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How do co-curricular mentorship programs meet the social-emotional needs of immigrant and  
refugee youth? A Case Study from Harrisonburg, Virginia

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An Honors College Project Presented to  
the Faculty of the Undergraduate  
College of Arts and Letters  
James Madison University

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by Katherine Margaret Clayton

April 2022

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Accepted by the faculty of the Department of Justice Studies, James Madison University, in  
partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Honors College.

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PUBLIC PRESENTATION

This work is accepted for presentation, in part or in full, at the Honors Symposium on April  
22nd, 2022.

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### **Acknowledgements**

This project would not be possible without the endless support of my committee, family, and friends. Thank you to my Committee Chair, Dr. Daniel Beers, for your willingness to assist me throughout this project. Your expertise and insight over the past three semesters have been invaluable to my professional and personal development. To my reader, Dr. Suzanne Fiederlein, thank you for reviewing my capstone and providing feedback. Neither this project nor the Peer Leaders Program would be the same without your insight. Thank you to the Peer Leaders Program for allowing me to look inside your beautiful community. To the stakeholders and former students, thank you for taking the time to provide your perspectives. Each story was critical to the formation of this project. To the Center for International Stabilization and Recovery, Harrisonburg High School, and Church World Service: thank you for the important work you are doing. To the JMU Honors College, thank you for entrusting me with the Madison Award four years ago, without which this thesis would not be possible. To Rafa, Ruth, my sisters, and my friends, thank you for celebrating with me during the highs and bolstering me through the lows. Finally, I would like to thank my parents for all of their love and support before my college journey, during, and (soon) after. Because of you, everything is possible. I love you to the moon and back.

### **Abstract**

Immigrant and refugee youth are at greater risk of encountering the following stressors: trauma, acculturation, resettlement, and isolation. If neglected, these stressors can prove detrimental to one's social-emotional wellbeing. Although a newcomer's successful adaptation is often measured in terms of their academic success, social-emotional wellbeing and academic achievement are intertwined. Thus, a focus on social-emotional wellness for newcomer students benefits both the students and the school systems. Co-curricular mentorship programs can be utilized by schools to meet the social-emotional needs of their newcomer students. The Peer Leaders Program (PLP) of Harrisonburg, Virginia offers one such approach. Based on trauma-informed peer support research, the Peer Leaders Program uses multi-level mentoring and flexible programming to allow newcomer students to process identity with people who share similar cultures and backgrounds. Through this program, findings suggest that refugee youth process trauma, build confidence, strengthen leadership skills, and become civically engaged with their community.

## **Introduction**

The school system is where refugee and immigrant youth spend the majority of their time. It is where they learn the American culture, interact with students their age, and advance in English fluency. For some of these youth, the American school system is their first formalized educational encounter.

As refugee and immigrant youth integrate into American life, they become subject to the measures of American success. Within educational institutions, success is largely measured in terms of academic outcomes. Therefore, successful adaptation for refugee and immigrant youth is similarly measured by academic achievement. Not without consequences, academic success has become synonymous with successful adaptation for newcomer youth.

Although the emphasis is placed on the academic achievement of immigrant and refugee youth as a sign of integration, the social-emotional needs of these youth must be met before they can succeed academically. Among all children, not just newcomers, research finds that social-emotional wellbeing and academic achievement are inseparably intertwined. Studies have been conducted to illustrate the impact of social-emotional development on academic achievement and success within the school system. As early as 1997, a study emerged estimating the independent influence of education, psychology, and social-emotional wellbeing on academic learning. Amongst all of these factors, the social and emotional variables were determined to be the most influential on academic performance (Berger et al., 2010; Wang, Haertel, & Walberg, 1997). According to the U.S. Department of Education, formal and informal support for social-emotional learning must be accessible to newcomer youth as a means to meet their social-emotional wellness needs (U.S. Department of Education, 2016).

In the following sections, I will first define the terms refugee, immigrant, newcomer youth, and social-emotional health. I will then discuss what the literature finds to be the social-emotional needs of immigrant and refugee youth. I will go on to explain how these social-emotional stressors are exacerbated when newcomer youth are made to operate in a new educational system. Next, I will discuss how these combined elements hinder the educational success of newcomer youth. Additionally, I will explain why it is important to meet their social-emotional needs and how schools can work to meet those needs, particularly through co-curricular mentorship programs. Finally, I will explore how one case study in Harrisonburg, Virginia has worked to meet the social-emotional needs of newcomer students.

## **Definitions**

### Refugee, Immigrant, and Newcomer

The term “refugee” has origins in the Latin *fugere*, meaning “to flee”. While the concept of a refugee has evolved over the years, the current definition of “refugee” within international law has remained the same for over seventy years. According to the United Nations’ Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, a refugee is “a person, who owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country” (UN High Commissioner for Refugees, 1951). Under United States law, a refugee is someone who is located outside of the United States; is of special humanitarian concern to the United States; and demonstrates that they were persecuted or fear persecution due to race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group (U.S. Citizenship and Immigration



Services, 2022). The three solutions for refugees as proposed by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees are voluntary repatriation to the country of origin, resettlement to a third country, or integration into the host country (UN High Commissioner for Refugees, 2018)

According to the U.S. Department of Homeland Security and the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA), the term “immigrant” is defined as “any alien in the United States, except one legally admitted under specific nonimmigrant categories,” such as temporary visitors or students (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 2018). I use the term “newcomer youth” to refer to both the categories of refugee youth and immigrant youth. For the purpose of this thesis, I will define the term “newcomers” as defined by the U.S. Department of Education: “any foreign-born students and their families who have recently arrived in the United States” (U.S. Department of Education, 2016).

### Social-Emotional Wellness

Social-emotional wellness (interchangeable with socio-emotional wellness) is short-form for social and emotional wellness. Researcher Sasha Stavsky identified a framework for identifying social emotional development and wellness within youth. This framework includes five core components: intrinsic motivation (initiative, persistence, self-direction), critical thinking skills (problem solving, metacognitive skills, reasoning and judgment skills), relational skills (communication, cooperation, empathy), emotional self-regulation (impulse control, stress management, behavior), and self-concept (knowing one’s own strengths and limitations, belief in one’s ability to succeed, belief that competence grows with effort) (Stavsky, 2015; U.S. Department of Education, 2016).

## Literature Review

### Social-Emotional Needs of Immigrant and Refugee Youth

Adolescents, as a whole, are vulnerable to external stressors; young refugees and immigrants are particularly vulnerable (Durà-Vilà et al., 2013). There are a variety of stressors that impede refugee and immigrant youths' ability to succeed in their new environment. The Department of Education has identified four core stressors for newcomer youth: trauma, acculturation, resettlement, and isolation. A newcomer child can experience each of these stressors to varying degrees. While this population may not experience all four of these hardships, this outline provides a general overview of potential stressors that immigrant and refugee youth may face.

#### Trauma

Trauma is defined as the experience of an intense event that “threatens or causes harm to a child’s emotional and physical well-being” (Peterson, 2018). Refugee and immigrant youth can experience traumatic events at any stage of their migration journey (Isakson, Legerski, & Layne, 2015). During the pre-migration stage, many youth experience conflict and violence in their home country (Miller et al., 2019). Within their home country, these youth may experience civil war and unrest, genocide, prosecution, intense poverty, community and family violence, prosecution, gang or drug-related violence, or the disastrous effects of climate change (U.S. Department of Education, 2016; UNDESA, 2016; Miller et.al, 2019). Refugee youth may experience trauma during the migration phase, as they are forced to flee their homes (Isakson, Legerski, & Layne, 2015). En route to the host country, these youth are vulnerable to physical and sexual abuse, separation from loved ones, forced displacement, human trafficking, and perilous travel conditions (Isakson, Legerski, & Layne, 2015; UNDESA, 2016; Miller et al.,

2019). Refugee youth may be similarly exposed to trauma in refugee camps where episodes of violence are reported to be commonplace and access to adequate food, water, and medical care are limited (Crowley, 2009). In a study conducted in 2002, 80% of refugees detained in refugee camps witnessed acts of violence (Lustig et al., 2004). Trauma in the postmigration stage is intricately linked to the following stressors of acculturation, resettlement, and isolation, as refugee youth may experience trauma from poverty, an unfamiliar cultural system, separation from family, racism, and isolation (Isakson, Legerski, & Layne, 2015; Lustig et al., 2004).

