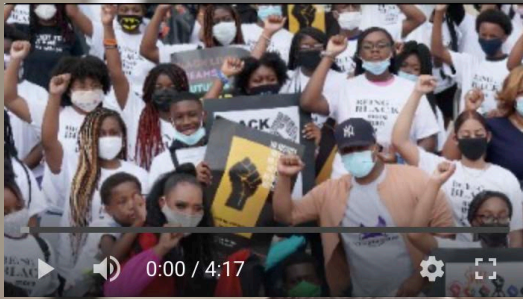**VIP Online Academy:**
Results from a mentoring program
for at-risk youth

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

VIP Online Academy is a youth-focused organization that has foci in several components of youth development, such as mentorship, STEM programs, entrepreneurship, artistic expression, movement and both male/female empowerment groups. The VIP Online Academy was started in response to COVID-19 as a means to engage young adults who might otherwise be bereft of educational programming and mentor/mentee relationships outside of the home. The online workshops are geared to increase morale, impart knowledge, provide social/emotional support and circulate important information, while providing recreation and entertainment to participants. The agency aims to inspire, uplift and empower youth to overcome adversity, seek out opportunity and self-actualize.

Quantitatively, in a climate of Covid-isolation where one might reasonably expect some level of self-efficacy loss among students, the percentage of participants in the VIP Online Academy in the City of East Orange reporting median and upper levels of self-efficacy at the onset of their participation in the program was largely maintained or slightly increased. Importantly, however, the percentage of students who "disagreed" and "strongly disagreed" with statements regarding their self-efficacy (and thereby reported the lowest levels of self-efficacy) at the onset of the program decreased dramatically at the program's conclusion, and in some instances were more than halved. These findings, though preliminary, may show that although the program showed benefit for its participants overall, the greatest beneficiaries of the program and the mentor/mentee relationships which the program utilized were those young men and women who could be considered most "at risk." Again, although preliminary, these quantitative findings were supported qualitatively, with responses including strong themes of self-reliance and self-resilience such as "anything is possible as long as you work for it" and "no matter the obstacles that we face, you must keep going."

INTRODUCTION

VIP Online Academy is a mentoring service agency that aims to enhance the quality of life of young adults impacted by various at-risk factors. Research indicates that youth mentoring programs are successful in modeling successful and healthy relationships, while increasing a youth's confidence and self-esteem (Rhodes, Reddy, Roffman & Grossman, 2005). The present study validates the relationship between youth who participated in the program and their perception of positive life trajectory. It also substantiates the positive correlation between the participant, curriculum and presentation of the course material. Data demonstrated that mentees who participated in the program felt confident in their ability to overcome life challenges. Qualitative data analysis of 553 respondents demonstrate straightforward focus in improving their lives and overcoming personal, lived experiences. This measure is promising to utilize in future qualitative studies to further examine the relationship between youth and mentor.

BACKGROUND

Literature indicates that mentoring programs are ways to address the decreased availability of reliable adult support and guidance in the lives of youth (Rhodes, Reddy, Roffman & Grossman, 2005). VIP Online Academy offers youth the opportunity to be a part of a supportive community. Mentoring relationships can be influential for youth who have limited supports. Mentors with lived experiences, coupled with professional workshops and guidance can create a safe, long-term relationship for youth. It is stated that these relationships can improve trajectory in the mentee's parental relationship, academic achievement, self-concept and behavior (Rhodes, Reddy & Roffman, 2005). Although youth are likely to anticipate positive relationships with their mentors, it is critical that mentors are trained professionally to ensure that the relationship remains close, reaches longevity and proves effectiveness. VIP Online Academy allows for youth to use personal experiences to help understand resilience, while living in poverty, experiencing community violence and undergoing tremendous familial stressors.

