McDaniel & Carter, 2019). However, justice-involved youth with disabilities can be a difficult population to reach for the provision of mentoring services, because of such issues as: lack of access to communications technology, disengagement with school settings, changing home and contact information, and issues with *systems avoidance* related to youth and family mistrust of service delivery systems (Fowler, Toro, & Miles, 2009; Brayne, 2014; National Skills Coalition, 2020).

The *Pro Se* Speech and Debate Program is a student-led, engaged learning program at Cornell University, housed within the New York State School of Industrial and Labor Relations (ILR). In this initiative, Cornell undergraduate and graduate students engage with justice-involved youth (ages 14-17) in Central New York to provide mentorship and educational offerings. Cornell students serve as "speech and debate coaches" and peer mentors to youth involved in the Central New York Health Home Network's (CNYHHN) "Restorative Integrated Youth Services" (RIYS) diversion program in Utica, New York.[1]

The primary goal of the program is to empower youth by building self-advocacy skills tied to supplemental academic opportunities provided by peer-aged mentors. Youth who complete the program receive a certificate of completion in "Speech and Debate" from Cornell and are provided opportunities for campus visits. The program is student-led in several ways. First, Cornell students provide virtual one-on-one mentoring and supplemental education to youth involved in the program and engage in self-guided tailoring of mentorship and educational activities based on individual youth interests, hobbies, and developmental levels.

Second, the program's flexible curriculum was designed by Cornell students in collaboration with faculty advisors. The Cornell University Undergraduate Mock Trial Association, the Cornell Speech and Debate Program's Advocacy Project, and students employed on the program all contributed to curriculum development. Cornell students involved in the program are encouraged to engage in small *communities of practice* around research, evaluation, and curriculum/program improvement. This paper is one example of those efforts. While faculty advisors provide student support and oversight—such as mentor-mentee matching,

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risk management, and supervision—student mentors are offered significant leeway in customizing services to their youth.

The program just completed its second year. In the first year, twelve youth mentees and seven Cornell mentors participated in a three- to six-month long mentorship—some mentorships were extended beyond the initial three months based on youth benefit and mutual interest in continuing the mentorship. Evaluative data from the first year of the program suggests that over 80% of youth program participants either made significant progress in their individual goals, or successfully graduated from the program. In the program's second year, an additional ten youth and six mentors participated in the program with a 70% progress and completion rate.

Despite the program's successes, the experiences of mentors varied significantly, with some mentors experiencing challenges engaging youth. Evaluation data for the program comes from a mentee survey administered at the beginning and end of the program, a mentor "checklist" administered monthly, and administrative data from the community partner. Evaluation tools for the program were also developed by student workers. A copy of the monthly mentor checklist is provided in the Appendix of this paper.

This paper provides three Cornell students' experiences as mentors to offer an additional source of qualitative programmatic information in the form of phenomenological case studies of mentor successes and challenges. By design, the paper presents case studies from mentors who experienced: (1) significant youth engagement; (2) mixed youth engagement; and (3) low youth engagement. The goal of providing these perspectives across a spectrum of program outcomes is to gain insight into barriers, facilitators, and strategies for increasing engagement. As such, the case studies span a range of experiences working with youth, which are typical of the program.

The hope is that these case studies will help make program improvements in Year Three and beyond. Before providing the case studies, some brief background on evidence-based practice is offered as a framework for analysis and discussion, along with an overview of the student-developed curriculum. The purpose of describing the curriculum components is to share the program's approach and provide context for evaluation of program improvements. This paper was prepared by three Cornell students who served as peer mentors on the program during Year Two, with the support and guidance of a faculty advisor. While the faculty advisor provided feedback and additions to the introduction, background and conclusion sections, the student case studies were left entirely to the student mentors.

Background

In this section, we provide a brief overview of relevant best and promising practices related to providing mentoring services and supplemental education to justice-involved youth with disabilities. This research informed program development and evaluation components.