The impact of traumatic events on youth can differ depending on the youth's age and stage of development. The following chart from The National Child Traumatic Stress Network breaks down the age-specific effects of traumatic events.

**Figure 1: Age-Specific Effects of Trauma Events (Peterson, 2018)**

<b>Preschool children</b>	<b>Elementary school children</b>	<b>Middle and high school-aged youth</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Bed wetting</li> <li>● Thumb sucking</li> <li>● Acting younger than their age</li> <li>● Trouble separating from their parents</li> <li>● Temper tantrums</li> <li>● Aggressive behavior like hitting, kicking, throwing things, or biting</li> <li>● Not playing with other kids their age</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Changes in their behavior such as aggression, anger, irritability, withdrawal from others, and sadness</li> <li>● Trouble at school</li> <li>● Trouble with peers</li> <li>● Fear of separation from parents</li> <li>● Fear of something bad happening</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● A sense of responsibility or guilt for the bad things that have happened</li> <li>● Feelings of shame or embarrassment</li> <li>● Feelings of helplessness</li> <li>● Changes in how they think about the world</li> <li>● Loss of faith</li> <li>● Problems in relationships</li> </ul>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Repetitive playing out of events related to trauma exposure</li> </ul>		<p>including peers, family, and teachers</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conduct problems</li> </ul>
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Refugee and immigrant youth that experience traumatic events are vulnerable to developing mental health conditions such as depression and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Depending on the study, the prevalence of PTSD amongst refugee children ranges from 19-54%. For reference, children in the general population have PTSD prevalence rates between 2-9% (Perreira & Ornelas, 2013). The American Psychiatric Association identified four key symptoms of PTSD including intrusion (intrusive thoughts, flashbacks, distressing dreams), avoidance (staying away from people, places, and situations that remind the victim of distressing memories), alterations in cognition and mood (distorted beliefs about oneself or others), and alterations in arousal and reactivity (angry outbursts, reckless behavior, problems concentrating/sleeping) (Torres, 2020).

### Acculturation

Children and their families experience acculturation while attempting to navigate between their culture of origin and the culture of their host country (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). Acculturation is a process of cultural and psychological change that occurs between more than one cultural group and the individual members therein (Berry, 2005). Acculturation includes various components including the familiarization of new norms, customs, cultures, and languages (Lincoln et al., 2016).

John Berry, a renowned psychologist, developed a model of acculturation. In this model, there are two dimensions of individual cultural adaptation: the first being “receiving-culture

acquisition” and the second being “heritage-culture retention”. The four acculturation categories are as follows: assimilation (adopting the receiving culture and discarding the heritage culture), separation (rejecting the receiving culture and retaining the heritage culture), integration (adopting the receiving culture and retaining the heritage culture), and marginalization (rejecting both the heritage and receiving cultures) (Berry & Padilla, 1980; Schwartz et al., 2010).

Adopting the receiving culture may lead to acculturative stress (Schwartz et.al, 2010). Acculturative stress can be triggered by language barriers, clothing differences, the extent of participation in the host culture, and instances of discrimination (Lincoln et al., 2016). Conflicts may arise between newcomer youth and their peers in relation to cultural misunderstandings. These misunderstandings can further lead to difficulties “fitting in” at school (U.S. Department of Education, 2016).

Additionally, conflicts may arise between children and parents over new and old cultural values. Refugee children are reported to acculturate at higher rates than their parents who often retain their heritage culture (Crowley, 2009). The different rates of acculturation between parents and children create “acculturation gaps” as children adapt to the culture and language of the receiving culture (Refugee, 2005). This parent-child conflict can lead to a schism in the family as cultures begin to misalign. Furthermore, this conflict can lead to a schism in the youth’s identity as newcomer children may struggle to form an “integrated identity”, an identity that includes elements from both their receiving culture and heritage culture, as they must navigate between what their parents want and what society wants (U.S. Department of Education, 2016; Schwartz et al., 2010).

Another stressor often occurs when immigrant and refugee youth are put in the position to translate for their family members who are not fluent in English. This process is known as

language brokering. While some studies report the positive effects of language brokering for newcomer children- including the development of metalinguistic skills (Bialystok, 1991), increased confidence and maturity (McQuillan & Tse, 1995), and better academic performance (Buriel et al., 1998)- sometimes, parents will find that the brokering process has caused them to lose parental influence in their child's life (Martinez, McClure, & Eddy, 2009). The brokering process can cause a role reversal between the parent and child who takes on the brokering responsibility (Umaña-Taylor, 2003). Parental disempowerment can lead to negative outcomes (Martinez, McClure, & Eddy, 2009).

Acculturative stress is reported to be strongly associated with poor mental health among immigrant and refugee groups. Specifically, acculturative stress has been linked to depression (Torres, 2010), anxiety (Revollo et al., 2011), and PTSD (Lee et al., 2009). PTSD reportedly accounts for 30.4% of newcomer youth and generalized anxiety accounts for 26.8%. These mental health conditions, combined with the previously discussed components of acculturative stress, make life more difficult for affected newcomer youth.

### Resettlement

As defined by The UN Refugee Agency, resettlement is the “transfer of refugees from an asylum country to another State that has agreed to admit them” (UNHCR, 2021). Resettlement is characterized by broad issues in the legal, healthcare, and financial sectors. The inability to meet basic needs is another characteristic of a resettlement hardship. Resettlement stressors often manifest as financial stressors, housing difficulty, unemployment, lack of access to necessary resources, and lack of transportation (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). Compounding these stressors is that refugee families must navigate these challenges using a new language in a new culture that operates in new systems (Refugee Trauma Task Force, 2005).

All too often, most newcomer families have to face these resettlement stressors on their own without the support of the friends and family from their home country (Refugee Trauma Task Force, 2005). While there are resettlement agencies located within the United States, these agencies faced significant cuts in the face of the Trump administration (2017-2021) and COVID-19 pandemic (2020-current as of 2022). According to the Associated Press, the Trump administration cut refugee admissions by 85% causing all nine U.S. resettlement agencies to significantly cut their aid (Watson, 2021).

### Isolation

Newcomers may experience the stressor of isolation as they operate within a new country. This stressor can be categorized by the following three themes: discrimination, loneliness, and alienation. Possible causes of isolation include experiences of harassment from peers, adults, and law enforcement; experiences of mistrust with the host population; feelings of not fitting in with others; and loss of social status (U.S. Department of Education, 2016).

According to various studies, racism, discrimination, and xenophobia are significant stressors for immigrants and refugees that are racial and ethnic minorities (Szaflarski & Bauldry, 2019). Racism is a multi-level occurrence that can be found at historical, institutional, structural, and individual levels. Racism at each level compounds to create the discrimination immigrant and refugee populations face today. For context, historical racism encompasses the historical domination and subordination of racial groups that continues to be seen in legal, policy and institutional frameworks, language, and cultural attitudes. Institutional racism is defined as the practice of institutions that result in the de facto exclusion of certain racial groups. Structural racism is the exclusion in law or practice of certain individuals that belong to ethnic minorities. Lastly, individual racism encompasses verbal abuse, non-verbal behaviors that undermine safety

such as symbols, behaviors aimed to exclude an individual, physical violence, and hate crimes/speech (UNHCR, 2020).

