

# Developing Servant Leadership Through a Peer Mentor Program

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## **Abstract**

*Mentor programs are an important component of transition programs, which help students successfully navigate the shift from middle school to high school. With that being said, little research has examined the impact of participation in a mentor program on the mentors' servant leadership skill set. Therefore, the purpose of this qualitative case study was to investigate the impact of a peer mentor program and challenge course training component on the mentors' perceived servant leadership skill-set. This study explored the impact on participants from a high school peer mentor program who graduated in 2018-2019 and had additional life experience from which to draw. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews as well as the researcher's bracketing journal. The findings led to a major theme aligned to the Barbuto and Wheeler (2006) Servant Leadership Questionnaire and revealed that there was an impact on the participants' servant leadership skill set through their participation in the yearlong peer mentor program that had an initial challenge course training component. The results and corresponding discussion yield a potential framework for other peer mentor programs to follow.*

**Keywords:** Peer Mentor Program, Servant Leadership, Leadership Development, High School, Challenge Course

In this article, a body of research is presented on a high school peer mentor program and its impact on the participants' servant leadership skill-set. The mission of this mentor program is to build relationships, foster genuine concern, and promote student success. The program intends to ease the transition for incoming ninth-

graders to high school by providing them with juniors who are screened, selected, and trained to make a positive impact on the freshmen.

Mentoring is a natural part of leadership and greatly benefits the mentee (Gibson et al., 2000). Leadership is the ability to influence a group toward the achievement of goals; it is not made up of a single characteristic or trait (Boone & Makhani, 2012). Although there are a variety of different leadership theories available including autocratic and transformational leadership, servant leadership has garnered the most attention regarding effective implementation (Boone & Makhani, 2012). There are valid and reliable instruments that can effectively measure servant leadership, such as the Barbuto and Wheeler (2006) Questionnaire (Barbuto & Wheeler, 2006; Melchar & Bosco, 2010; Sendjaya et al., 2008). This research focused on the development of servant leadership skills in adolescents through participation in a high school peer mentor program that had an initial challenge course training component.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Over time, mentor programs in the school setting have developed from a need to bridge the transitional gap between elementary schools and secondary schools due to less individualized time, increased large-group instruction, and a focus on performance instead of effort (Roybal et al., 2014; Van Ryzin, 2010). Mentor programs meaningfully connect individuals, provide an intentional structure to support individuals, and continue to grow in their implementation across the country (Blake-Beard, 2002). While there are many types of mentoring programs, a specific formula for what a peer-mentoring program should look like does not exist (Lecorchick et al., 2018). The peer mentor program structure can vary depending on the individual school so that it meets the needs of the student body. Best practices in mentoring are also difficult to identify due to the complex nature of the mentoring process as it may occur at different levels, in different ways, and in different industries (Brondyk & Searby, 2013). Any best practices must be effective, empirically proven, and achieve the stated purpose (Brondyk & Searby, 2013). Both Anastasia et al. (2012) and Lecorchick et al. (2018) examined the best practices of mentor programs and found that programs should have a formal structure, clear expectations, ongoing support, and organization self-monitoring. While including these best practices, Lecorchick et al. (2018) noted that a blended approach of these best practices is often the best fit for a school or organization.

Both mentees and mentors are positively impacted by mentor programs. Allen et al. (1997) found that often those seeking to become a mentor possess a desire to help others (i.e., other-focused) and increase their learning and gratification (i.e., self-focused). Newby and Heide (2013) noted that mentoring can be a major part of one's development as a member of an organization. Being a mentor can make them feel more connected through their contributions. Additionally, a mentor receives direct benefits with increased competence and confidence through the relationships formed (Newby & Heide, 2013). The process is a rewarding experience and creates a loyal base of support for the mentor and the mentor's satisfaction within their role and organization increases (Eby et al., 2006). Mentors feel engaged through their participation, which is a benefit worth sharing

with those being recruited for the position. By discussing the possible benefits when recruiting mentors as well as throughout the training process, the potential to exemplify the benefits exists (Eby et al., 2006). Lampert (2005) reported that through the experience, mentors had a sense of enhanced personal growth and development as well as increased levels of responsibility and extroverted tendencies. These mentors also felt they had a deeper understanding of their teachers and were more accepting of differences (Lampert, 2005). This promotes a connection not just with other students, but also with school staff, and perhaps the school itself.

One aspect of being a mentor that has received far less attention is the impact on one's leadership skills. Specifically, the development of servant leadership through mentor program participation has yet to be adequately explored.

### **Defining Servant Leadership**

Servant leadership has garnered a great deal of attention over time. Greenleaf (1977) introduced the concept of "servant leadership," indicating that the servant leader is servant first. This nebulous definition has resulted in researchers creating their concept situated in his work (van Dierendonck, 2011). Researchers have described servant leadership as a people-focused leadership style (Sendjaya & Sarros, 2002; van Dierendonck, 2011) that emphasizes a need to serve that in turn serves as motivation to lead (Greenleaf, 1977). In essence, a servant leader puts their followers' needs as their top priority. According to van Dierendonck (2011), "Being a servant allows a person to lead; being a leader implies a person serves" (p. 1231). This emphasizes the duality of servant leadership as a leadership approach. Conceptualizing this idea presents a unique challenge as it becomes difficult to imagine one being a leader and a servant at the same time (Sendjaya & Sarros, 2002). With this concept in mind, viewing these dual roles in a symbiotic manner allows for a more thorough understanding and realization of the potential of a servant leader (Sendjaya & Sarros, 2002; van Dierendonck, 2011). Servant leaders can appreciate and empower their followers because they have a first-hand understanding of what their followers experience each day. At the same time, there is a view that the paradoxical nature of servant leadership is a concern for the potential value and real-life application of this theory (Northouse, 2019).

The central theme of servant leadership focuses on putting people first. Servant leaders recognize that the empowerment of their followers is a vital part of their mission (Boone & Makhani, 2012). The servant leaders do not have an affinity for an organization, rather they value the people who make up the organization (Gregory Stone et al., 2004). The organization exists, while the people make it a vibrant and thriving entity. Servant leaders do not serve to focus primarily on results, instead they focus on the service and the people (Gregory Stone et al., 2004). Essentially, servant leadership is not driven by results, rather driven by the people being served. In servant leadership, long-term organization goals are achieved only by first facilitating the growth, development, and well-being of the individuals in the organization (Gregory Stone et al., 2004). Therefore, having a vision is important, but ensuring those in the organization are taken care of and supported must come first. Servant leadership is a set of attitudes that must be

developed (Boone & Makhani, 2012). This requires constant dedication and reflection of the leaders and their organization.