"Justice involvement" for youth has a broader meaning than in adult contexts because it does not always entail involvement with the adult criminal court system, or involuntary detainment outside the community (Saleh & Cook, 2020). Juvenile justice facilities might include a range of placements, including detention centers but also shared residences, shelters, staff-secure placements like youth camps, and other settings. In this paper, the youth population being described was involved in alternatives-to-detention and/or diversion services, meaning that they were participating in community-based services, supports, and educational opportunities as a court-determined alternative to more significant and restrictive placements.

Youth with disabilities are dramatically overrepresented in justice involvement (Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, 2017; Saleh, 2021). Many justice-involved youth

with disabilities drop out of school, or simply do not reengage with their educational systems after reentering the community (Hagner et al., 2008; Zajac et al., 2015). Evidence points to the importance of connecting members of this population with supplemental educational and mentoring opportunities to help prevent drop out (Nellis & Hooks Wayman, 2009; Marshall et al., 2012; Cavendish, 2013).

Such supplemental services are an important complement to the fuller array of wraparound services and supports provided by government agencies in collaboration with community partners (Leone et al., 2002), and help youth obtain interactions and learning opportunities outside their existing peer groups and home educational environment, which may have been the locus of past negative experiences and stigma (Todis et al., 2001; Hagner et al., 2008). Research suggests that helping youth with disabilities develop new personal strengths and self-perceptions outside of their regular community/school environment can help reframe their sense of self, shed negative labels, and experience relationships characterized by mutual respect and understanding, which may have been lacking in the environment they are returning to (Marshall et al., 2012).

There are known prosocial benefits related to having access to a reliable listener, rebuilding social capital, and providing opportunities to make associations with someone outside of a youth's existing social network (Atkins et al., 2005; Brown & Ross, 2010; Fletcher & Batty, 2012; National Reentry Resource Center, 2017). There is also growing evidence of the need to offer peer-to-peer mentoring in addition to support from adult programmatic leads, because participants can benefit from having relatable experiences with credible messengers in their age group, in contrast to mentorship from program staff, who may be viewed as authority figures (Fletcher & Batty, 2012).

Another promising practice that this project incorporates is the blending of academic, life skills, soft skills, and vocational goal development with traditional or peer mentoring opportunities (Mathur & Griller Clark, 2014; Nellis & Hooks Wayman, 2009). Research suggests that for justice-involved youth, exposure to higher education settings can offer a safe environment for developing positive relationships with adults and peers and are a promising setting for employment and soft skills development (Cramer et al., 2019). Mentoring programs developed through cooperative partnerships between universities, the justice system, and community organizations have been one demonstrated model (McDaniel & Carter, 2019). The program curriculum and implementation design were informed by these research findings.

Curriculum Summary

This section briefly describes the program curriculum. The goal of this description is to situate the experience of the mentors and provide additional background on the program's learning objectives and mentoring approach. All aspects of the curriculum are student-led and designed. Because of this, another goal of including the curriculum here is to provide opportunities to share the program approach externally and seek feedback on program improvement opportunities. Curricular components were also supported by a student-developed "Program Implementation and Fidelity Guide" that mentors read and review as part of their onboard training. As the mentor case studies below illustrate, one significant consideration related to the curriculum might be the need to simplify learning objectives and provide more flexibility for coaches and participants to focus on the mentorship rather than supplemental learning opportunities.

The *Pro Se* Speech and Debate curriculum is designed to introduce participants to the fundamental principles of speech and debate, but with an emphasis on plain language learning

and efforts to connect learning objectives to participant hobbies, interests, and self-guided goals. The curriculum is divided into twelve sessions. The curriculum begins with a one-to-one meeting between the coach and the participant, where the coach informally gets to know the participant's goals, interests, and learning style. The aim of this meeting is to build rapport and identify potential topics and mediums for the participant's final project. The coach is encouraged to be flexible and adapt to participant communication and learning styles. This includes potentially using diverse means of outreach, such as text messaging or emailing, to develop initial rapport.