Refugee youth are particularly vulnerable to social rejection by their peers. As explained in *The Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, belonging to an ethnic minority is cited as a risk factor for peer exclusion. Accordingly, immigrant status was found to be associated with social exclusion among peers (Plenty & Jonsson, 2017). Continuous social rejection from peers on the basis of racial and ethnic lines can lead to feelings of alienation and marginalization within refugee youth (Camras, 2004). It is documented that darker skin tones, physical features associated with minority populations, and lower levels of English-language proficiency affect the extent to which immigrants experience racism and discrimination (Szaflarski & Bauldry, 2019). For example, Latino youth with darker skin tones are stopped by police officers in higher amounts than their peers with lighter skin tones (Ayón, 2015). The discrimination can also be experienced horizontally: it is reported that Latino youth with lighter skin tones discriminate against other Latino youth with darker skin tones (Córdova & Cervantes, 2010; Ayón, 2015). Black immigrants and refugees similarly experience discrimination in the form of both anti-Black systemic racism and anti-immigrant rhetoric within the United States.

High levels of discrimination can lead to feelings of isolation as immigrants and refugees may feel that the U.S. system does not work in their favor. Discriminatory experiences have proven to increase levels of loneliness “both directly and indirectly”. Indirectly, discrimination can lower the victim’s self-esteem. Perpetual discrimination increases the likelihood of victim isolation, weakening their willingness to seek social support. Social support at an early stage is crucial to mitigating the impacts discrimination has on immigrant and refugee youth (Świtaj et al., 2015).



### Operating Within a New Educational System

Not only are newcomer students facing the stressors of trauma, acculturation, resettlement, and/or isolation: they also face the struggle of operating within a new educational system. A significant portion of refugee youth are categorized as “students with limited or interrupted formal education”, or SLIFE, which makes the transition to a formal educational system all the more difficult. Newcomer youth that are categorized as SLIFE face structural expectations that are profoundly different from the educational environments to which they are accustomed. This can lead to episodes of problematic behaviors, including academic refusal, distress, and disengagement in class (McBrien, Dooley, & Birman, 2017). Self-perception of their academic ability and lack of “psychological and academic preparation before entering U.S. schools” are all cited as reasons for barriers to success for refugee youth (McBrien, 2005).

Standardized testing, one characteristic of formalized education in the United States, proves wildly challenging for newcomer youth. Since 1838, standardized testing has been used by U.S. schools to formally assess student achievement (NEA, 2020). These tests are often deemed inappropriate forms of assessment for refugees and immigrants. The expectations are far too high, with non-English speakers being expected to perform at the same level on standardized tests as their native-born peers within a year of arriving in the United States. Students who are non-native English speakers are typically cited as performing poorly on tests, leaving administrators to wonder if the failing test score is due to lack of knowledge or lack of fluency in the English language.

Additionally, refugees who arrive as children are far more likely to graduate from high school than refugees who arrive at older ages. As of 2017, refugees who arrive in the United States at an age younger than 15 exhibit high school graduation rates similar to those of the

native-born population. However, older refugee teens have much poorer graduation rates. The difference between younger and older refugee youth and graduation rates can be attributed to language barriers and the higher likelihood that older refugees will have arrived in the U.S. without parents (Evans & Fitzgerald, 2017). Without a basic understanding of English, the language through which the United States educational system largely operates, it is difficult for refugee youth to graduate. While English as Second Language (ESL) classes are effective, it generally takes 3 to 5 years for oral proficiency to develop, while academic English proficiency can take anywhere from 4 to 7 years (Hakuta, Butler, & Witt., 2000). Older refugee youth do not have enough time within the school system to achieve academic proficiency; thus, refugee youth fall behind in school, and their graduation rates suffer.

#### The Importance of Meeting Social-Emotional Needs

There is a correlation between unmet socio-emotional needs and poor academic outcomes. On the other hand, socio-emotional wellness is correlated with “higher rates of academic engagement, a sense of belonging and connectedness in school, and academic motivation” (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). Furthermore, evidence promotes the theory that the integration of social emotional care with academics stands to enhance students’ learning. In an educational environment where success is defined through the lens of academic achievement, a focus on socio-emotional wellness for newcomer students appears to benefit both the students and the school systems. As the U.S. Department of Education posits, “An effective education for all students addresses academic performance and achievement—and nurtures their interpersonal and intrapersonal development.”

As a whole, a majority of school systems have limited formal support available to refugee students when it comes to addressing their socio-emotional needs in addition to guidance with

respect to educational and career choices. Research has ascribed these limitations to misunderstandings school personnel have in regards to the refugee community. Similarly, teachers cite pressure to comply with testing curriculum and lack of resources as reasons for their inability to adequately support their refugee students. Due to a lack of formal support from schools, most support is found informally by youth through their ethnic communities, refugee groups, and churches (McBrien, Dooley, & Birman, 2017).

Basic safety nets for refugee youth are commonly met by refugee resettlement organizations, but the school is the structure newcomer youth see on a day-to-day basis. It is the main structure by which refugee youth are seen as having succeeded or failed. While the school's main concern is the academic performance of their students, it is crucial that they meet the needs of their refugee populations. Fundamentally, schools must meet this critical lack in educational and socio-emotional formal support for their refugee students. One way through which this can be achieved is by way of after-school programs for refugee support.

### **Co-Curricular Mentorship Programs to Meet Social-Emotional Needs of Newcomer Youth**

#### **Types of Co-Curricular Mentorship Programs**

The U.S. Department of Education has identified four key types of support for the development of socio-emotional wellness for newcomer youth. These types of support differ in their combinations of formal vs informal support as well as adult-led vs peer-based support. The four types of support can be organized as follows:

1. Formal, adult-led
2. Informal, adult-led
3. Formal, peer-based
4. Informal, peer-based

While each support type has been proven to yield benefits, they vary in terms of aid given. While formal programs are deemed essential to meeting the socio-emotional needs of newcomers, informal support systems- and the relationships that stem from these informal structures- provide much-needed benefits. Additionally, adult-led support gives students the academic, professional, and resource support that is necessary for newcomer stability, but peer-based support allows students to feel accepted by people in their age group. Consequently, this can decrease feelings of isolation and strengthen emotional well-being (U.S. Department of Education, 2016).

In the following sections, I will discuss the benefits provided by each of the four support types as well as various examples for the implementation of each type. Furthermore, I will address how each of the four types works to mitigate the impacts of the four socio-emotional stressors: trauma, acculturation, resettlement, and isolation. Importantly, I heavily draw from the frameworks of co-curricular support systems as explained by the U.S. Department of Education in an effort to elucidate the federal government's recommendations.

#### Formal, Adult-Led

Formal, adult-led social and emotional co-curricular support systems for newcomers have shown to provide a sense of stability for refugee and immigrant youth. This stability translates into a minimized fear of acculturation as these youth confront challenges whilst navigating between two cultures. Continued support from a formal, adult instructor gives newcomer students companionship, a sense of importance, and feelings of belonging to the school and community. In having support, these students are better able to meet their social-emotional needs. With both teachers and other school personnel in their support network, these students can experience both socio-emotional and academic benefits. Lastly, maintaining consistent communication can strengthen the ties between families, students, schools, and the community at

large. This communication is additionally helpful in detecting concerns earlier rather than later. If a teacher is concerned about a student, consistent communication by way of formal support systems is helpful in relaying those concerns to the student's guardian(s). The same works vice-versa. It can be argued that this vulnerable population of students is in need of specialized support that is both formal and adult-led to ensure these students have the systematic support they need to succeed in America (U.S. Department of Education, 2016).