Although other leadership approaches incorporate followers in their models, the strong emphasis on leading through serving followers sets servant leadership apart from the other leadership theories such as transformational leadership, situational leadership, skills-based leadership, etc. (Gregory Stone et al., 2004; Liden et al., 2014; van Dierendonck, 2011). Servant leaders have distinct personal characteristics that include authenticity, humility, compassion, courage, altruism, integrity, and listening (Coetzer et al., 2017; Gregory Stone et al., 2004). These personal traits provide an outlet for leaders to serve others first. In addition to these personal attributes, the servant leader possesses leadership qualities such as developing empowerment, promoting stewardship, building relationships, and portraying vision (Coetzer et al., 2017; Gregory Stone et al., 2004; Smith et al., 2004). Over time, researchers have grouped and arranged these qualities in a variety of different ways.

### **Specific Model of Servant Leadership**

While researchers have come up with different servant leadership models, Barbuto and Wheeler (2006) refined these concepts into a five-dimensional construct with the following leadership characteristics: altruistic calling, emotional healing, wisdom, persuasive mapping, and organizational stewardship. Altruistic calling is a leaders' true desire to make a positive impact in others' lives and putting their needs ahead of themselves (Barbuto & Wheeler, 2006; Bass, 2000). It is the giving nature of spirit in harmony with one's philanthropic life purpose (Barbuto & Wheeler, 2006). Over time, scholars have recognized the importance of altruism in leadership, particularly in servant leadership (Greenleaf, 1977; Sendjaya et al., 2008). Essentially, those with altruistic calling put the needs of others ahead of their own and work tirelessly for their followers.

Emotional healing is the leader's ability, skill, and commitment to fostering emotional recovery through empathy and listening, making the followers feel their voices are heard and attending to their needs (Barbuto & Wheeler, 2006; Liden et al., 2008). It promotes the creation of a safe environment where those around can voice their personal and professional concerns (Barbuto & Wheeler, 2006). Emotional healing also provides a process to make one whole again after they have felt broken (Spears & Lawrence, 2016). This requires a leader to be cognizant of what is happening around them.

Wisdom is the leader's ability to be aware of their surroundings and anticipates any issues that may arise through their use of knowledge and utility (Barbuto & Wheeler, 2006). It engages self-awareness and environmental consciousness to obtain and distribute knowledge so that followers may feel empowered (Crippen, 2005; Kohle Paul & Fitzpatrick, 2015). In essence, having wisdom implies that a leader can blend idealism with practicality in a manner to best lead their followers.

Persuasive mapping is the leader's ability to map and conceptualize issues to create a compelling vision for their followers (Barbuto & Wheeler, 2006) and use their insight to generate a strategic plan to turn their vision into reality (Kohle

Paul & Fitzpatrick, 2015). Leaders who possess strength with this characteristic not only have a vision and plan to carry it out, but they convey this to their followers and ensure the followers are active participants throughout the process.

Organizational stewardship is the leader's ability to create a communal climate and positive atmosphere for the well-being of the organization and to leave a legacy (Barbuto & Wheeler, 2006). It is a conscious act that requires leaders to remember that their actions and the actions of their organization have an impact and repercussions not just internally, but externally (Covey, 2002). Organizational stewardship provides a frame for how the organization relates to its resources and governs itself (Spears & Lawrence, 2016). The intent is to extend the positive impact of the organization to the community and surroundings, thus making sure things are in a better place than they were before.

These characteristics are conceptually and empirically distinct (Barbuto & Wheeler, 2006). Admittedly, this list is not necessarily all-inclusive of every trait as it does not include listening, empathy, community building, and growth, but it does focus on the qualities that exemplify servant leadership (Barbuto & Wheeler, 2006). Through these characteristics, one can begin to develop their servant leadership skill-set.

### **Developing Servant Leadership**

The development of servant leadership can occur through a variety of types of experiences, activities, and programs including high school peer mentor programs. While many mentor programs have been developed to bridge the transitional gap between middle and high schools, their growth and implementation have continued to rise over the past few decades and there is limited research on the best design to maximize their effectiveness (Allen et al., 2006; DuBois et al., 2002; Randolph & Johnson, 2008; Van Ryzin, 2010). When developing and implementing a mentor program, several studies recommend initial training and ongoing training as a key factor in the success of such programs (Anastasia et al., 2012; Randolph & Johnson, 2008). Anastasia et al. (2012) also offered a specific set of best practices, including a training portion, but no specific guidelines exist regarding the exact framework of peer mentor training. Research indicates that any training conducted should provide mentors with exposure to situations that increase mentors' confidence in their ability to work effectively with youth (Raposa et al., 2016). One possible choice for this training is a challenge course.

### **Developing Student Leadership through Challenge Courses**

In selecting or creating a training component for a mentor program, directors of such programs have a variety of options including the use of a challenge course to develop leadership skills for mentors. A challenge course (e.g., a ropes course, outdoor course, or adventure course) contains demanding scenarios that places the participants into uncomfortable and stressful situations (Eatough et al., 2015; Rohnke et al., 2003). These can contain indoor or outdoor components. Challenge courses are an effective tool in training adolescents (Gillis & Speelman, 2008). They require the adolescent to depend on others to be successful, yet the individual's knowledge, skill, and ability play a significant role in the experience

(Eatough et al., 2015). This combination of relying on others and individually following through is a distinctive characteristic of challenge courses. Moreover, Glass and Benshoff (2002) found that challenge courses develop and foster group cohesion among adolescent participants. This is true regardless of race, gender, or age showing that challenge courses offer a unique opportunity to cross these barriers to develop cohesion (Glass & Benshoff, 2002; Hatch & McCarthy, 2005). After completing a challenge course, adolescent participants perceive an increase in effectiveness as an individual and member of a group (Hatch & McCarthy, 2005). Through this experience, some research has shown that adolescents develop life skills such as tolerance for one another, interpersonal skills, and conflict resolution as well as learn valuable and transferable life skills through the various tasks in which they engage and complete (Sibthorp, 2003). There are also additional specific leadership skills that challenge courses can effectively develop.

Through challenge courses, the development of emotional intelligence, self-efficacy, and leadership motivation significantly increases (Kass & Grandzol, 2012). Goleman (1998) defined emotional intelligence as, “the capacity for recognizing our feelings and those of others, for motivating ourselves, and for managing emotions well in ourselves and in our relationships” (p. 317). In essence, it allows an individual to see how their actions impact themselves and those around them. Barbuto et al. (2014) found that emotional intelligence predicts a leader’s efforts to lead using a servant-leadership ideology. This is important because it creates a distinct connection between emotional intelligence and servant leadership. Additionally, developing emotional intelligence increases the ability to not only manage emotions but also deal with complex mental tasks (Lam & Kirby, 2002). Challenge courses offer participants a unique opportunity to foster the important life skill of emotional intelligence through the various activities and scenarios provided (Kass & Grandzol, 2012).

Beyond emotional intelligence, challenge courses also foster the participant’s self-efficacy (Eatough et al., 2015; Kass & Grandzol, 2012) and promote higher levels of group cohesion and group member trust (Eatough et al., 2015). Bandura (1994) defined self-efficacy as one’s belief and confidence in task completion and success. It is possible to develop self-efficacy in adolescents by figuring out how to manage potentially challenging matters as well as advantageous life occurrences (Bandura, 1994). Challenge courses provide both opportunities through their interactive and thought-provoking situations (Kass & Grandzol, 2012). This empowers individuals to come together as a group and to be confident that they can complete a variety of tasks.

