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The Experiences of Steppingstone Scholars: Implications for Developing a Mentoring Program

Gracie Phillips

Community Partner: Steppingstone Academy Hartford

Faculty Advisors: Professor Dina Anselmi and Professor Laura Holt

Introduction

What are the purposes of educational preparatory programs?

- Provide access to supportive educational environments for economically and/or socially disadvantaged students.
- Provide opportunities that ensure college graduation, such as admittance to independent secondary school.

Why are preparatory programs relevant for Hartford?

- Only slightly more than half of Hartford district students graduate from high school (59.8% graduated from high school in 2011 according to CT SDE).
- Very few individuals in the Hartford school district complete higher education programs; only 15% of Hartford high school graduates in 2004 completed a program at a two- or four-year college by 2010.

What are the challenges students from preparatory programs face in independent schools?

Racial minorities can often experience:

- Tokenism, speculations of qualifications (Archibold, 1999).
- Socioeconomic disparities, emphasis on race, social isolation, and homesickness (Zweigenhaft and Domhoff, 2003).

Will a mentoring program help reduce these challenges?

There has been very little research on mentoring in preparatory programs; research on general mentoring programs suggest positive outcomes such as:

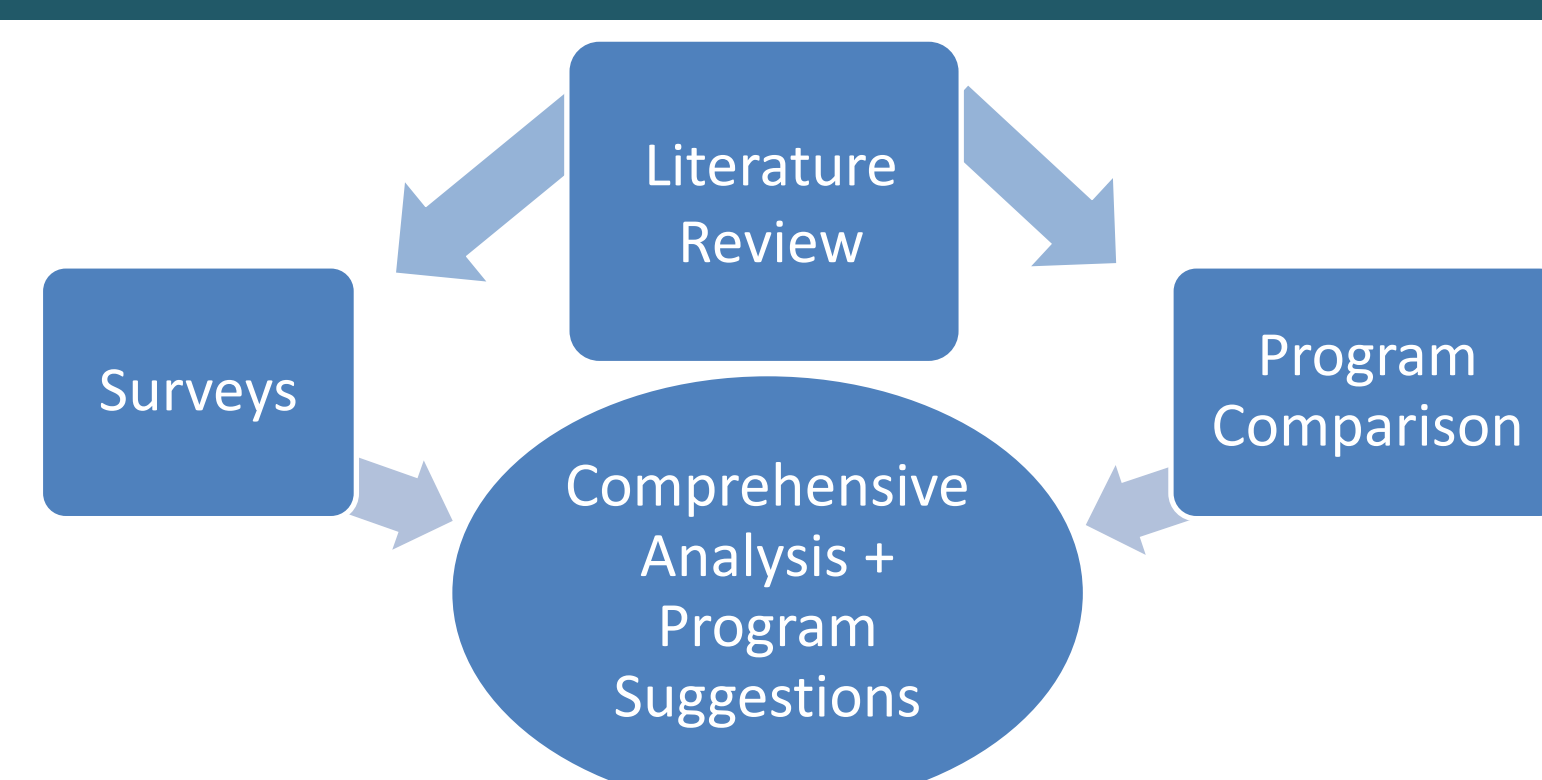
- Higher attendance
- Higher probability of reaching higher levels of education
- Better attitudes towards school
- Better relational and communication skills
- Access to social networks
- Development of social bonds that transcend the high school experience