Formal, adult-led support can be implemented in a multitude of ways. Schools can collaborate with relevant community-based organizations to provide support for newcomer students. School-led sessions exclusively catered to the needs of newcomers can give them information pertaining to college planning, service-learning projects, and other relevant topics in regards to college applications. Formal extended-day programs have been cited as an option to provide opportunities for newcomer students to become immersed in clubs, service projects, and sports. Additionally, parent and family workshops in home languages on topics including college planning, tax preparation, immigration assistance, health clinics, and internet skills can be particularly beneficial to newcomer students and their families (U.S. Department of Education, 2016).

Formal, adult-led types of support are beneficial in terms of meeting the acculturation and resettlement needs of student newcomers, especially in terms of helping them adapt to the formal education system. While school-led support systems can meet the educational and systemic needs of these youth, formal structures are not as flexible as informal structures when trying to meet the immediate needs of newcomer youth. The formal nature of these programs may not be as beneficial in terms of reducing isolation and the socio-emotional challenges that come with feeling set apart from one's peers.

### Informal, Adult-Led

Informal, adult-led support is mainly beneficial in that newcomer students have the opportunity to speak one-on-one with an adult in an environment that is confidential and informal. Such an environment increases trust and shows students that there are adults that care about their well-being beyond their academic success. An informal environment, and the trust fostered therein, allows students to open up about their needs; the trusted adult can then connect students with relevant support services while still maintaining confidentiality and trust. An adult-led mentorship can further provide opportunities for newcomer students to be engaged with their new community, leaning on the mentor that is established within the community as a conduit to additional services and opportunities (U.S. Department of Education, 2016).

Examples of informal, adult-led support include advisory programs in which students can check in with a trusted teacher to discuss concerns. School counselors also provide a trustworthy adult to which newcomer students can turn in an effort to work through the various socio-emotional challenges newcomer youth face in coming to America (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). The informal, adult-led style of support can mitigate the negative effects of acculturation and isolation.

### Formal, Peer-Based

Formal, peer-based models of support are cited as having benefits for both newcomers and their peer mentor counterparts. The relationship between a newcomer and a peer mentor serves to help newcomers gain a sense of independence and learn how to integrate into the new culture. It is also an opportunity for both parties to learn about and understand those from different backgrounds (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). In turn, both the newcomer and the peer mentor can experience heightened emotional intelligence. Examples of formal, peer-based

support include pairing a high school age mentor with an elementary newcomer student. It can also include cross-age programs including tutoring between an older peer and a younger newcomer.

### Informal, Peer-Based

Informal, peer-based models of support are cited as providing opportunities for peers to assume leadership positions as well as encourage “positive interethnic interactions that support English proficiency and academic achievement” (U.S. Department of Education, 2016).

Furthermore, evidence shows that newcomers who engage in informal social interactions in the English language are able to develop English proficiency at higher rates (Carhill, 2008).

Examples of this form of support include opportunities for newcomers to converse in informal social settings as well as the ability to interact with others from the same cultural background (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). Both informal and formal peer-based forms of support seem to mitigate the effects of resettlement, isolation, and acculturation. Both forms of peer-based interaction also support the development of “significant psychosocial competencies” within both involved peers (Suárez-Orozco, Pimentel & Martin, 2009).

### **Methodology**

To explore co-curricular mentorship programs for immigrant and refugee youth, I identified the Peer Leaders Program (PLP) from Harrisonburg, Virginia to serve as a case study for my research. By identifying PLP as a case study, I was able to study the following themes: the socio-emotional needs of immigrant and refugee youth, types of mentorship programming, and the outcomes of program involvement.

My research question is as follows: How do co-curricular mentorship programs meet the social-emotional needs of immigrant and refugee youth? My research question is further

supported by the following sub-questions: What are the design elements that help co-curricular mentorship programs meet the social-emotional needs of immigrant and refugee youth? How are involved students affected by involvement in co-curricular mentorship programs? In other words, what are the outcomes of involvement in terms of social-emotional wellbeing? I used the Peer Leaders Program as a case study in order to answer these questions in depth.

It was important to me to hear firsthand accounts from stakeholders and former students involved in the program in order for my findings to be representative of my target population. The Institutional Review Board (IRB) at James Madison University reviewed and approved this research as being exempt from IRB review. I received exempt approval on November 18, 2021, and this study's identification number is #22-2946. As per International Review Board protocol, all interviewed individuals will remain anonymous. Through a series of semi-structured interviews with former participants, program stakeholders, and professors with relevant expertise, I gathered necessary information about the Peer Leaders Program and its impact on the socio-emotional wellbeing of newcomer youth. A former participant was defined as any participant who took active part in the Peer Leaders Program and was 18 years old or older. A program stakeholder included any key informant that was involved with PLP firsthand or worked with an institution that organized and/or helped run the program. Interview participants were asked a series of open-ended questions about their experience with the program, as well as their thoughts on the program and its mentorship model. Following the semi-structured interview, follow-up questions were asked based on the initial responses. This method made it possible to follow unanticipated lines of inquiry and better understand participants' ideas.

Interviews were conducted at a location of the subject's choosing (i.e. the participant's place of work, an agreed-upon public place, over a zoom call). They lasted approximately 30-60



minutes or as long as the participant chose to participate. Data was collected using handwritten notes and audio-recordings, if the subject agreed to being audio-recorded. Audio recordings were collected using an audio recording device. At all times, the subject retained choice about where to hold the interview, and whether to pause, interrupt, or stop the interview altogether. To find and select participants, snowball sampling was used. Research participants were asked at the end of their interview if they had any recommendations for who to interview next.

Often, qualitative forms of research are criticized for being less rigorous, scientific, and controlled than quantitative studies. However, due to the qualitative nature of case studies, complex phenomena are able to be studied and explained in greater depth. Additional quantitative research must be conducted in an effort to test the variables and hypotheses extrapolated from my qualitative research as well as case studies conducted by others in the field.

A limitation of this study, as well as the body of literature concerning mentorship models for newcomer youth as a whole, is the very nature of the case study. Most of the literature, including my own addition, by and large conduct research on small samples of one or two mentorship programs. However, further research must be conducted that takes into account a larger body of evidence. One or two case studies are simply unable to capture the full extent of the forms these programs can take and the benefits different programs yield. Of course, this does not mean that case studies are not useful. They are important in terms of gaining initial research about a fairly understudied topic. My topic of study has begun to gain interest in recent years as the United States accepts higher numbers of immigrant and refugee youth, and the importance of socio-emotional learning is a newly popularized topic of discussion in academic circles. The recent interest in this topic makes case studies an appropriate form of research, however the topic

can be better understood going forward through the analysis of both case studies and quantitative research.

### **Case Study: The Peer Leaders Program of Harrisonburg, Virginia**

#### Demographics of Harrisonburg, Virginia

The Peer Leaders Program (PLP), a co-curricular mentorship program, was established in 2015 in Harrisonburg High School of Harrisonburg, Virginia. The rapidly changing demographics of Harrisonburg makes a program such as PLP necessary for refugee resettlement. From the 1960s to 2016, the makeup of Harrisonburg became increasingly diverse. In 1960, 94% of Harrisonburg residents were white, and 99% of the population was American-born. Residents were predominantly English-speaking, and the population was primarily white Anglo-Saxon.