In addition to self-efficacy, challenge courses develop the participants’ leadership motivation, which is the desire to lead but not focusing on the power-based aspect of leadership (Kass & Grandzol, 2012; Kirkpatrick & Locke, 1991). Leadership motivation also entails the desire to influence others with a willingness to take on responsibility in a given circumstance (Kirkpatrick & Locke, 1991). This motivation also assists in developing bonds between members. By placing the participants in these stressful circumstances through a challenge course, there exists the potential to improve one’s feelings toward others (Eatough et al., 2015).

Not only this, but challenge courses provide an opportunity for individuals to rely on each other and be a resource for one another (Eatough et al., 2015). This forces participants to trust one another to be successful through each of the challenge course scenarios. Additionally, this type of experience builds reflective learning (Watson & Vasilieva, 2007). The opportunities afforded by challenge courses offer many positives for participants, including servant leadership.

## METHOD

Research indicates that effective mentor programs need to provide a thorough and all-encompassing training component (Anastasia et al., 2012; Randolph & Johnson, 2008). While there are many options for this training, challenge courses offer a unique opportunity in that the experiential learning and hands-on activities provided in this environment have a larger impact on leadership skills compared to other types of leadership development (Ewert & Overholt, 2010). The impact of this type of training has demonstrated positive effects immediately following the training, but over a longer period, the effectiveness significantly decreases (Schary et al., 2015; Schary et al., 2016). There exists little evidence showing that the positive outcomes from challenge course participation continue beyond the initial training (Schary et al., 2016).

With these factors in mind, the purpose of this study was to investigate the impact of a peer mentor program on the mentor's perceived servant leadership skill-set after program participation when they had additional life experience such as their first-year collegiate experience (i.e., academic, social, and emotional).

### Research Design

A qualitative design was utilized in this case study examining servant leadership through a social constructivism lens. In this study, the researcher desired to learn how participants' experience in a peer mentor program impacted their servant leadership. This meaning is subjective and relativist, therefore the researcher is examining the complexity of viewpoints, rather than a more narrowed focus (Creswell, 2013; Yin, 2011). Through the semi-structured interview protocol, questions generated by the researcher were broad and general to allow participants the opportunity to create the meaning of the situation. These open-end questions allowed the researcher to listen carefully to what people said or did in their experience (Creswell, 2013), realizing that this experience is formed by the external conditions as well as by the participant (Yin, 2011). As such, the researcher intended to interpret the meaning that others have about the world (Creswell, 2013). This allowed the researcher to answer the research question thoroughly and holistically.

### Participants

This study used participants from a suburban school district in Southwestern Pennsylvania. The district in which the study occurred had nearly an even breakdown of male and female students with only 15% total minority enrollment (12% Asian, 1% Black, and about 1% Hispanic), 11% total economically disadvantaged students, and just over 12% enrolled in special education (Future

Ready PA, 2019). The average median income was over \$116,000 and a median property value of nearly \$280,000 (Census, 2019). All participants came from this district.

Mentors were selected during the second semester of their sophomore year and participated in the program during their junior year of high school. There was an application process that included a review of GPA, attendance, and discipline records as well as video screening and teacher recommendations of candidates. Based on these data points, approximately 60 students were selected to participate in the program. Training had traditionally occurred in May of the sophomore year at a challenge course located in Central Pennsylvania. Participation in the program lasted through the duration of participants' junior year. Some students continued to participate in the program their senior year as members of the senior leadership team. This was typically between four and six seniors who applied and went through an extensive interview process. This process included an essay and in-person interview with program sponsors laying out specific goals and programming ideas. Since the program's training and overall structure had remained constant for at least five years, the researcher believed data can be pulled from this group and any conclusions made apply to future mentors.

For the semi-structured interviews, the participants for this study initially consisted of a purposeful sample from 2018-19 graduates who participated in the mentor program; however, due to COVID-19, most of the researcher's original selected candidates were unable to participate. While four participants were purposefully sampled, the researcher employed snowball sampling for the remaining participants, where some of the original participants identified others who were information-rich candidates and willing to participate (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981; Creswell, 2013). This technique was well-suited for this study since it requires specific knowledge that only certain individuals have (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981). The total sample included 12 participants, who completed the junior mentor program and have since graduated from high school. Based on the researcher's knowledge and experience in the mentor program, this sample size had the best opportunity for the researcher to obtain data saturation (Fusch & Ness, 2015). These individuals have all continued their education at the collegiate level, albeit at a wide variety of institutions. The vast majority of graduates who participated in the mentor program do further their education at a college or university. In table 1, the demographics of the participants are summarized.

Table 1  
*Participant Demographics*

Participant Number	Gender	College/University	Intended Major(s)
P1	Female	Duquesne University	Early Childhood Education
P2	Female	University of Villanova	Nursing
P3	Male	University of Pittsburgh	Orthodontics
P4	Male	University of Notre Dame	Business
P5	Female	University of Pittsburgh	Business
P6	Female	University of Delaware	Business (minor in theatre)
P7	Male	Pennsylvania State University	Secondary Education— Social Studies
P8	Female	Duquesne University	Occupational Therapy
P9	Male	Pennsylvania State University	Mechanical Engineering & Economics
P10	Female	Duquesne University	Early Childhood Education
P11	Male	University of North Carolina	Biostatistics
P12	Male	Pennsylvania State University	Finance

### Data Collection

Qualitative data were collected via semi-structured interviews from the 12 participants. Each interview consisted of two levels of questioning: main themes and corresponding follow-up questions (Kallio et al., 2016). The researcher used verbal and non-verbal probing techniques by repeating some of the participants' points or remaining quiet and listening to the interviewee as appropriate (Kallio et al., 2016). The researcher provided all participants with an informed consent agreement and the interview protocol before the interview. By supplying this information ahead of the interview, the participants knew that the researcher was recording the interviews using an audio device. Due to COVID-19, these interviews were conducted through Google Meet<sup>®</sup> over a secure network and computer. These interviews took place during the spring/summer of 2020 and the researcher used follow-up questions with three participants and employed member-checking (i.e., the returning of an interview or analyzed data to the participant) to verify all each participant's story (Birt et al., 2016). This also enhanced the credibility of the study (Creswell, 2013). The researcher used the technique of photo elicitation (e.g., showing photos to provoke memories) in the interviewing process as well as to answer the research questions as completely as possible (Creswell, 2013). Each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes.

While conducting and recording the interviews via Google Hangout<sup>®</sup> due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the researcher used a secure Chrome extension called Tactiq<sup>®</sup> that linked to the researcher's Google account, to provide a rough

transcript. He then edited the transcription focusing on not just the answers to the questions, but also any inflections or distinguishing characteristics from the conversation.