The second session focuses on the basics of an argument. The coach uses relatable examples to explain how speech and debate exists all around us, from movies to music to advertisements. The participant is encouraged to give examples of real-life situations where speech and debate skills come in handy. The coach also discusses how diverse jobs and occupations use the skills of speech and debate. The aim is to help the participant understand that argumentation is not a *dirty word* and to connect hobbies and interests to academic skills.

The third session introduces participants to debate games—a quick-and-easy way to practice the skills of effective speech and argument. The coach uses the *If I Ruled the World* game to help the participant practice self-presentation and argument. The aim is to help the participant understand that debate games are one way to practice the principles of speech and debate, and brainstorm ways that hobbies and interests can be connected to learning objectives.

The fourth session focuses on the power of persuasion, where the coach introduces the participant to strategies for persuading an audience. The coach emphasizes the importance of understanding the audience and tailoring arguments to their needs and interests. The participant is encouraged to practice persuasive argumentation and to connect hobbies and interests to persuasive techniques.

The fifth session shifts focus to introduce the basics of debate. The coach reminds participants that speech and debate are separate but related skills. The session uses the Lincoln-Douglas format as an example, and the coach avoids triggering topics. Activities include providing a short history of the Lincoln-Douglas debates, reviewing participant take-home exercises, and debriefing with constructive feedback. The goal is to help participants understand the rules of speech and debate, learn how to make a strong and effective argument, problem solve how to give a good speech or argument, and learn the importance of research and support.

The sixth session is about logically refuting an argument. Participants are introduced to two models of refutation: the ICE ("Introduce, Cite, and Explain") and LARA ("Listen, Affirm, Respond, Add Information") methods. The ICE model involves identifying the argument, critiquing it, and explaining why it is problematic. The LARA model involves listening to the argument, affirming parts of it, responding to its weaknesses, and asking questions. Participants practice breaking down arguments and responding to them using these models.

The seventh session focuses on strategies for responding more generally. Participants are taught about three key concepts: mitigation, turn, and logical irrelevance. Mitigation involves acknowledging a weakness in an argument but trying to minimize its impact. Turn involves taking an argument and turning it against the person making it. Logical irrelevance involves pointing out when an argument is not relevant to the discussion. Participants practice identifying weaknesses in arguments and responding to them. Throughout the curriculum, coaches are encouraged to meet with advisors to discuss adapting terminology to plain language and adapting learning objectives to be developmentally appropriate to participants.

The eighth session continues the focus on responding to arguments and emphasizes the importance of demeanor. Participants are taught about three more concepts: factual inaccuracy,

unproven assumptions, and causality. They also learn about logical fallacies and the importance of maintaining a calm demeanor during an argument. The participants practice identifying weaknesses in arguments using these concepts and responding to them respectfully.

Overall, the goal of these sessions is to improve participants' ability to respond to arguments in a structured, logical, and respectful way. They learn to identify weaknesses in arguments and respond to them using various models and concepts. They also learn about the importance of demeanor in effectively communicating their responses.

The ninth session is on the concept of *justice* and its application in everyday life. Participants explore what justice and fairness mean, and how they can apply these concepts in their personal lives. The day includes brainstorming sessions on the theories of justice, debates on various topics, and identifying self-advocacy skills. Participants learn about the importance of effective storytelling in self-advocacy and how to use personal narratives to drive action.

The tenth session focuses on self-advocacy skills building. Participants learn what self-advocacy is and how they can identify and work on their own self-advocacy skills. The session includes activities such as discussing the importance of having confidence, identifying audience prejudices, and sharing success stories of self-advocacy. Participants learn about the SARA model ("Story, Audience, Resources, and Action"), to help them advocate for themselves and others. The goal is for participants to learn the key aspects of advocating for themselves, recognize their own value, and connect self-advocacy skills to key speech and debate concepts.

The eleventh session is all about final project preparation. It focuses on helping participants finalize their speeches, arguments, or other projects. Participants practice reading their speeches or arguments and receive feedback on structure, logic, counter arguments, emotion, and delivery. Coaches provide constructive tips on how to be confident during public speaking, without overemphasizing norms of body language or speech that are exclusionary. Participants work with their coach to finalize a best version of their ideas and prepare them for upcoming group activities such as "Round Robin" share out.