From 1960 to 2016, the demographics drastically flipped. In a relatively short period of time, the community transformed into a city of vibrant diversity. As of 2016, 42% of Harrisonburg's population was foreign-born with 51 countries of origin represented. Further, 62% of the population was non-white. In the Harrisonburg City Public Schools (HCPS), more than 35% of students were English language learners, and 57 languages were represented by students. The top countries of birth for students of HCPS, respectively, were the United States (58%), Iraq (11%), Honduras (8%), Puerto Rico (6%), El Salvador (3%), and Mexico (2%) (Garcia & Tankard, 2016). Each of these statistics represents the cultural and linguistic transformation undergone by Harrisonburg over the past 60 years.

#### Origins of the Peer Leaders Program (PLP)

In light of these demographic changes, the Harrisonburg community, as well as Harrisonburg High School, implemented various programs based on the needs of the newcomer population. Specifically, as the Spanish-speaking population grew, there was a marked increase

in community and school based support for students originally from Spanish-speaking countries. However, refugees from non-Spanish speaking countries began to fall through the cracks (Respondent 1). Stakeholders from Harrisonburg City Public Schools (HCPS), Church World Service (CWS) Immigration and Refugee Office in Harrisonburg, and James Madison University's Center for International Stabilization and Recovery (CISR) formed a collaborative effort to build a support network for these students. Thus, the Peer Leaders Program (PLP) began in 2015.

The Peer Leader Program was formed as a co-curricular structure of support for refugee youth within Harrisonburg High School. Importantly, the program is not the only form of support for this population, instead working with and alongside actual curriculum. A co-curricular support program happens outside of the allotted school hours, working in conjunction with what is formally done for refugees during school hours. In other words, the Peer Leaders Program was designed to fill in the gaps of other established newcomer and English-learner programs as a supplementary newcomer resource. They particularly include newcomers who come from smaller minority groups in the high school such as Arabic, Kurdish, and Swahili-speaking students. The Peer Leaders Program relies upon staff to identify refugee students who are in need of support or identify with the struggles of refugees. While the program still maintains a focus on families with refugee status (and immigrant backgrounds, to an extent), a student does not have to be formally defined as a refugee in order to participate in the program. The focus is on the student's background and whether or not they identify with the refugee experience. Ultimately, the program was established to assist students in building a peer network to feel welcomed and accepted in an effort to 1) accelerate social integration; 2) improve academic acclimation; 3)

keep students from incurring disciplinary offenses; and 4) improve emotional and psychological health.

### Structure of Peer Leaders Program

Harrisonburg City Public Schools appointed home-school liaisons to facilitate the Peer Leaders Program's weekly meetings. The home-school liaisons were already hired by the staff of Harrisonburg City Public Schools as employees to serve English-language learning students in the school system. They are described as "the primary touch point between parents who do not speak English and the school." They are responsible for a multitude of tasks including: encouraging family involvement during the school orientation process, providing communication support, supporting students by connecting them with school counselors, overseeing student integration into the school community, and translating parent-teacher conferences (Garcia & Tankard, 2016). As facilitators of the Peer Leaders Program, the liaisons are responsible for planning and implementing weekly meetings that occur nearly every Friday afternoon of the school year.

### PLP's Theoretical Lens: Trauma-Informed Peer Support

The theoretical lens that informs PLP was created in collaboration with James Madison University's Center for International Stabilization and Recovery (CISR). For this section, I largely reference Cameron Macauley's work in Trauma-Informed Peer Support for a Diverse Population, as was referenced by CISR in the formation of PLP. Cameron Macauley's research was integral to the foundation of the Peer Leaders' training program (Macauley, 2011).

CISR has worked with victims of landmines and explosive remnants of war since 1996. They have used peer support methodology to aid survivors with forms of psychological trauma including war-related violence, genocide, torture, forced conscription, and sexual abuse. Notably,

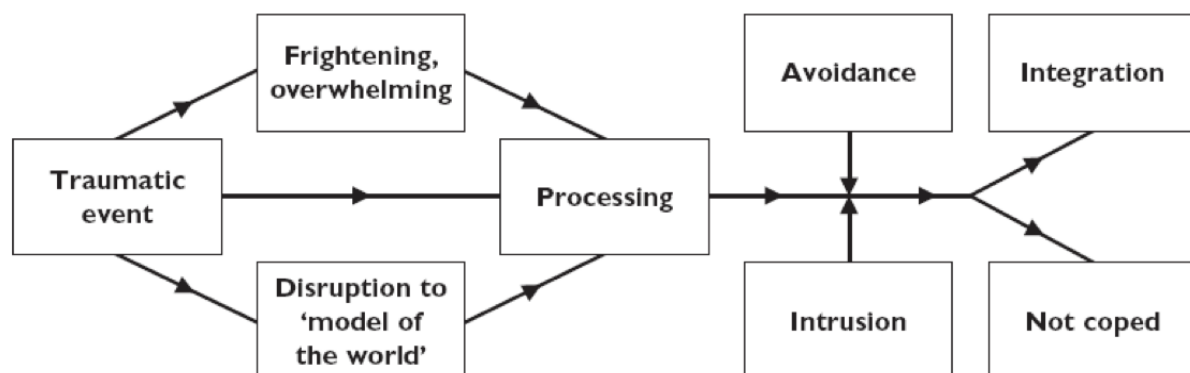
the Center for International Stabilization and Recovery has provided peer-support training to survivors of explosive remnants of war from Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, and Yemen (U.S.

Department of State, 2022).

To CISR, trauma-informed peer support signifies an understanding of the high prevalence of traumatic experiences in persons who seek and receive mental health, physical health, and substance abuse services. A thorough understanding of the effects of trauma and violence on the individual at all levels (neurological, biological, psychological, and social) is also necessary to meet trauma-informed criteria. In the words of Cameron Macauley, “Trauma specialists worldwide recognize that most survivors are capable of full recovery from psychological trauma under the right circumstances and that an accepting, supportive social environment is a key factor in preventing long term psychological dysfunction” (Macauley, 2011).

CISR worked to apply their international model of trauma-informed peer support to refugees in the Harrisonburg High Schools. Although students that identify with the refugee experience may not all have direct trauma from the refugee experience, it is likely that they are affected by various forms of trauma as experienced by their families and loved ones. PLP and CISR sought to create a model of peer support that mitigated the behavioral effects of psychological distress including anxiety, self-isolation, loss of self-esteem and self confidence, mood swings, depression, anger, poor decision-making, and impulsive behavior. The following coping process was necessary to understand:

**Figure 2: Traumatic Event to Coping Process (Fiederlein & Macauley, 2016)**



To CISR, avoidance and intrusion, found at the latter half of the coping process, are part of the “normal internal processing of an experience”. However, when avoidance and intrusion interfere with an individual’s daily life (particularly one’s mental health and social life), it is considered to enter the range of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). According to CISR, social support plays a key role in the coping process (Fiederlein & Macauley, 2016).

CISR relied upon the six principles of a trauma-informed approach as defined by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). The six principles are safety; trustworthiness and transparency; peer support; collaboration and mutuality; empowerment, voice, and choice; and cultural, historical, and gender issues. I will provide a brief overview of each principle as defined by SAMHSA and utilized by CISR in the formation of peer support training.

1. Safety

Safety is about managing expectations in order for refugees to a) know what is happening at all times and b) know what behavior is expected of them. Nonverbal cues are especially helpful when communicating safety across language barriers. One’s tone of voice, body language, facial expressions, and gestures all communicate messages. Lastly, providing choices for a person and allowing time for them to make those choices indicates levels of trust and respect.

2. Collaboration and Mutuality

Collaboration is a necessary component of the peer support model. Collaboration must be present between staff and refugee students, among staff at all levels, among refugees (from the same country and from different countries), and between staff and refugee community support systems. Healthy, collaborative relationships promote healing.

### 3. Trust and Transparency

Training in trauma-informed support places a focus on trust and transparency. In other words, supporters should keep their promises and be transparent whenever necessary.