**Data Analysis**

Qualitative data were analyzed with In Vivo coding where the qualitative data were coded in a very literal way. The researcher took this approach, as it was appropriate for a beginning researcher, useful when working with educational youth, and focused on the voice of the participant (Saldaña, 2016). These codes focused on the research question posed. The purpose of these codes, and corresponding theme/subthemes, was to support an answer to the research question. The theme and subthemes are listed in the table below.

Table 2  
*Theme and Subthemes*

Theme	Subthemes
Recognizing others	Connecting with others Helping others Meeting others’ needs Acknowledging others’ contributions Creating a supportive environment Fostering empowerment Being adaptable Practicing openness Following through

**FINDINGS**

In response to the research question, *what impact, if any, does participation in a peer mentor program have on the mentor’s perception of their servant leadership skills?* The findings suggest that participation in a peer mentor program has an impact on the mentor’s perceived servant leadership skills. This was seen through the theme of *recognizing others*.

This theme was derived from the subthemes of connecting with others, helping others, meeting others’ needs, acknowledging others’ contributions, creating a supportive environment, fostering empowerment, being adaptable, practicing openness, and following through. It focuses on others, not oneself, and brings to the forefront the importance of examining interactions from a different point of view. The first subtheme, connecting with others, was the most prominent and exemplifies this theme.

**Connecting with Others**

Connecting with others describes individuals coming together and bonding as a cohesive group. This bonding includes breaking down barriers between individuals and getting to know one another better, on a deeper level. Some sample codes include, “all 60 of us really came together,” (P2) “everybody mixing,” (P3) “shared

personal experiences with others,” (P6), and “people accept me into their group” (P8).

This subtheme occurred throughout the participants’ experience with the challenge course training and peer mentor program. While there was a variation to some degree, there were common threads and interesting perspectives that the participants brought up in terms of this subtheme. P1 felt as though the remote location of the challenge course training and lack of cellular service played a large role in helping people to connect:

I loved when you have those moments when you're off the internet and off of technology that you can really connect with people. I feel like I have the best experiences when we don't have cellular connection. And I feel because of that it did grow our cabin stronger that we were all having fun and being able to talk.

P2 felt similarly, “I think it just took away that distraction and without technology communication and people interaction is always going to improve.” This improvement in interaction promoted better connectedness in the group.

While the location had an effect, the actual challenge course activities brought the connection between individuals as well. The leadership reaction course (LRC), which is unique to this particular challenge course, was specifically designed to have small groups engage in problem-solving, decision-making, and communication skills with various members taking leadership roles throughout the course. In this setting, P2 felt this course helped build the connection between individuals stating, “...it just opened up who we were...showed each other our true personalities and our true leadership...there was a good mixture in my group and we could see that in the LRC and we got to know each other.” P3 echoed this sentiment when he said that, “...it was great to be able to connect on a deeper level with people.” This deeper connection was seen throughout the participant’s experiences in the challenge course, particularly the LRC.

The connecting with others subtheme was less prominent with the participant’s mentoring experience, although field day was mentioned. Field day typically occurs in October of the school year on a half-day. All freshmen and junior mentors are excused from classes and participate in team-building activities on the football field with homerooms competing against one another. While the program sponsors set the rotation of events, senior volunteers that were former junior mentors run the activities. P11 cited field day as a time when he felt as though the freshmen and junior mentors started to develop a deeper bond, “It slowly became a very comfortable conversation. I think that started a little after field day, where we all just started understanding, we're all cool with each other...we're all just going to talk.” Similarly, P9 shared this about field day, “I think field day brought us the closest because not only did they have to work together, but we had to work with them.” Through these activities, the freshmen and their junior mentors were able to connect in a different setting than a typical Thursday morning in homeroom. In addition to this connection, the mentors were also able to help others.

### Helping Others

Helping others references the desire, need, and execution of action to assist other individuals in a variety of circumstances. This action leads to an improvement in someone else's situation and can be a simple action or more global contribution. Sample codes include, "being able to help each other," (P3) "helping others, someone they can come to," (P4) "I like helping others," (P5), and "relieve pressure on the freshmen" (P8). This subtheme occurred during the challenge course training and throughout the mentoring experience.

In the high-ropes portion of the challenge course training, the subtheme of helping others became prominent. P7 recalled completing the indoor high ropes course and his interaction with his partner for one portion:

I had to just be like, 'Look in my eyes, you can do this!' and I really felt we were in a movie for those few minutes, but it was really funny because she was terrified and she was shaking and literally grabbing onto my entire body, even though I could have easily fallen down just as fast as she could...I felt I was helping her out.

Through his words and actions, P7 was able to help his partner stay focused and complete the course.

Throughout the mentoring experience, participants spoke of helping freshmen in a variety of ways. P8 reflected on this experience and she had a powerful realization:

It made me look back and realize that these underclassmen only need one person in the hallway to say 'Hi' to them or point them in a certain direction, like I said, to boost their confidence and feel more comfortable in the high school environment. It really made me feel good that I could do that for a whole bunch of kids and help them.

This sentiment combines the simple action (e.g., saying 'hi' in the hallways) with the global contribution (e.g., "do that for a whole bunch of kids") that appears in the helping others subtheme.

Some of the participants also were members of athletic teams and they noted the transference of their skills to younger members of their respective teams. P11 was a member of the school soccer team and noted, "...being a mentor for the kids on the soccer team is something that's super important...that they knew I was there for them all the time...for those freshmen to make sure they knew they had someone." This experience propelled P11 and other athletes into a role where they were helping others, assisting them not just in school, but also in other areas of their lives. Helping others was prominent in the data analysis process and directly ties to the next subtheme: meeting others' needs.

### **Meeting Others' Needs**

Meeting others' needs focuses specifically on taking care of others by making sure they have whatever resources are necessary to be successful. It is not necessarily about one person, rather the group. The following sample codes illustrate this concept, "seemed like they actually got a lot out of it like," (P2) "showed that it's not about one person being a leader," (P3) "started acknowledging both sides to any questions that they might have," (P6) and "could related to them and how they were feeling at a certain time" (P8).

In making sure that her mentees had what they needed, P1 provided a key insight into this subtheme:

I can show them that, not only am I here as a friend, but I'm here for any advice that they need, that I've been through and I can show that through leadership...that I can, not just be like, 'Hey, this is what you should take.' But be like, 'So how are you in that class? Are you struggling in any way?' That they could come in the hallway and be like, 'Hey, I'm \_\_\_\_\_, I've got a question and be like, 'Ask me,' which I thought was really cool.

Instead of directing her mentees, she framed things to make sure they had whatever they needed to be successful.

During her mentoring experience, P6 realized that she and her fellow mentors had a positive experience in their freshman year, but that was not the case for all of the freshmen in their homeroom. As P6 said, "Once we started realizing that, we definitely started acknowledging both sides to any questions that they might have." Just because the mentors had one experience did not mean their mentees were having the same experience. Through realizing this, P6 and her fellow mentors were able to provide their freshmen with what they required to have their needs met. When meeting others' needs, it is also important to acknowledge others' contributions.