The twelfth and final session emphasizes program closeout and the importance of ending the mentoring relationship properly. The mentor and participant are encouraged to reflect on what they have learned together and discuss opportunities for continued mentoring. The goal is to ensure that both parties have a clear understanding that the program is over, have open conversations about future goals, and discuss the possibility of informal continued mentoring.

Mentor Checklist Summary

In this section, we provide data from the "Mentor Checklist" evaluation tool to help contextualize—and ultimately triangulate—mentor experiences described in the case studies below. To monitor mentors' experiences with the program, an online "Mentor Checklist" was administered monthly and reviewed by faculty advisors. During Year Two of the program, 25 responses were collected to the checklist, representing 3-4 responses for each of the six mentors. The Checklist asked mentors to provide information about whether they have been in touch with their mentee over the past month, and how they were able to get in contact with their mentee. Across all six mentors, there was a 60% monthly success rate in having some contact with the mentee, meaning that most mentors were able to make some contact each month.

Email and text message were the most common methods of initial contact, through which mentors were able to schedule their virtual meetings. In some cases, mentors reported that it was beneficial to be flexible with youth by allowing the mentorship to occur over text or other means rather than only relying on virtual meetings. A common strategy to overcome difficulty

connecting with a mentee was to contact the youth's family member on file or work with youth care coordinators at the partner agency to overcome technology access or scheduling barriers.

Among mentors who struggled to make monthly contact with their participant, the primary barriers described involved youth not understanding what the program entailed or preferring to work only with their case manager rather than having an added meeting related to their diversion. Of the twenty-five checklists submitted, five (20%) indicated that during the past month no contact was made with the mentee whatsoever. On a monthly basis, the number of virtual meetings with mentees for those who *were* able to make contact ranged from 1-2 meetings per month on the low end to 4-8 meetings on the high end. Where meetings occurred, the average meeting length was 103 minutes (≈ 1.75 hours). However, some meetings lasted as little as five minutes, while others exceeded two hours.

Taking all of this into account, it was clear that the experiences of mentors varied a great deal. For this reason, it is important to explore mentor experiences more phenomenologically and experientially to generate ideas for program improvement going forward. The below case studies provide lived experience with the mentor role to help inform continuous program improvement.

Mentor Narratives

Case Study #1: Significant Youth Engagement

Connecting with my mentee was an exercise in adaptability, but also led to a fruitful relationship. When the mentees were initially matched, I texted my assigned mentee to introduce myself and the program and to arrange a phone or video call. After a few follow-up messages, my mentee did not respond so I called his case manager. During the case manager's next meeting with my mentee, we had a call. During that initial phone call, I re-introduced myself and asked what my mentee's preferred method of communication was. In this initial introduction, I learned that my mentee's phone did not have cell service, so he had not received any of my text messages. We decided that moving forward, we would communicate through his mother's phone.

Unlike our first phone call with his case manager, my mentee was drastically more talkative during our first one-on-one call the following week. My intention for this second phone call was to briefly learn more about my mentee's interests and goals. To my disbelief, this initial conversation was about forty-five minutes long. Just the week prior, I was concerned that it was going to be challenging for my mentee to feel comfortable chatting, but this concern was completely absolved during the second call. I learned that my mentee loves watching sports, reading, spending time with his dog, and how he sees himself working in some business discipline in the future. This conversation was valuable not only for growing familiar with the conversational style of my mentee but also for helping me cater our future conversations to his interests to make this mentorship experience as meaningful and enjoyable as possible.

Given my mentee's context as a high schooler, having formal, structured conversations seemed not to be the best approach to our calls. The expectation of a formal conversation each week turned out not to be feasible given how tired my mentee was when we talked, which was almost always after school during the middle of the work week. On days when my mentee was particularly tired, he was typically distracted when we discuss speech and debate topics. On these days, I instead shifted our conversation to only recent personal interests and progress in school.