Supporters should also refrain from providing unrealistic expectations. Lastly, supporters should encourage refugees to take responsibility when possible.

### 4. Empowerment

Loss of power is a main reason for people becoming refugees; therefore, it is essential that refugees gain control over their lives again with the appropriate support. While outside support is helpful, refugees should also be encouraged to help each other. This allows for increased benefits as both refugees are empowered from the experience.

### 5. Culture, Gender, and History

Supporters should be trained to enter the mentorship relationship with an open-mind; they should be encouraged to learn from refugees about the culture and history of their country of origin. Compassion must be encouraged in supporters; the process of learning to navigate a new culture takes many years, and supporters should be aware of the stress that refugees may face as a result of the transition process. Finally, depending on the demographics of the refugees, supporters should be aware of any specific culture-based gender differences that could inform their mentorship interaction.

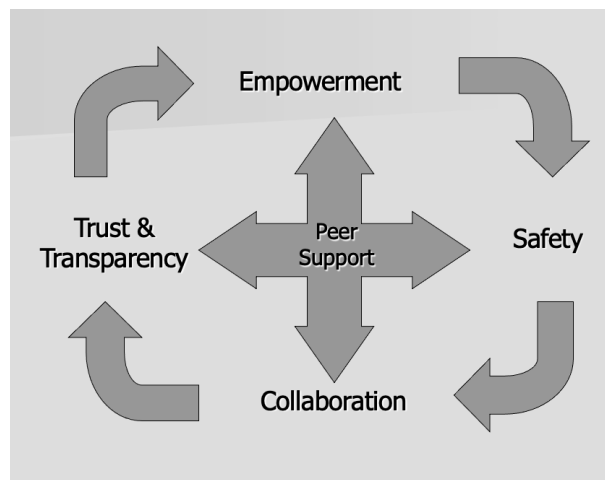
### 6. Peer Support

At the crux of these five principles is peer support. The framework of peer support relies upon a trained peer support worker who has experience in adapting to life in the United States. According to Cameron Macauley, a trained peer support worker (PSW) can provide a number of benefits for newcomer refugees (Macauley, 2011). A trained PSW

can help manage expectations of refugees, in turn increasing levels of safety. Staff, refugees, and the community can all be brought together with the help of a trained PSW. Importantly, peer support workers can advise refugees based on their own experience. Transparency is enhanced when PSWs can draw upon personal stories. Trained PSWs can encourage the development of self-confidence and autonomy in newcomer refugees. Lastly, PSWs can help facilitate refugees' transition and adaptation to US culture, particularly in navigating culture-based gender differences.

Figure 3 illustrates the interactions amongst these principles. The principle of 'culture, gender and history' is not included in the figure, as it informs the other five principles.

**Figure 3: 5 Principles of Trauma-Informed Approaches (SAMHSA, 2014)**



## Findings

In the findings section, I seek to answer my research question and the subsequent sub-questions utilizing the results of the case study: How has the co-curricular mentorship Peer Leaders Program addressed the social-emotional needs of immigrant and refugee youth? What are the design elements that have helped the program meet the social-emotional needs of newcomer students? How are involved students affected by involvement in the program?



## **Design Principles**

This section of my findings include design and structural elements that have made it possible for the Peer Leaders Program to meet its objectives. These elements include the program's adaptability, semi-formal programming structure, and multi-level mentoring model.

### Adaptability of the Program Model

At its core, the Peer Leaders Program is adaptable. As one stakeholder posits, "I think the Peer Leaders Program is always changing because of the needs of the school, the kids, the facilitators, and the funding... We always have to be aware that the way we ran the program last year might not be the best way to run the program this year, depending on the kids and who is there and what their needs are... The need for assessment, adjustment, and evaluation is ongoing" (Respondent 2).

In the beginning, the program consisted mostly of Arabic and Kurdish-speaking newcomers. Arabic-speaking girls were in particular need of an adult mentor as they found it difficult to navigate two different cultures. To meet this need, the program's stakeholders appointed an Arabic-speaking woman to run the program. As the program progressed, fewer Arabic speakers were entering the Harrisonburg area and more Congolese students were arriving instead. The program shifted from a group for primarily Arabic-speaking girls to a group for anyone who identifies with the refugee experience. In terms of facilitators, the program once again adapted, appointing an additional home-school liaison, a Swahili-speaking man, for the Peer Leaders. As the needs of the Harrisonburg community grew, the Peer Leaders Program naturally expanded.

I use the term "appoint" as opposed to the term "hire" in order to emphasize the fact that no adult is specifically paid to lead the Peer Leader Program. Harrisonburg High School was

adaptable in asking the liaisons to facilitate the program, seeing as they were already hired mentors for the refugee population. The homeschool liaisons have exhibited adaptability themselves to keep the program running despite receiving no additional pay. Community stakeholders have similarly been flexible. People from the aforementioned stakeholder organizations (HCPS, CWS, and CISR) have found a way to make supporting the program an unofficial component of their job description. Ultimately, the program's success is due to a few people who see it as an essential source of support for newcomer students and are willing to put the effort in to maintain that support.

The structure of the PLP also adapted when it shifted from one-on-one mentoring to the group mentoring model that it now features. When the program first began, the mentors were refugee students who had been in the United States for more than a year. The mentors were paired with mentees (mentees being refugee youth who had newly arrived). After a year, this structure changed as the newly arrived students wanted to come to the mentor trainings. The program then adapted to see all of the students as peer mentors for new arrivals.

Further, the program has been flexible through the changing demographics of the Harrisonburg community. When the Trump administration cut the number of refugee arrivals, the program adapted. Although the Peer Leaders Program was intended for newcomer students, they were few and far between during the Trump administration. During this time, the program pivoted to focus more on refugee students who had been settled for a while, and the content of the program switched from new arrival information to broader topics such as civic engagement and identity. As a new administration is in place and the number of refugee arrivals is set to increase, the program is once again returning to its original mission: supporting new arrivals. Peer leaders are being retrained to aid newcomers (Respondent 2).

The Trump Administration was not the only event to thwart refugee arrivals, causing a shift in the Peer Leaders Program. COVID-19 suspended the program for about a year. During this time, there were no in-person meetings, and “a program like this is built upon face-to-face interaction” (Respondent 3). While academic aid continued online in the midst of COVID-19, the core of the program- the relational aspect- was stunted. As schools have resumed in-person learning, PLP has entered a rebuilding period. In a testament to the program’s resilience, the students are still involved, and the adults are still committed to fulfilling the program’s mission. Whether it be a surge of newcomers or a dry spell due to changes in administration or a global pandemic, the program has remained malleable yet consistent in its mission.

#### Semi-Formal Programming Structure

The Peer Leaders Program relies on a semi-formal programming structure in order to remain fluid and adaptable. The program’s model is loose and semi-structured, striking a balance between informal and formal. This flexible model has been crucial to the program’s ability to adapt to the needs of their target population. Due to the semi-formal structure, the program is able to vary week-to-week depending on the needs of the students. Some weeks, the program will bring in guest speakers that provide newcomers with resources and teach them new skills that they would not obtain in mainstream high school classes. Other weeks, PLP will have a field trip to a relevant place in the community. Sometimes, however, the students just need a space to talk amongst each other and the adult mentors. Other times, they just want to hang out, relax, and be the kids that many refugee youth are not always granted the privilege of being. This semi-formal structure is part of what makes PLP a space that students want to revisit week after week. In some ways, overplanning and over-prescribing can impede upon the natural flourishing of human relationships.