### **Acknowledging Others' Contributions**

Acknowledging others' contributions examines what others can contribute to a situation that may be different from what one may have initially thought. It also makes sure that other individuals have their voices heard. Codes that fell into this subtheme include, "who brought what to the table," (P2) "need a lot of empathy and being able to understand others," (P9) "when to take a step back and learn from other people's leadership," (P11) and "allowing everybody's voice to be heard" (P12).

This subtheme appeared through the various activities at the challenge course training. P6 felt that "It really helped me realize that I should give other people a chance to speak and listen to what everyone has to say and these activities really helped out with that." These activities had a similar impact on P11, "You might have to take a step back. So, it actually worked in the way to know when to take a step back and when to learn from other people's leadership skills. That's a big thing I took away from it..." In the end, P7's sentiments summarize this subtheme well, "I think this scenario showed me that all the mentors have different

strengths and that's what makes it awesome." Appreciating what others have to share, and taking a step back for them to be able to share, is an invaluable lesson when it comes to working with others. By doing this, one can also create a supportive environment.

### **Creating a Supportive Environment**

Creating a supportive environment occurs when there is synergy between individuals through an experience. It promotes positive interaction through the energy created by the group in a situation. This also allows individuals to feel more comfortable in a given scenario. The codes in this subtheme include, "cheering everyone on," (P1) "being with other people made one more comfortable," (P3) "try to make them want to feel engaged," (P7), and "easier for us to interact with each other" (P12). This subtheme was found throughout the challenge course training, but also in the mentor experience.

The remote environment with rustic accommodations started this supportive environment. P1 brought this up early on in her interview, "I feel since we were in an unfamiliar area at the challenge course, no one else had been there. We were all in one cabin. I feel like the environment did bring us closer..." The openness in the cabins and large space allowed for the girls (and in a separate cabin the boys) to freely interact.

During the various activities, this supportive environment appeared often through cheering and clapping for one another. P2 said, "...I really liked the low ropes course and I think most people did because it brought us closer to the people in our group as well." There were also strong sentiments for the positive environment at the high ropes courses. P1 recalled an instance at the outdoor portion, "I remember even watching-- I remember someone was on this really challenging one on the side and everyone was like, 'Oh my God. Go.' We were cheering everybody on. And that was really fun too..." This comradery was seen by P9 as well during the indoor portion when he, "...went up [to the leap of faith] and a bunch of people were there making sure I went through with it. It was a very supportive group... of people making sure you felt safe and comfortable with whatever you're doing."

In the evening, the participants were part of a bottle-flipping event that pitted individuals against one another in friendly competition through a bracket. P5 had strong feelings as she shared, "...these guys really, they got excited about it which helped a lot and then everybody...it just translated with everything...Even after, we were all just talking about it and saying how much fun it was so that was cool." When reflecting on the bottle-flipping activity, P6 had similar sentiments as P5, "I won the first two rounds in something and everyone was screaming and someone was recording. It's so fun to look back on because it was just everyone was just so happy and it was such a cool moment to capture."

The participants carried this energy into their mentoring experience. The daily setup of this high school had homeroom at the beginning of each day, separated by grade level and alphabet, with a few exceptions including a junior mentor homeroom. The mentors started each day in this homeroom except for Thursday when they would go and work with their assigned freshmen homeroom.

P11 had many positive things to say about the supportive environment created in this setup, "...it was a camaraderie in a sort of sense. You'd walk in and everyone was there...you'd sit with your mentors, so you got super close with them...it's a very good sense of community. I enjoyed that a lot." In terms of the actual mentoring experience with regards to the environment, P7 described what he and his group did with their freshmen:

I never excluded one from another and I think that's key, to make everybody in the classroom environment feel comfortable, make sure everybody feels comfortable, and that they want to be there...I always walked in with the attitude, let's try to make them stay, which try to make them want to feel engaged.

By trying to engage with their freshmen and make them want to stay and be a part of the group, these mentors created an environment that promoted positive interaction, which in turn can foster empowerment.

### **Fostering Empowerment**

Fostering empowerment impacts both an individual and the group often in the form of epiphany. It provides them with the opportunity to learn from failure and take control of their life or situation. It also provides them valuable lessons in terms of leadership and life. This subtheme includes sentiments such as, "failure can lead to a better way of success," (P8) "showed me a leader is anyone," (P9) "I'm not the only one there that can lead," (P11), and "do big things by doing simple things" (P12).

During the challenge course, P8 felt the low ropes course had some unintentional instances of fostering empowerment, "...I feel everyone failing and trying again was definitely a good icebreaker that we weren't even aware of. That helped us a lot and some people that I was closer with were closer with people that I didn't know..." By going through the course and experiencing failure, it brought P8 and her groupmates together in a different way, one that allowed them to take control of events moving forward and learn things about themselves and one another.

Throughout her experience with the mentor program, including the challenge course training, P2 felt she grew a lot, "...whether it be my confidence, ability of being the leader or comfort and help people. I think was really cool because I realized that I could be the person that could help and...comfort people as they were growing..." This experience contributed to P2's current major in nursing, as it enabled her personal and professional growth. For this growth to occur, one needs to be adaptable.

### **Being Adaptable**

Being adaptable is the ability to react and modify one's plan and/or actions to meet the needs of a given scenario. In essence, how one adjusts to changes in their environment. This appears in the In Vivo codes, "being adaptable that came from

mentoring,” (P2) “reacting to certain situations,” (P4), and “multiple ways to approach a situation” (P9).

During the challenge course training and also through participation in the mentor program, P4 felt that his reactionary skills grew and greatly benefited him, “...it also promotes a lot of reactionary skills...reacting to certain situations and being a reactionary leader...going to each situation with a plan, but also expecting things to not go to plan and developing the skills to address those situations.” In essence, P4 noted the importance of modifying and adjusting to the situation that came up whether it be at the challenge course, in his freshman homeroom, or beyond.

P2 realized in college how important it is to be adaptable. While she was a standout amongst her peers in high school, she saw that in college that there were other highly qualified individuals. There were times that she applied for leadership positions, but did not get them. During the interview, P2 reflected on this:

...it's also very challenging now because I will apply for a lot of stuff that every single person applies for and that was super involved in high school so it's been harder to get a lot of stuff, but I think what I've gotten out of this whole freshman year, being denied from things, but getting other stuff is the adaptability that came from mentoring. You have to be adaptable to your students, your group whatever it is. But here I'll get denied from something but I'm not going to let that hold me back. I'm going look at the situation. I'm going to apply for next year or whatever it is.

This resiliency is an important aspect of being adaptable because often things do not work out as one intends, which requires an individual to be open to other possibilities.

### **Practicing Openness**

Practicing openness happens when there is free sharing of information between individuals without judgment. This often occurs when individuals are receptive to new ideas and/or experiences. Sample In Vivo codes for this subtheme contained sentiments like, “open to every single person's ideas,” (P2) “have separate minds and ideas, but came together and shared our thoughts” (P7), “more open to making friends after high school,” (P8) and “helped us view things differently” (P9).