In addition to adapting the degree of structure in our conversations week-to-week, I also changed the duration of our phone calls. For the first seven weeks of the program, we would call for an hour. After about eight weeks, I changed this call duration to thirty minutes. During these thirty minutes, we would catch up and then have a formal discussion. At the thirty-minute mark,

I would let my mentee decide how much longer to talk. I found that this flexible and shorter approach helped my mentee retain information and stay engaged during our sessions. This intentional flexibility of letting my mentee decide how much further than the thirty-minute mark to talk proved useful in keeping engagement throughout the entirety of the program because he had authority in directing our calls based on his energy level and personal circumstances.

Because of this flexibility, I had to forgo my initial intention to stay on top of the curriculum's weekly learning objectives. Unlike the beginning of the program where I would start our conversations by describing each of the topics we would cover during our session, I adapted my approach by going into our meetings with three or four curriculum topic options prepared. I would then decide which topic to cover after gauging my mentee's energy level.

I discovered that his energy level was highly correlated with how school was going, so avoiding an objective-focused call in instances where his energy level was low seemed to make sessions more worthwhile, because we could still cover the curriculum while adapting to his weekly circumstances. In addition to choosing learning objectives to cover based on the nature of our conversations week-to-week, I found it most effective to spend ten minutes at the beginning of each session reviewing the previous week's topics—not only to remind my mentee but also to assess how much he recalled so, if needed, we could spend time reviewing previous topics.

An additional key to our success was being open to pursuing every suggestion my mentee provided. One week, my mentee stated that he wanted to talk about the new *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* movie trailer. We dedicated the entire following week to practicing the LARA method in the context of *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*. By dedicating a session to a topic he was currently interested in, my mentee seemed much more engaged, and, by the end of the session, he could recall each of the steps of the LARA method unlike our review from the prior week.

Despite being adaptable in our conversation's topics and duration, I discovered that it is critical to *not* be flexible in our weekly meeting time. When we would have to adjust our meeting time due to a conflict on my end or his end, we would have difficulty getting back into our regular schedule. For example, there was one instance where following the postponement of our regular call, I couldn't get back in touch with my mentee for two weeks. Consequently, each Tuesday morning I would text my mentee's mother to confirm our regular meeting time later that day. Then, each week, I would call at the same time. I found that speaking for less than five minutes a week led to better outcomes than skipping entire weeks.

In sum, my experience with my mentee was enjoyable, despite hiccups related to establishing a reliable form of communication and ranging levels of engagement from my mentee. The most successful components of our relationship were related to flexibility in meeting outcomes and duration, maintaining informal conversations, tailoring learning objectives to new interests, and having a regimented call time.

Since the end of the program, I have made it clear to my mentee that I will always be willing to be a resource for him. In addition to learning about the Pittsburgh Steelers, the *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*, and UFC fighting, our relationship has taught me valuable skills in versatility. Before participating in the program, I would certainly consider myself a compassionate but rigid mentor. This experience has refined my perception of how mentorship ought to operate and the value of malleability in these types of relationships.

Case Study #2: Mixed Youth Engagement

The start of the program went very well with my mentees. I had two sibling mentees, and when I initially reached out, they both responded with excitement about starting the program. My first

outreach was introductory and encouraged my mentees to provide information about their likes and extracurriculars. I was hoping that a more low stakes communication style would encourage them to connect, as well as give me an idea of their personalities and how engagement might go. My first mentee was quick to respond to my first outreach email, replying within a few days with his favorite sports and hobbies.

My second mentee took a bit longer to respond to initial outreach. She was nonetheless very eager to hear more about the program and shared her hobbies and even some classes she was enjoying. With my second mentee I was able to communicate and set dates to meet, but there were multiple instances where we set a time to meet and she would not show. Later that same day or in the following days she would reach out again and apologize and provide a reason for her absence. This was very frustrating because she would be in communication with me, but when it came to meeting, she would be very distant.