The Steppingstone Academy Hartford (SAH) is a preparatory program at the middle school level that aims to prepare students for the academic and social hurdles of independent secondary school. All of the above factors are pertinent to helping SAH Scholars address the challenges they might face in independent school.

Research Questions

1. In what areas has SAH prepared its students well and in what areas has it prepared them less well for independent secondary school?
2. What are the challenges that SAH Scholars face in the independent school environment from the perspective of independent school staff and from the scholars themselves?
3. What are the best strategies for coping with these challenges?
4. What are the key characteristics of a mentoring program that would help SAH Scholars deal with these challenges?

Method



Method

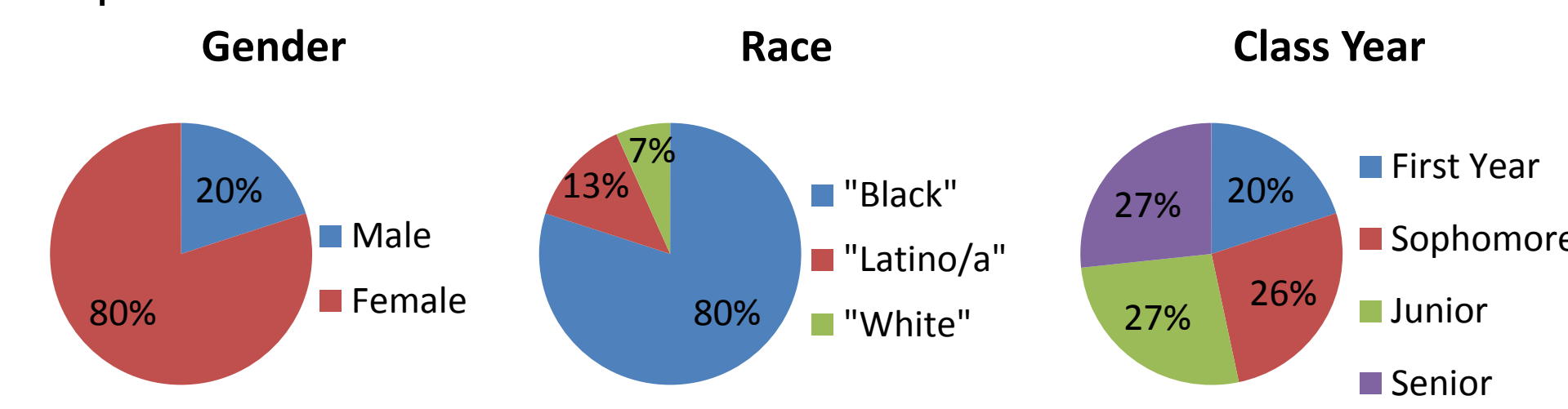
Participants

Deans and Directors

8 Deans and Directors from various independent schools in the Northeast.

Students

15 SAH Scholars who are currently enrolled in various independent schools in the Northeast.



Measures and Procedures

Deans' and Directors' Surveys

The Deans and Directors were asked to identify three prominent challenges that SAH Scholars, or students from similar preparatory programs, face in independent school.