During the challenge course training, the low ropes course promoted this free-sharing of information according to P7, “...we all have our own separate minds and ideas, but we shared what we thought was the best solution to this problem and we all worked together towards that goal...and just understanding how other people think.” Through this experience, without passing judgment, the participants were able to not just succeed in the various activities, but also develop a better sense of how one another thinks and operates. P4 felt this with his peers, “...they have such different perspectives than you're used to because you're not always with them and that's something else that the mentor program brought to me.” By considering those different viewpoints, one can learn a lot about others, but also themselves.

These differences provided a powerful lesson for P9, who had insight through this experience with both his fellow mentors and his mentees:

I could learn to listen and accept and understand different viewpoints, different ideologies, different personalities, and not pass judgment. I think that I was able to grow a lot in that aspect and to this day I try to be as open-minded as I can. If I disagree with someone I try to view it like, ‘Okay, where are you coming from, like why?’ I don’t just shut it down.

This practice of openness yields a more tolerant and understanding point of view that could have a significant impact on not just the individual, but how they in turn engage with others and society at large. For this to be effective though, there must be follow-through.

### **Following Through**

Following through is seeing a task through until its full and successful completion. This occurs with consistent and sustained effort. Sample In Vivo codes for this subtheme includes, “I would be the person that would text first,” (P2) “I went for it and it worked...it was the coolest experience,” (P4) “action is the number one thing, if you want to show that you care to prove it,” (P7) and “let’s make the most of whatever we do have” (P11).

During the high ropes course, P6 felt that she and her partner experienced the effects of following through, “...she was terrified and literally grabbing onto my entire body, even though I could have easily fallen down as fast as she could but it was fun. I felt I was helping her out...I think I did take the lead.” P6 helped to see the activity with her partner to the end, albeit with some struggle. This emphasized the importance of completing a task, which translated into the mentoring experience for P7. When mentoring his freshmen, P7 felt that he and his group did follow through, “...if you want to show that you care prove it don’t just say it...I loved going to homeroom every week and talking to them, and feeling like...I always walked in thinking that I want to make a difference...” P12 felt similarly saying, “you got to make it happen” with sustained time, effort, and dedication. He also took this a step further stating that this process was cyclical for him, “It reminds you to be a good person, that’s what this kind of thing does. Then once you do it and you see it in action and you see the fruits of it of doing good, then it’s just keeps going.” This cycle can then repeat itself, yielding benefits for generations to come.

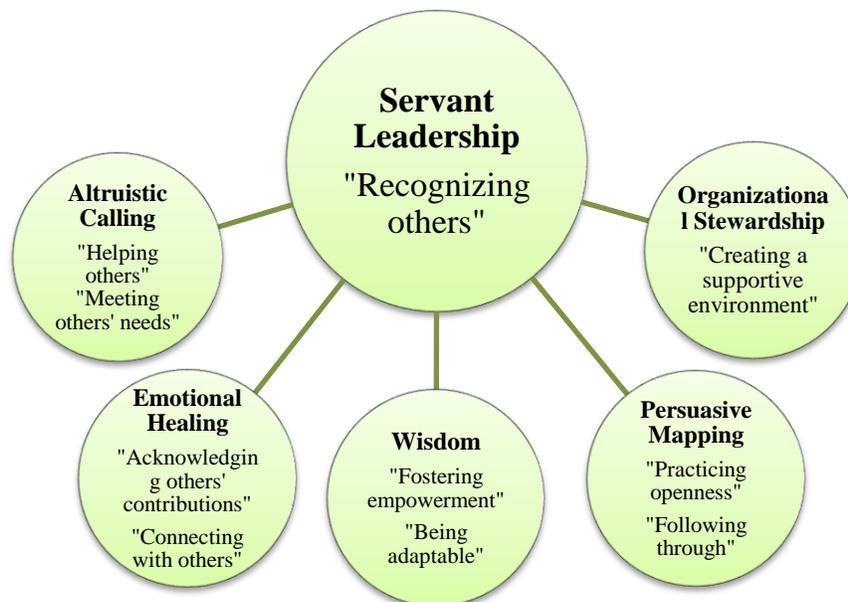
### **Summary of Findings**

In alignment with the research question, the theme of recognizing others was created from the subthemes of connecting with others, helping others, meeting others’ needs, acknowledging others’ contributions, creating a supportive environment, fostering empowerment, being adaptable, practicing openness, and following through. It focuses on others and highlights the importance of examining interactions from a different perspective.

## DISCUSSION

The discussion portion of this article brings together the results with relevant literature that helped to form the research. The results in relation to the research question revealed the theme of *recognizing others*, which focused on others, not oneself, and brought to the forefront the importance of examining interactions from a different perspective. This connects to the concept of servant leadership, which is “other” focused (Greenleaf, 1977; Sendjaya & Sarros, 2002; van Dierendonck, 2011). Under this theme were corresponding subthemes of helping others, meeting others’ needs, acknowledging others, connecting with others, fostering empowerment, being adaptable, practicing openness, following through, and creating a supportive environment. These subthemes align with the five factors of the Barbuto and Wheeler (2006) Servant Leadership Questionnaire: *altruistic calling*, *emotional healing*, *wisdom*, *persuasive mapping*, and *organizational stewardship* (Barbuto & Wheeler, 2006), which is illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1  
*Tenants of Servant Leadership*



*Note.* This figure illustrates the connection between the five factors of servant leadership (Barbuto & Wheeler, 2006) and corresponding theme/subthemes.

According to Barbuto and Wheeler (2006), the first tenant of servant leadership is altruistic calling. Researchers have defined altruistic calling as a leader’s desire to make a positive impact in others’ lives and putting their needs ahead of oneself (Barbuto & Wheeler, 2006; Bass, 2000). Altruism represents an important aspect of leadership in general, but specifically in servant leadership (Greenleaf, 1977; Sendjaya et al., 2008). Those who possess high levels of altruistic calling put the needs of others ahead of their own while simultaneously working for their followers. The results from this study revealed the subthemes of helping

others and meeting others' needs, which align with the altruistic calling aspect of servant leadership. The subtheme of helping others represents one's desire, need, and execution of action to assist other individuals in a variety of circumstances. Often, this can lead to an improvement in another's situation through either a simple gesture or a contribution on a larger scale. Meeting others' needs requires one to care for others by making sure they have whatever resources are necessary to be successful. The focus is on the group, not the individual. It must be noted that these needs are not on the most basic (i.e., food, clothing, shelter), which must first be addressed. In this study, the participants had already had their foundational needs met.