I reached out to their social worker and attempted to see what could be done. I wanted to be sure that both my mentees had access to a computer or phone with which they could get in contact with me. I also wanted to check with the social worker to see if she could help me receive more engagement from my mentees. Unfortunately, at a certain point my mentees were not very active, and I struggled completing the program despite promising early levels of engagement.

Case Study #3: Low Youth Engagement

Unfortunately, my experience connecting with multiple mentees was very difficult. When I was trying to connect with my first mentee, in the beginning she was very responsive to emails, and even provided me her phone number so we could communicate more effectively. While our conversations did not occur very rapidly, and required many follow ups from my end, we eventually scheduled a day and time to officially meet. Unfortunately, that meeting never occurred, as my mentee never confirmed or joined the Zoom meeting. After that experience, our conversations were scarce, with me mostly following up to reschedule a new time, and her agreeing multiple times but eventually nothing resulting from the conversation. As time went on, she ultimately became unresponsive.

After a period of lack of communication, I learned that my mentee had exited the diversion program and I was assigned a new participant. My experience with the second mentee started off much differently. I met my mentee through her case worker. Her case worker was very active and open to communication with me, providing ample information about my mentee and being very proactive with scheduling meetings. While our first meeting had to be rescheduled due to internet issues, we were ultimately able to meet on Zoom.

The first meeting went very well, and both the mentee and her case worker were present on the call. I got to explain the program to my mentee and learn a little more about her, while she got to learn more about me. I explained how I wanted to run our meetings, what I hoped she would learn, and more. I could tell she was very quiet, but saw that I was able to get her to open a bit by the end when we played a game. She seemed very excited but nervous to be a part of the program. By the end of the meeting, we had agreed that since she was given my email, she would reach out and we would schedule weekly meetings. Unfortunately, she never reached out to me, and I had to get back in touch with her case worker who provided me with her email. Communications by email slowly tapered off, and the connection was lost.

In conclusion, my experience as a mentor has been challenging due to communication difficulties with both of my mentees. Despite my initial efforts to connect and establish a rapport

with my first mentee, the lack of responsiveness and missed opportunities for virtual meetings proved to be discouraging. On the other hand, my second mentee showed promise during our first meeting, with her case worker being actively involved in facilitating communication. However, even after an encouraging initial meeting, I encountered similar communication hurdles when my second mentee failed to reach out as agreed upon. It is disheartening to witness the potential for meaningful mentorship fade away due to these communication challenges. As a mentor, I remain dedicated to making a positive impact on the lives of my mentees, and I will continue to persevere in finding ways to connect and provide support to them, with the hope that we can overcome these obstacles and establish future mentoring relationships.

Discussion

A persistent challenge for mentors was maintaining engagement throughout the entirety of the program. While more than half of the mentees (7) involved in the program stayed engaged for the expected duration of the program, an additional three participants had low to non-existent engagement. The participants who became disengaged from the program are all described in the case studies above. One theme from the second and third case studies that needs to be explored involves *why* initial contact was often achievable and even resulted in seemingly positive interactions, but then did not lead to continued mentorship. In other words, what might have caused the breakdown in communication after successful initial meetings? For instance, we may want to explore whether the way the program is being described is alienating or confusing to certain participants, or represents an unwanted additional burden for youth whose lives are already busy and complicated. In this way, we may want to explore different *paths* that participants can take based on their interests and needs: one focused more on informal mentorship, the other focused more on supplemental education.

In instances of low youth engagement, even when initial meetings were positive or there were promises of follow-up by the mentees, communication nevertheless deaccelerated or ceased. Mentors recognized that the youth involved in the program have different personal circumstances that may make a mentorship relationship atypical. Therefore, mentors ought to consider alternate forms of communication more strongly, such as providing reading material for asynchronous learning followed by written-only communication or voice memos. As evidenced in all three mentorship case studies described above, despite varying levels of engagement, a consistent theme involved the need to explore more unconventional mentorship and communication styles to increase learning outcomes among program participants. In this way, it is possible that the current version of the curriculum is too rigid and contains too many learning objectives, and may need to be updated to include fewer learning objectives and further accentuate mentorship and informal relationship building over supplemental learning outcomes. This need for more flexibility and informality was represented even in successful youth experiences, indicating that it may be an issue across the board.