Students' Surveys

15 SAH independent school students were contacted via phone interview. The 23-question survey explored, through quantitative and qualitative questions, the experiences and challenges that these students face in independent school, the benefits from attending SAH, as well as suggestions they may have for future programming.

Exploration of Additional Mentoring Programs

5 additional preparatory programs, deemed "successful" by SAH administration, were contacted, and 3 were identified as having mentoring components. Administrators from these programs reported details about their mentoring programs and "success" rates of their programs.

Results

Phase 1: Themes from Deans' and Directors' Responses

Personal	Academic	Social
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • seeking help • trusting adults • adolescent challenges • family expectations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • adjusting to new academic standing • adjusting to new "cultural norms" (teacher-student relationship, etc.) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • letting guard down • social etiquette • balancing freedom with demand • code shifting • adjusting to new "cultural norms"

Phase 2: Student Responses

Figure 1. Scale Responses: % of Student Responses About Level of Preparation for Independent School

	Well to Very Well Prepared	Neutral	Not at all to Somewhat Prepared
Academic Rigor	93.3	6.7	0.0
Transition from home to school	26.7	20.0	33.3
To connect with peers	53.3	26.7	20.0
To communicate well with teachers	73.3	26.7	0.0
To manage time well	86.6	6.7	6.7
To take on leadership roles	53.4	46.7	0.0
To be involved	73.4	26.7	0.0
To feel comfortable in own skin	66.7	20.0	13.3

Note: 3 day students were excluded from the analysis of "transition from home to school".

Results

Figure 2. Open-ended Responses: "What part of your independent school experience did SAH prepare you most for?"

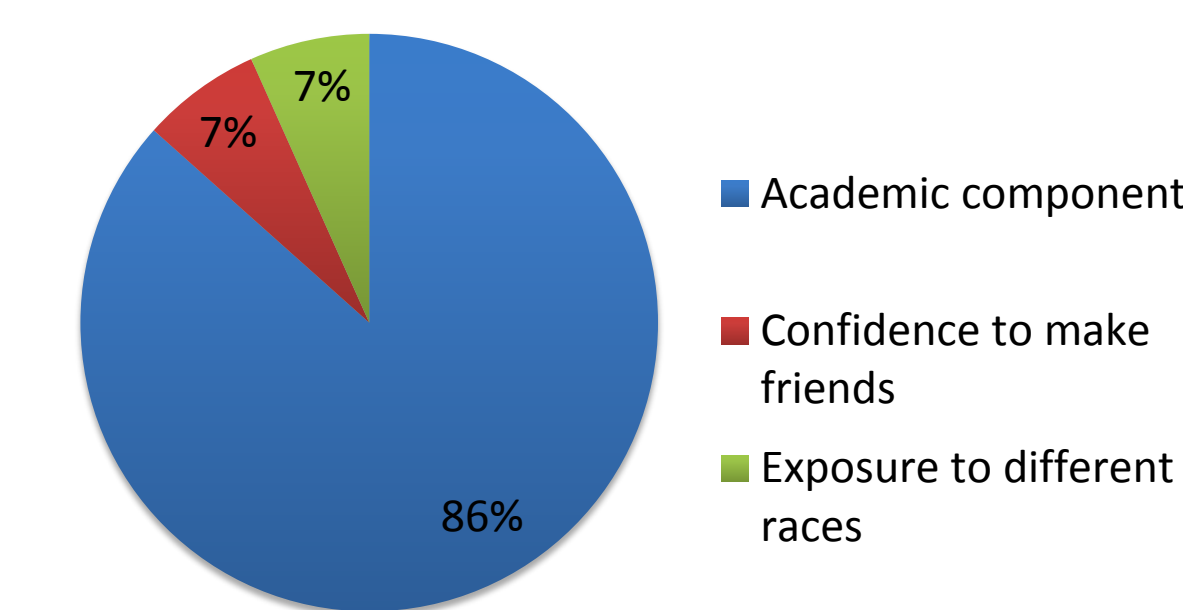


Figure 3. Open-ended Responses: "How do you think SAH could have prepared you better?"