The second tenant of servant leadership is emotional healing (Barbuto & Wheeler, 2006). Emotional healing represents a leader's ability, skill, and commitment to fostering emotional recovery through empathy and listening, making the followers feel their voices are heard and attending to their needs (Barbuto & Wheeler, 2006; Liden et al., 2008). The main intent of emotional healing is to create a safe environment where individuals can voice their personal and professional concerns (Barbuto & Wheeler, 2006). It also provides a process to make one whole again after they have felt broken in terms of their spirit and will (Spears & Lawrence, 2016). Often, it comes from emotional pain and hurt that occur just by being a human being. This requires a leader to be aware of their environment. The results from this study identified several subthemes that align with the tenant of emotional healing. These include acknowledging others' contributions and connecting with others. The subtheme of acknowledging others' contributions examines what others can contribute to a situation, which often differs from their initial thoughts. It also ensures that other individuals have their voices heard. Relating to this subtheme, connecting with others describes individuals coming together to bond as a cohesive unit. This bond includes breaking down barriers between individuals and getting to know one another better, on a deeper level.

The third tenant of servant leadership, as defined by the Barbuto and Wheeler (2006) Servant Leadership Questionnaire, is wisdom. Wisdom is the leader's ability to be aware of their surroundings and anticipates any issues that may arise through their use of knowledge and utility (Barbuto & Wheeler, 2006). It engages self-awareness and environmental consciousness by gaining and distributing knowledge, which in turn empowers the followers (Crippen, 2005; Kohle Paul & Fitzpatrick, 2015). Wisdom allows a leader to combine idealism with practicality to best lead their followers. The results from this study contain several subthemes that support this tenant including fostering empowerment and being adaptable. Fostering empowerment impacts both an individual and the group often through a powerful realization. It gives everyone the chance to learn from failure and take control of his or her own life or situation. For example, P8 felt going through a scenario in the low ropes course where their team had to stand on an unstable log together, gave her and her group this opportunity. She recalled, "...everyone failing and trying again was definitely a good icebreaker that we weren't even aware of. That helped us a lot and some people that I was closer with were closer with people that I didn't know..." P8 and her groupmates together in a

different way, one that allowed them to take control of events moving forward and learn things about themselves and one another. This also provided them important lessons in terms of leadership and life: failure can be used as a learning tool. In this situation, P8 and her team may have been benefitted by adapting to the situation. Being adaptable represents the ability to react and modify one's plan and/or actions for a given situation. P2 believed that she developed adaptability through the mentor program. This occurred through her role as a mentor, meeting the freshmen where they were at, and also through her freshman year in college, where she had to manage expectations when getting turned down from leadership roles that she had applied for. In essence, being adaptable shows how one can adjust to changes in their environment.

The fourth tenant of servant leadership is persuasive mapping, which is the leader's ability to map and conceptualize issues to create a compelling vision for their followers (Barbuto & Wheeler, 2006) as well as use their insight to generate a strategic plan to turn their vision into reality (Kohle Paul & Fitzpatrick, 2015). Leaders who possess strength with this characteristic not only have a vision and plan to carry it out, but they convey this to their followers and engage them as active participants throughout the entire process. The results revealed two subthemes that directly connect to the fourth tenant: practicing openness and following through. Practicing openness occurs when there is an open sharing of information between individuals without judgment. P9 exemplified this subtheme when reflecting on his experience, "I could learn to listen and accept and understand different viewpoints, different ideologies, different personalities, and not pass judgment." Often this happens when individuals are responsive to new ideas and/or experiences. Following through transpires when an individual ensures a task is fully and completed. P12 felt, "you got to make it happen" with true dedication toward achieving a goal. This requires consistent and sustained effort.

The final tenant of servant leadership is organizational stewardship, which is the leader's ability to create a communal climate and positive atmosphere for the well-being of the organization and to leave a legacy (Barbuto & Wheeler, 2006). It is a conscious act that forces leaders to remember that their actions and the actions of their organization have an impact and repercussions not just internally but externally (Covey, 2002). Organizational stewardship offers a framework for how the organization relates to its resources and governs itself (Spears & Lawrence, 2016). Organizational stewardship intends to advance the positive impact of the organization on the community and surroundings, ensuring that things are better off now than they previously were. The results showed one subtheme in alignment with this tenant: creating a supportive environment. This occurs when there is a cooperation between individuals through an experience. It promotes positive interaction through the energy created in a group's situation and allows individuals to feel more comfortable in a scenario. This was evident throughout the mentor program but in particular the mentor homeroom for P11. Instead of being with their peers alphabetically, those selected as peer mentors their junior year were assigned to a homeroom together. P11 had many positive things to say about the supportive environment created in this setup, "...it was a camaraderie in a sort of sense. You'd

walk in and everyone was there...you'd sit with your mentors, so you got super close with them...it's a very good sense of community.”

Together, the results with relevant literature on servant leadership, suggest that participation in a peer mentor program with a challenge course training component does enhance one's servant leadership skill-set in each of the five factors of the Barbuto and Wheeler (2006) Servant Leadership Questionnaire. By connecting the results to a reliable and valid instrument, it should enhance this study's transferability.

### **Significance of Findings**

The findings from this study confirm and verify previous research, but also expand on it regarding the impact of challenge course training and participation in a peer mentor program. The participants indicated through their responses that the challenge course training and peer mentor program participation impacted their servant leadership skill-set.

The results and discussion from this study verify that challenge courses are effective in training adolescents (Gillis & Speelman, 2008). Additionally, Kass and Grandzol (2012) found that challenge course training significantly increases the development of emotional intelligence, self-efficacy, and leadership motivation. This study confirmed these results as participants' responses indicated that they recognized how their actions impacted themselves and those around them (Goleman, 1998), demonstrated their belief and confidence in completing tasks (Bandura, 1994), and were willing to take ownership in a variety of circumstances (Kirkpatrick & Locke, 1991). Additionally, the results from Eatough et al. (2015) were verified as the challenge course experience was shown to improve one's feelings toward others and incorporate a reliance on oneself and others to have a successful experience. This was seen in this study as the connection between themes that emerged provided evidence of individual development and positive feelings toward one another. Previous research has also suggested that challenge courses foster group cohesion among adolescent participants (Eatough et al., 2015; Glass & Benshoff, 2002; Hatch & McCarthy, 2005), which this study confirmed. Through the challenge course training experience and subsequent participation in a peer mentor program, the participants bonded as a group and operated as a unified team, which is a significant result.

While there is limited research on how to best design mentor programs to maximize their effectiveness (Allen et al., 2006; DuBois et al., 2002; Randolph & Johnson, 2008; Van Ryzin, 2010), the results and corresponding discussion of this study suggest that a comprehensive approach to mentoring with a thorough challenge course training component and subsequently sustained peer mentor program may be one avenue for program designers consider. Research exists that supports challenge courses (Boettcher & Gansemer-Topf, 2015; Eatough et al., 2015; Rohnke et al., 2003; Sandberg et al., 2017; Schary et al., 2015; Schary et al., 2016) and mentor programs (Lampert, 2005; Newby & Heide, 2013) impact on overall leadership skill development, but limited research has specifically focused on servant leadership. Allen et al. (1997) did find that often those seeking to become a mentor possess a desire to help others (i.e., other-focused), which is only one

component of servant leadership. Previous research has indicated that servant leaders possess qualities such as developing empowerment, promoting stewardship, building relationships, and portraying vision (Coetzer et al., 2017; Gregory Stone et al., 2004; Smith et al., 2004), which was seen in the results of this study indicating that participants' servant leadership skill-set was impacted through the challenge course and peer mentor program participation.