### Multi-Level Mentoring

The mentorship model utilized by the Peer Leaders Program is not as narrowly defined as those proposed by the Department of Education. Instead, PLP applies a multi-level mentorship approach. Mentorship is exercised by facilitators, other peers, students of James Madison University, and speakers that come to the meetings that are held nearly every Friday. These speakers range from professors to actors to community health organizers: all offering different lessons depending on the interests of the group. The Peer Leaders Program has found ways to meld different elements from various mentorship models, which is a core strength of the program.

While the Department of Education laid out a plan for the four ideal types of co-curricular mentorship programs (formal/adult-led; informal/adult-led; formal/peer-based; informal/peer-based), these ideal types fail to capture the importance of multi-level mentorship approaches. As discussed, there are benefits to each form of mentorship, and an ideal co-curricular program blends elements of each. As seen in the Peer Leaders Program, multi-level mentoring created added benefits. Integrating both adult and peer mentorship levels into one program allows newcomer refugees the optimal level of support as they reap the advantages offered by all forms of mentorship. A single program, with a proper foundation, can blend each model of mentorship under one umbrella of support.

### Relationship and Trust in Program Design

Relationships are the core mission of the Peer Leaders Program. To the program's stakeholders, it is important that PLP represents a safe space for refugee students to speak with other students and other adults beyond their parental units. Each interviewee stressed this point in different ways: "It comes down to personal relationships"; "Human relationships are what

move and motivate everything”; “Having people like (the facilitators), that those kids relate to, that they trust to talk to, someone who’s not their parent, and aren’t adults who are (judgemental), but can actually listen and relate and understand and support those in that journey (is important)”. Ultimately, human relationships are the roots of the Peer Leaders Program. It is not about strict, technical programming; it is about building a community that is founded upon trust.

### **Outcomes of the Program**

Buttressed by the design principles, the following were cited as outcomes of student participation in the Peer Leaders Program: cultural identity processing, trauma processing, confidence building, and civic engagement.

#### Cultural Identity Processing

While the program encourages integration (helping students adapt to American society, encouraging resumé building, etc.), the Peer Leader Program’s end-goal is not assimilation: the adoption of a receiving culture at the expense of the heritage culture. The program has never expected newcomer students to adopt the mainstream culture or have a “traditional” high school experience. The Peer Leaders Program values the students’ identity differences and helps them to adapt. In the words of a community stakeholder, refugees are not the same (as their American peers) and to pretend that they are exactly the same is disrespectful and dishonoring (Respondent 1). According to a program founder, targeted acceleration of new arrivals is necessary to help them become participating members of the larger community and maximize their own potential; one must recognize the different life experiences of refugee youth compared to their native-born counterparts and not wish for them to assimilate and fade into the culture surrounding them

(Respondent 1). A focus on cultural identity and integration, as opposed to assimilation, is a core tenant to the Peer Leaders Program as it is today.

Exploring identity in a group-setting with adults and peers of similar cultures is a key way in which the Peer Leaders Program meets its goal: to reduce the transitional stressors of newcomer students. To honor the cultural identities of involved students, the Peer Leaders Program appoints facilitators who are members of the refugee community in Harrisonburg and/or have relevant experience so as to relate to and understand the students. To have an adult mentor that shares one's background proves invaluable for questions that newcomers may have regarding gender, religion, culture, language, and education. This form of mentorship gives newcomers an adult figure outside of their home to which they can bring their concerns and questions. As one informant stated, having an adult of similar background to work with made their time in the program comfortable and successful (Respondent 6).

For example, many Arabic-speaking girls struggled with the decision to continue wearing the hijab upon starting school in the United States. According to interviews with an adult involved with the program, the cultural struggle is difficult, and many young girls wished to take off their hijab despite familial and religious expectations. These girls relied on discussions with trusted mentors in order to process their decisions, as the mentors provided them with an empathetic, non-judgmental space to express their grievances, fears, and concerns (Respondent 4). A former student explained that having mentors with shared cultural backgrounds was incredibly helpful, as they could better understand cultural differences in terms of religion and gender, specifically (Respondent 6).

In interviews, it was explained that cross-culture mentorship, while more beneficial than no mentorship at all, does not contain that element of trust that same-culture mentorship models

have from the beginning. Simply put, it is human nature for people to trust those with which we share more similarities.

### Trauma Processing

A stakeholder described the following incident as a moment that highlighted the need for a program like Peer Leaders. Before PLP was formed, an Iraqi student was found fighting another student in the hallways of Harrisonburg High School. When teachers tried to break up the fight, they had to “physically pull the students off of one another”; the Iraqi student was cited as reacting in a manner that was “not in proportion with the situation.” The stakeholder described that the student’s reaction was a trauma response.

She explained that when the Iraqi boy had lived in Iraq, his father had worked for the United States’ military. The boy had been “kidnapped at gunpoint, blindfolded, mock executed, beaten to unconsciousness, and dumped in front of his parents’ house with a note on his back that said, ‘We know what your dad did. If you don’t leave, we’ll kill your family.’” The stakeholder explained that when the Iraqi student was in a fight in the high school and was grabbed from behind by a teacher, he physically felt that he was reliving his experience of almost dying because the trauma was still living in his body.

There were a few incidents of newcomer fights within the school (Respondent 2). Once school personnel identified this as a problem, they had meetings with a few of the refugee students to determine why they were acting out. In talking to the boys, the stakeholder was able to form an understanding. She explained that in refugee camps, the boys will test each other and gauge reactions. If the other boy is afraid or backs down, they will keep bullying him. On the other hand, she stated that if the boy learns to stand up for himself and project a “don’t mess with me” persona, everybody leaves him alone. In coming to a new school where everyone spoke a

different language and there are refugees from other countries who present potential threats, the refugee students fall back on trauma patterns. Many refugee students are “primed to be sensitive to threats and danger” and might misinterpret actions as an assault, eliciting the “don’t mess with me” reaction. Traumatic experiences can translate into behavioral problems within the formal education system including physical altercations (Respondent 2). This brought to light a common theme amongst the newcomer population: although showing it in a variety of different ways, many refugee students were struggling to process trauma and needed a place to do so. The Peer Leaders Program filled this need for the refugee youth in Harrisonburg High School.

One stakeholder describes the program as a way for refugee youth to feel safe, adjusted, and supported given the traumatic experiences they may have gone through at any stage in the resettlement process. A secure group that helps newcomer youth make sense of their experience can promote positive mental health and behavioral outcomes. As a PLP stakeholder put it, the peer leader model is about “giving some training (to mentors) about how to talk, (actively) listen, and refer people to other services. They’re not (providing) counseling, or giving advice... Sometimes just by listening, feeling like you’re being heard, and knowing that you have somebody who’s supporting you and encouraging you... that improves mental health outcomes” (Respondent 2).

The program has organized various activities to counteract the effects of trauma on the refugee youth. Guest speakers from within the high school and the surrounding community were asked to speak to the students about available sports activities, counseling services, and the school’s approach to bullying. A stakeholder had a connection with a professional clown who provides mental health services overseas in refugee camps. He walked the students through theater exercises that heavily focused on the mirroring of body language and facial expressions.



These activities encouraged the students to laugh and act out without using language. The exercises gave the students room to laugh and interact with one another in a low-stakes environment. Further, the focus on facial expressions and body language awareness were helpful to counteract the heightened threats that many of the youth perceived through the lens of trauma.

### Confidence Building

The trusting environment as described in the design principle section has allowed for the development of confidence in newcomer youth. Mentorship relationships with James Madison University students, English language practice, and community activities have each played a role in bolstering newcomers' self-efficacy.