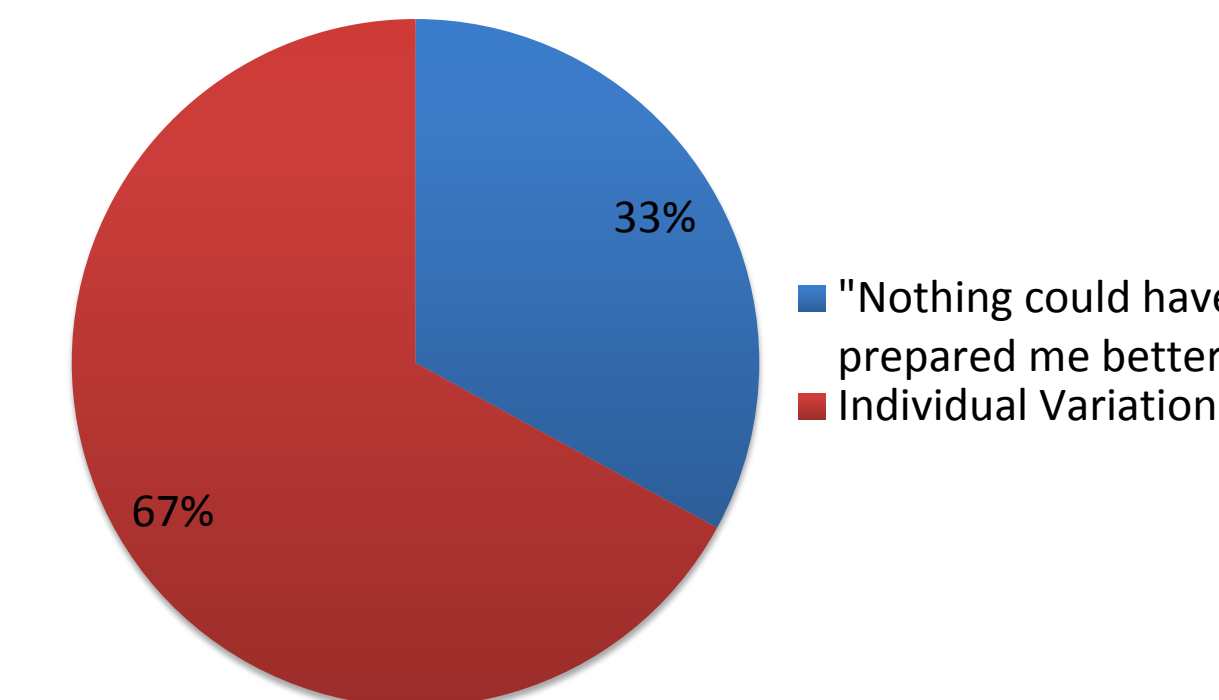


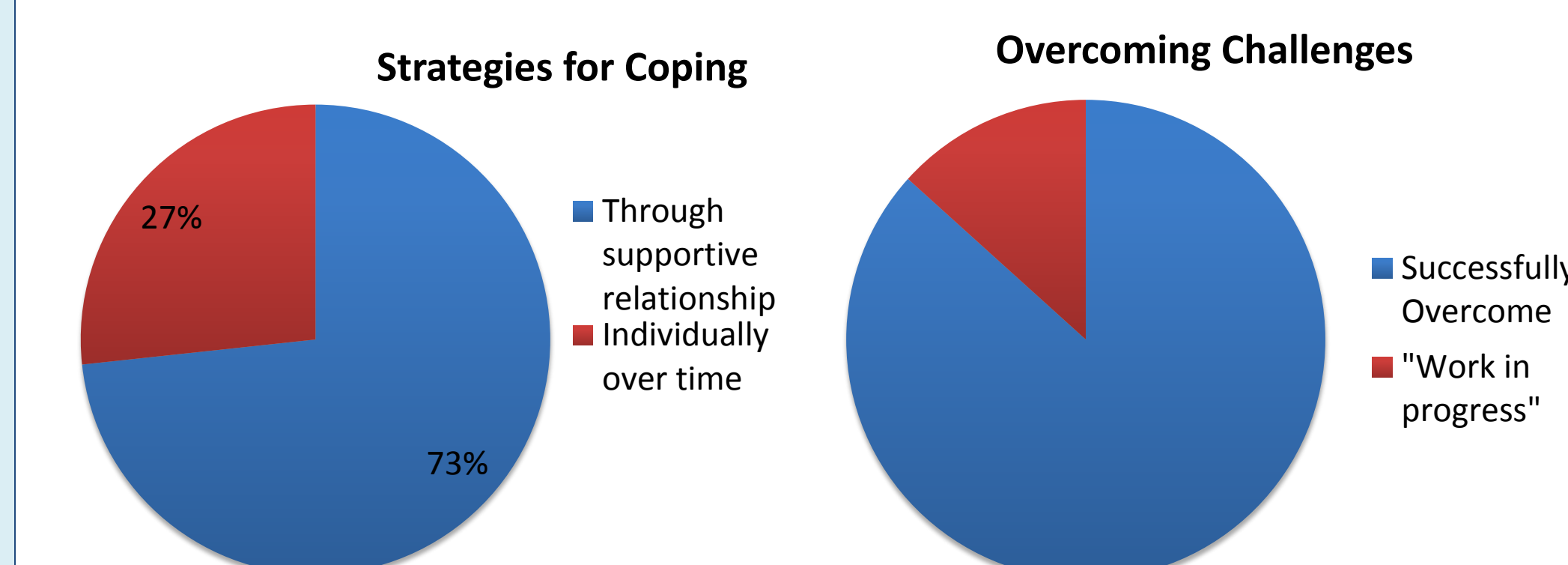
Figure 4. Open-ended Responses: "What were/are the three greatest challenges you face(d) in independent school?"

Themes	# of Times Appeared	Examples
Academic	8	College process, being involved in school, etc.
Social	6	Making friends, knowing how to approach people, etc.
General acclimation	6	Time management, staying focused in boarding environment, etc.
Interpersonal	3	"realizing I will not be number one," "realizing I am imperfect," etc.
Extracurricular	1	Adapting to sports

Figure 5. Scale Responses: % of Student Responses for Reasons for Identified Challenges