The results from this study specifically build on the impact of servant leadership through the challenge course training and participation in a peer mentor program. By combining the challenge course training with a sustained peer mentor program, any dissipation effects of the challenge course experience (Schary et al., 2015; Schary et al., 2016) appear to have been mitigated, including the loss of group cohesion (Glass & Benshoff, 2002; Hatch & McCarthy, 2005). This suggests that the combination of challenge course training and peer mentor program participation may provide a pathway for participants to experience continued growth and development of their servant leadership skills without losing the benefits afforded through the challenge course training in relation to their servant leadership skill-set.

#### *Limitations of Findings*

The limitations for this study include the sample, time, participant attendance, and the COVID-19 pandemic. By using the high school in which the researcher works, the sample does limit the transferability of the results. This high school is not representative of most other high schools in the country, having a low percentage of minority and economically disadvantaged students. Additionally, the researcher was unable to interview every single mentor, past and present, during the study. As such, the mentors may or may not be an accurate representation of other mentors or students in other school districts across the state or nation. This also does limit the transferability of the results. Another limitation comes from the short time length of homeroom, only ten minutes long, as well as participant attendance. If the participants were absent from homeroom or sought out help from teachers or other classmates outside of the homeroom, then they were not as immersed in the homeroom experience as a peer mentor. This could have impacted their experience as peer mentors. Finally, the researcher had initially intended a mixed-methodology study, but due to the COVID-19 pandemic, was unable to conduct the quantitative portion. Newly selected mentors in the spring of 2020 were to take the Barbuto and Wheeler (2006) Servant Leadership Questionnaire before their challenge course training, directly after, and three months later in alignment with the research on challenge course training regarding the loss of skills over time (Schary et al., 2015; Schary et al., 2016). Due to COVID-19, this training had to be canceled and was not rescheduled as the pandemic continued into the fall of 2020 when school resumed.

#### *Recommendations for Future Research*

In terms of building on this research, several different approaches could be taken to provide a deeper level of understanding of the impact of challenge course training and a peer mentor program on an individual's servant leadership skill-set as well as

self-perception. First, before attending the training, a group of newly selected mentors could be given the Barbuto and Wheeler (2006) Servant Leadership Questionnaire, which is a valid and reliable instrument (Melchar & Bosco, 2010; Sendjaya et al., 2008), to self-rate their servant leadership skills. This questionnaire is shorter in length (23 items) compared to other instruments yet still thoroughly measures servant leadership traits (Sendjaya et al., 2008). After receiving the training, participants would again complete the Barbuto and Wheeler (2006) Servant Leadership Questionnaire and do so in three months. This is in alignment with the research on challenge courses that states the impact of this training has positive initial effects but decreases over a few months (Schary et al., 2015; Schary et al., 2016). Furthermore, the instrument could be given again after participants begin mentoring their freshmen to determine quantitatively if participation in a mentor program does mitigate the dissipation effect on servant leadership skills. The researcher originally had intended on incorporating this quantitative component into his study, but due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the challenge course training was canceled and not rescheduled.

To enhance this research, a similar study should be conducted using a different theoretical framework such as intersectionality. This study did not examine the data through this important lens, which means that there were a variety of important factors that were not addressed. These factors include examining the participant's ability to break away from the status quo when appropriate and questioning those in leadership roles, focusing on the inequities that exist in society and correspondingly the educational system, and addressing the concept of self-worth without the influence of societal norms and pressures. If these factors could be analyzed in detail, then important structural and societal changes could be substantially addressed.

Another avenue for further research could come from the development and implementation of a similarly structured peer mentor program (i.e., challenge course training component and sustained program participation) that could be conducted in other school districts that have a more diverse student body. This could then be examined similarly to this study, but also incorporate the aforementioned quantitative components. By doing this, the results could be further transferred and generalized to a larger audience.

Finally, further research could include a longitudinal study that focuses on the impact of the participants' experience beyond just their first year out of high school. This could be combined with examining and grouping other participants based on their year of participation and corresponding graduating year. Examining the data over an extended time could increase the reliability and credibility of the results.

## CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to investigate the impact of participation in a peer mentor program and corresponding challenge course training on the participants' servant leadership skill-set through the lens of social constructivism. To better grasp the purpose, a thorough review of existing literature was conducted on mentor programs, challenge courses, and servant leadership. This review provided the

researcher an opportunity to discover a gap in the literature and help guide the research study.

Mentor programs have been shown to provide mentors with increased levels of confidence and competence through the relationships formed (Newby & Heide, 2013) as well as enhanced personal growth and development (Lampert, 2005). They provide a valuable experience and outlet for individuals to contribute to an organization and help others. At the core of an effective mentor program is an inclusive training component (Anastasia et al., 2012), but the exact type of training was not fully described within the body of research.

Challenge course training offers a unique opportunity for participants to be put into difficult situations not just as an individual, but also with other individuals in a group setting (Odello et al., 2008). This type of training encourages communication, organization, and empowerment of others (Boettcher & Gansemer-Topf, 2015). It also provides participants the chance to better recognize their leadership identities in the context of a larger scope (Boettcher & Gansemer-Topf, 2015), while developing emotional intelligence and self-efficacy (Kass & Grandzol, 2012). Unfortunately, the research indicates the positive effects of challenge course training tend to wane after just three months (Schary et al., 2015; Schary et al., 2016).

While these pieces of training have been shown to improve overall leadership (Boettcher & Gansemer-Topf, 2015), the research has not focused specifically on servant leadership. Servant leadership is a people-centered leadership style (Sendjaya & Sarros, 2002; van Dierendonck, 2011) that emphasizes a need to serve, which serves as motivation to lead (Greenleaf, 1977). While there are a variety of instruments to measure servant leadership skills, Barbuto and Wheeler (2006) created a servant leadership questionnaire that contains five factors: altruistic calling, emotional healing, wisdom, persuasive mapping, and organizational stewardship. These characteristics are conceptually and empirically distinct, although not all-inclusive of every aspect of servant leadership (Barbuto & Wheeler, 2006).

When examining the research, a gap existed that did not address the connection between all of these components. Through this qualitative case study that employed semi-structured interviews of recent high school graduates from a peer mentor program, the researcher gathered a thick and rich description of their experience as well as valuable insight into their growth and development as servant leaders. The findings of this study can offer guidance to educators and administrators when creating a peer mentor program that will offer a significant, positive impact on peer mentors. Combining challenge course training and peer mentor program participation appears to mitigate the dissipation effects that Schary et al. (2015) and Schary et al. (2016) found regarding challenge courses. The challenge course training and participation in the peer mentor program shows promise as a powerful combination that allows participants to grow as servant leaders to better relate and work with those around them, not just now, but for years to come.

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