Across the different levels of engagement observed by mentors, all relationships benefitted from engagement with the mentee's case workers during periods of communication issues. For all three mentor experiences, the case workers' existing relationships with the mentees were particularly useful in setting up the first meeting. While it may be useful to involve the case workers more deeply in the program to ensure that engagement is maintained with the mentees, we also recognize that these community-embedded care coordinators have high caseloads, and participation in the *Pro Se* program is only a small component of the youth's overall re-entry and diversion case management. As such, one significant program consideration

involves how we can more seamlessly integrate the care coordinators as a point of contact for mentees without disrupting or overburdening them.

One possible way to engage case workers to ensure mentorship success without overburdening them may be to set up a monthly feedback framework for mentors and case workers in the format of a brief call or update email. Providing opportunities for collaboration between caseworkers and mentees may be useful in providing mentees with initial context about their mentors, or reinvigorating program participation as necessary. In general, our community partner should be engaged before the next program year to discuss how case workers can play a bigger role in increasing contact between mentors and mentees, especially in instances of low youth engagement.

In future iterations of the program, we also recommend utilizing more structured opportunities for engagement among mentors themselves to help troubleshoot specific concerns and share experiences. Learning about other mentors' experiences may facilitate the brainstorming of new communication or engagement techniques. Additionally, if communication methods are working for mentor-mentee pairs, it could be useful for pairs to co-facilitate group events interactively, such as hosting a mock debate on a small, informal scale. While mentors were explicitly encouraged to collaborate, mentors did not always take advantage of the expertise within the group. In future years, this collaboration among mentors can be more strongly encouraged through monthly meetings among all mentors to share progress updates and share ideas for engagement-building.

Program Sustainability

In addition to increasing the uptake of mentoring services among participants, another major consideration is program sustainability. Program sustainability refers to the ability of a program to continue providing benefits to its intended beneficiaries even after its initial implementation phase. In the present case, sustainability can be achieved by incorporating certain elements into the program that promote long-term success for current and future program participants. This entails *both* long-term benefits to youth who have already participated in the program, and factors related to the program's continued success in the community where it is embedded.

One such element is the focus on participant-centered learning, where coaches take the time to understand the participant's goals, interests, and learning styles. By doing this, coaches can tailor their coaching to the participant's specific needs, which increases engagement and fosters a sense of ownership and investment in the program. Ideally, this will also increase positive *word of mouth* about the program, which could increase its impact and sustainability. Personalization also helps participants to see the relevance of the skills they are learning and how they can be applied to their personal and professional lives beyond the program. One take away from the case studies above is that, while personalization *is* written into the curriculum, it likely needs to be even more front-and-center in the curriculum itself and in the implementation guide.

One theme throughout the narratives above is that, even in instances of low youth engagement, allowing space for youth to describe their interests and hobbies was almost always a successful means to increasing their engagement. As such, the current program might contain too abrupt a transition from discussing youth interests to learning objectives. The curriculum likely should be updated to allow even more youth self-determination in setting goals and defining the terms of their mentoring sessions. Again, we want to continue to acknowledge that some youth will want the supplemental educational opportunities, and may benefit greatly from getting a collegiate certificate of completion in "Speech and Debate." However, it is clear that

this wasn't the most appealing element of the program for other youth, who are already balancing high school requirements and an additional load of responsibilities related to their diversion and other personal issues at home. We conclude that for the program to be sustainable—both for youth participants and at a more programmatic level—updates must be made to allow for *more* personalization and flexibility than is currently present.