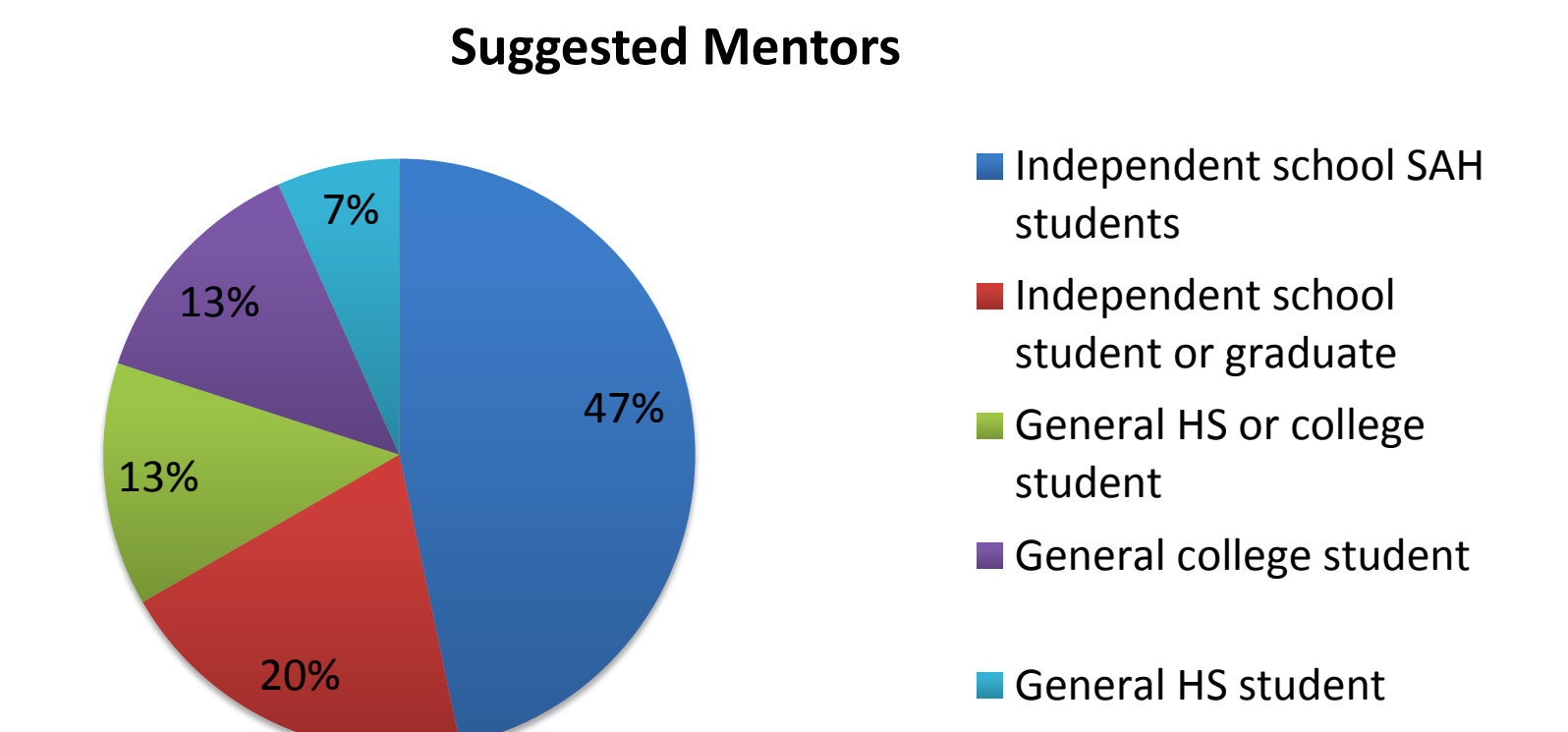
	Large influence to Very Large Influence	Neutral Influence	Little to No Influence
Race	46.7	6.7	46.7
SES	33.4	46.7	20.0
Ed Background	53.4	26.7	20.0
Personality	60.0	20.0	20.0

Figure 5. Open-ended Responses: Coping and Overcoming these Challenges



Results

Figure 6. Open-ended Responses: "Who would make the best mentor?"



Step 3: Components of Mentoring Programs at Other Preparatory Programs

	Who	What	When	How
Prep for Prep	P4P private school students and alumni	Ensure academic and social success in ind. school	Prep component AND ind. school	Similar background + spontaneous
NJ SEEDS	Hired guidance counselors	Ensure academic and social success in ind. school	4 years of ind. school	Confront hurdles when arise. Monthly "check-in" visits
Daniel Murphy	Adult volunteers	Provide additional Academic and emotional support to ensure success in ind. school + learn life skills	4 years of ind. school	Communicate regularly (with mentees and program staff), meet every 2-3 months, attend fun scheduled events

Conclusions and Future Work

Student Responses

- Students reported feeling the most prepared for the academic rigor and managing their time well in independent school and the least prepared for the transition from home to school.
- A large portion of students felt that there was nothing SAH could have done to prepare them better.
- Most SAH Scholars reported being able to cope with challenges through a supportive relationship with another individual (e.g., roommate, teacher, older student, family member).
- Students suggest the best mentors would be SAH students enrolled or graduated from independent schools. The second most frequent suggestion was students who have experienced ind. school, as they experienced challenges themselves and can inform future students of "what to expect."
- Structures of mentoring programs within "successful" preparatory programs vary. The Prep 4 Prep model may be the best match based on student responses.

Suggestions for Components of a Mentoring Program

- Start summer before 7th grade or summer before 8th grade
- One mentor to every three SAH students
- Careful matching (SAH independent school student to SAH middle school student according to school and region interest)
- Intensive summer program
- Updates/check-ins through the year, minimum once a month
- Attend special events/workshops
- Complementary workshops (focused on transition from home to school) and spontaneous guidance

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