Many stakeholders and former students acknowledged that the Peer Leaders Program helped them practice speaking English. In the words of a liaison, "(The Peer Leaders Program) is the time when the students meet a group of people who don't speak English like the other students. They feel comfortable (speaking) broken English because everyone belongs to the same category." The liaison explained an experience he had in dealing with a language barrier: "I felt like I was a (prisoner). I was a prisoner of not communicating what I wanted to say because of the language (barrier)." When he had the opportunity to practice English with someone who was also learning the language, he stated, "I didn't want that person to leave." He maintained that the newcomer students feel the same way: "When these young brothers and sisters get the opportunity to speak without thinking that someone is judging them for how they speak, they don't want to leave that place" (Respondent 5) Overtime, this practice gives them the confidence to speak English with their peers who do not identify with the refugee experience.

When describing a challenge that newcomer students face, one stakeholder noted that it was hard for newcomers to engage with American students because "Americans did not

welcome them.” To meet this challenge, the Peer Leaders Program brought in a James Madison University (JMU) student organization. According to the stakeholder, these students were more mature and had grown to appreciate diversity. In her words, “American teenagers are different from college students.” The JMU students provided students transportation from the high school to their homes, engaged with them during program operation, played soccer with the students, and developed friendships. According to the stakeholder, these older JMU students gave the newcomer students the confidence to engage with their American peers within the high school (Respondent 4).

In an effort to build self-confidence, the Peer Leaders Program kicks off each school year with a ropes course activity at James Madison University. The ropes course features a series of obstacles in which one must navigate, climb, balance, and jump across logs and ropes at varying heights. This activity enables newcomer students to conquer physical obstacles, providing evidence to themselves that they are able to triumph in the face of barriers. Overcoming physical challenges such as the ropes course can translate into a belief that they, too, can overcome intangible challenges.

### Leadership and Civic Engagement

The resettlement process can often raise many questions for newcomer students. It is not uncommon for them to wrestle with themes of civic identity, citizenship, community, civic involvement, and leadership. To help students through this process, the founders of the Peer Leaders Program encourage refugee students to become civically engaged. Civic engagement and leadership are two sides of the same coin; thus, PLP urges refugee youth to recognize their leadership qualities, affirming them that they are leaders and have the strengths and skills to help others. As alluded to in the section on adaptability, the program shifted to encourage the message

that each newcomer has leadership potential. Instead of pairing refugee students that have more experience in the United States with newly-arrived refugees, the program pivoted to allow all refugee students to see themselves as leaders. As one stakeholder describes it, “All of (them) are peer leaders. From the time of arrival, they have skills and gifts that they can share with others to support and encourage their experience” (Respondent 2). This encouraged newcomer refugees to feel a sense of personal autonomy which, as Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services indicates, is a crucial goal of peer support.

Civic engagement and volunteering are core tenants of the program and are both proven to encourage mental wellness, promote resiliency, and deter drug abuse and misuse (Respondent 2). To become civically engaged, the program has conversations about what it looks like to be an active participant in one’s community. Studies show that participation in discussion surrounding civic-related topics is linked to newcomer students’ levels of civic engagement (Elliot et al., 2021).

To translate civic discussion into action, the program encourages volunteering. Recently, the Peer Leaders Program has been working with Habitat for Humanity to build homes for people in the community. They also participated in the annual Blacks Run Clean Up Day in Harrisonburg, VA to clean up a section of the river. In interviews, nearly every respondent referenced a service trip in which the program visited a retirement community near the high school. According to a facilitator, the students prepared food from their home countries to bring to the community center. The facilitator said that this particular volunteer experience was important for many reasons. First and foremost, the students were able to connect with elder community members, and the elder community members could connect with the newcomer youth. Second, the facilitator described that, “In Africa, taking care of elder people is a blessing.”

He wanted the newcomer youth to experience the cultural norms of their home countries through volunteering. For many newcomer students, they have not had the opportunity to speak with the grandparents to which they are related, so he “took them to their grandparents at the (retirement community).” He said, “In an African context, your grandparents don’t have to be blood related. Anyone (that is) the same age as your grandparents is your grandparent. So if I take them (to the retirement community), they see their grandparents according to (our) culture.” He urged the students to sit with the residents, ask them questions about their life, and listen to their stories (Respondent 5). Through volunteering, the students felt connected to both their immediate community and their cultures of origin.

In sum, a respondent stated the following: “(The Peer Leaders Program) is not telling kids “We think you need mental health services. We think you need to learn how to deal with your trauma. We think you need to talk about your problems.” We tell them, “(You all) are leaders. You have the ability to help other people” (Respondent 2). These are all things that promote mental wellness and that prevent drug abuse: being civically engaged, having a sense of purpose, doing long term thinking, volunteering, and giving back. These are the things that promote resilience... because you feel important, validated, and needed.”

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

My research findings support that social-emotional wellness should be the priority of co-curricular mentorship programs; academic success should be a byproduct of that social-emotional wellness. A focus on human relationships and identity processing, as prioritized by the Peer Leaders Program, supports social-emotional health. The students, of course, will benefit, as they will be able to process the stressors caused by trauma, resettlement, isolation, and/or acculturation. Further, the academic success that is correlated with social-emotional

wellness stands to benefit students in the integration process, giving them access to higher education if they choose to pursue that route. The schools can benefit, seeing as meeting the social-emotional needs of their students is correlated with higher rates of academic success. Additionally, the co-curricular mentorship model should work in tandem with the academic support systems in place for newcomer students during the school day. Ultimately, both curricular and co-curricular models of support have newcomer students' best interests at heart and working together will help the newcomer students succeed both socially and academically.

As demonstrated by the Peer Leaders Program, I further conclude that same-culture mentorship is especially beneficial for newcomers in terms of bonding and bridging social capital. According to his book '*Bowling Alone*', political scientist Robert Putnam describes building social capital as an integral component to increasing one's sense of belonging. It stands to reason that this would be an important element to newcomer youths' integration. According to Putnam, social capital can be divided into two different categories: bridging and bonding (Putnam, 2000). Bridging is defined as the process of building relationships with people who might be different from oneself. Bonding is the process of maintaining relationships with people who are similar to oneself (Walseth, 2008; Putnam, 2000). Bridging social capital is considered to be important to social integration. Importantly, bridging and bonding are not mutually exclusive phenomena but instead can work simultaneously to promote newcomer integration (Walseth, 2008). The Peer Leaders Program has displayed this theory of social capital. The mentorship of same-culture adult mentors acts as a bonding experience for the newcomer youth; this bonding acts as a safe harbor for newcomer students to build confidence, identity, trust, and relationships within the context of a new environment. With the support of the social capital gained through bonding, newcomer youth can seek social capital through bridging experiences

with their American peers. From this, I conclude that co-curricular mentorship programs (particularly when facilitated by same-culture adult mentors) can provide an opportunity for newcomer youth to bond, which gives these youth the support they need to bridge.

Ultimately, the Peer Leaders Program demonstrates the importance of building flexibility and resilience into a co-curricular program. In order to meet the social-emotional needs of newcomer youth, co-curricular mentorship programs must be able to adapt to various circumstances including inconsistent newcomer rates, demographic changes, and varying newcomer stressors. While the four core stressors of newcomer youth (trauma, acculturation, resettlement, and isolation) may apply to many refugee and immigrant youth, each case is unique. Stakeholders must listen to their stories, identify their needs, and include them in the process of designing the co-curricular mentorship program. From this, I conclude that co-curricular mentorship programs should remain adaptable so as to increase the effectiveness and resilience of the program.

Schools have a unique opportunity to meet the socio-emotional needs of their newcomer students. Co-curricular mentorship programs are a way in which schools can do this. When prioritized by school administrators, newcomer youth know that they are safe, valued, and empowered. If every student is meant to succeed in the United States' school system, then the socio-emotional health of newcomer students must be addressed.

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Respondent 1

Respondent 2

Respondent 3

Respondent 4

Respondent 5

Respondent 6

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