Another element of sustainability is the incorporation of group meetings where all coaches and mentees come together to collaborate. This fosters a sense of community and encourages participants to continue their engagement with the program even after its completion. Participants can continue to build relationships with coaches and other mentees, which can lead to continued learning opportunities and further skills development. This also relates to the topic discussed above of creating more interaction between mentors, mentees, and the care coordinators at our community partner. These care coordinators proved to be integral to increasing engagement with youth. As such, programmatic sustainability may depend upon building more of a community of practice both between mentors at Cornell *and* between mentees and frontline service providers at our community partner.

To further promote sustainability, the curriculum could include follow-up sessions or resources for participants to continue developing their skills and to reinforce what they have learned during the program. This can include online resources, ongoing coaching or mentorship opportunities, or opportunities for participants to attend outside speech and debate competitions or other related events. We also feel like some of the conversations and learning objectives in the curriculum related to "self-advocacy" and justice/fairness occur too late in the curriculum. These seemed to be of interest to participants—potentially of *more* interest than other speech and debate topics. Therefore, we may want to consider updating the curriculum to directly connect these topics to participant interests and hobbies as a pathway into discussing speech and debate. In summary, we feel that the program has several elements that promote sustainability, including participant-centered learning, group collaboration, and a focus on relevant and essential skills. However, for the program to be sustainable at micro- and macro- levels, there is a need to continue improving on these elements to ensure that they result in the desired outcomes.

Conclusion

The *Pro Se* program exhibits the importance of mentorship programs centered on youth empowerment where student mentors influence the design of the program directly. Our goal in writing this paper was, on the one hand, to provide a few sources of evaluation data that will allow us to triangulate descriptive qualitative and quantitative findings to inform program improvement and sustainability. On the other hand, we hope that by sharing our experiences with this program, we can provide some valuable insight into the challenges and strategies for delivering mentoring services and supplemental educational opportunities to groups of youth that may benefit from such services but can be hard to reach. In other words, we hope that other similar programs will find some commonalities in our insights, and that this will help contribute to the mentoring literature for justice-impacted youth with disabilities. While mentoring services and supplemental education offerings are a known best practice for this population, the current literature is relatively sparse. We hope that sharing the experiences of *Pro Se* mentors can help inspire and inform other student-led initiatives in the region and elsewhere around to country to enact social change.

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Appendix

Pro Se Speech & Debate Mentor/Coach Checklist

Your Name: ______________

Since the last checklist, in what ways have you reached out to your mentee? (check all that apply)

- ◯ Text Message
- ◯ WhatsApp
- ◯ Other private messaging App (e.g., GroupMe). App name: ____________
- ◯ Email to youth
- ◯ Email to parent/family
- ◯ Call to youth
- ◯ Call to parent/family
- ◯ Social media (e.g., Facebook Messenger). App name: _____________
- ◯ Other, please describe: _______________

Since the last checklist, how many times have you reached out to your mentee? _____________

I was able to get in touch with my mentee.

- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No

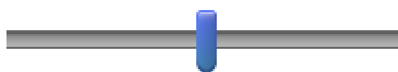
What, if any, challenges have you experienced in reaching out to your mentee? What is your plan moving forward in attempting to communicate with your mentee? _______________

Since the last checklist, how many times did you meet with your mentee? _______________

How long did the session(s) last (in minutes)? If multiple sessions write the **total** time that you met with your mentee. _______________

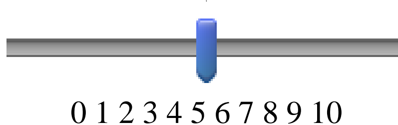
Indicate your level of agreement with the following statements:

I feel like I have been able to meaningfully connect with my mentee.

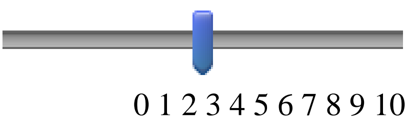


0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

I maintained a professional relationship with my mentee.



My mentee seems to enjoy our time together.



Did your mentee respond to your initial or most recent outreach?

- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No

Did you identify yourself and the program in your most recent outreach/messages to your mentee?

- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No

Would you be willing to share the text of your most recent outreach/messages to your mentee? _______________

Is there anything you would like to elaborate on? _______________