Understanding the needs of both mentors and mentees is critical to ensuring that both are engaged in a healthy relationship. Mentors are often navigating complicated systems, managing internal conflicts from a past history of adverse experiences and maintaining positive relationships with youth. Youth need to have positive and formulative relationships with their mentor in
order to help understand the complexities of healthy relationships.
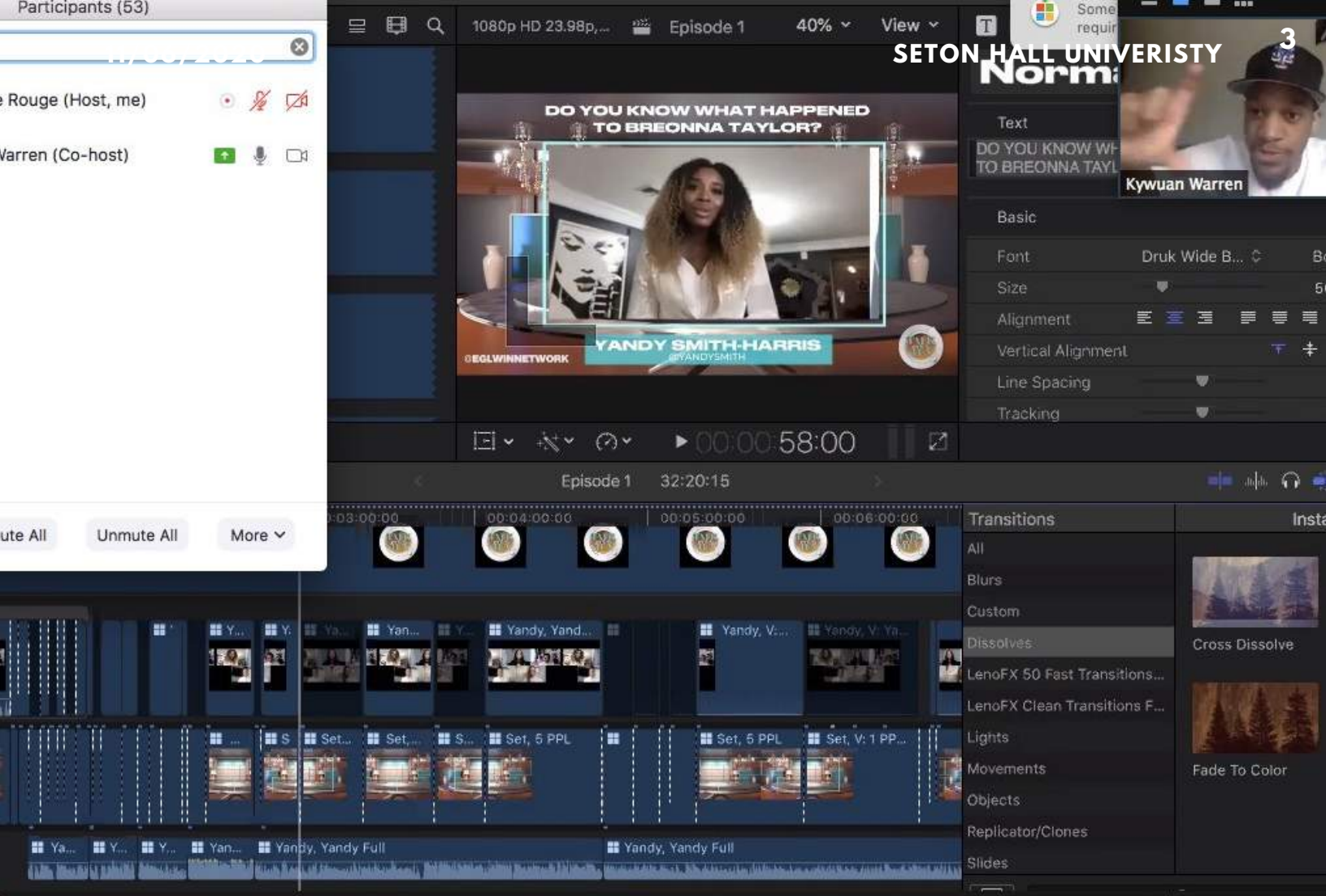
SCOPE

A self-administered, anonymous, 8-question questionnaire was developed to explore demographics, personal involvement in previous risk factors and the prevalence of empowerment, self-efficacy and resilience.

OBJECTIVE

To examine existing curriculum and assess the efficacy of its impact in demonstrating quality mentor programs for at-risk youth. Importantly, it examined the youth's personal life journeys and how experiences can transfer to viable and successful skills. This relationship is important to demonstrate to youth, who have been exposed to community violence, gang involvement and adverse childhood experiences.

PARTICIPANTS

In total, there were about 554 respondents, with 62.09% female participants and 37.91% male participants. Ages primarily ranged with about 97.84% participants in the 14-18 range and 1.98% between 19-24 years of age.
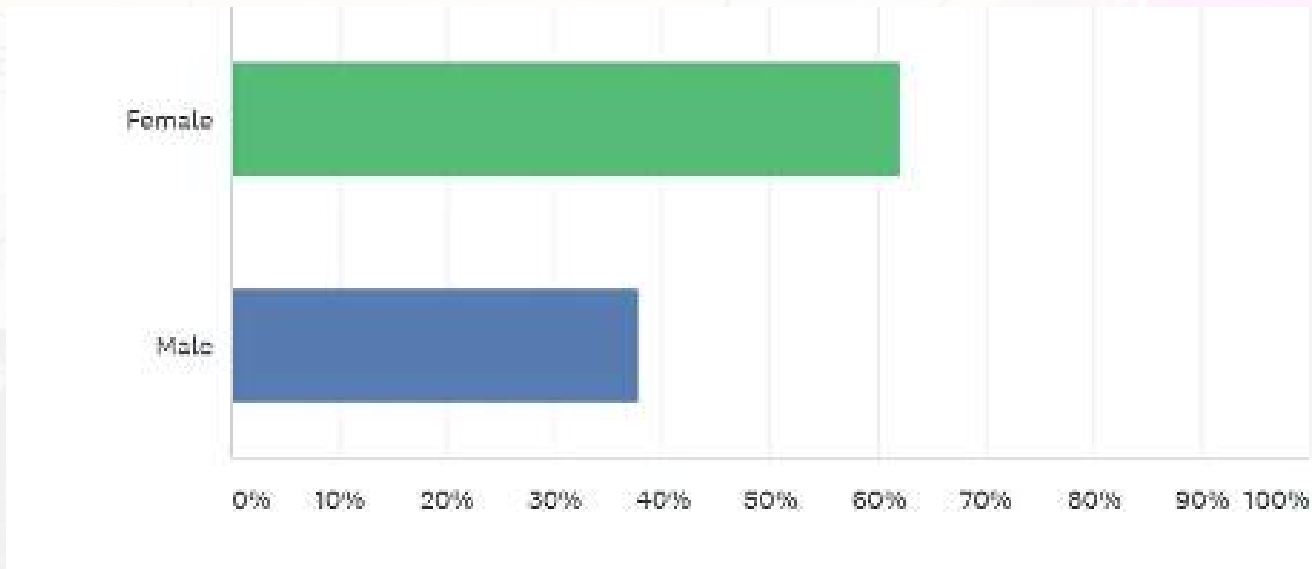
RESULTS

Literature demonstrates that youth are known to engage in high risk behaviors with consequential effects that impact adverse health outcomes, socioeconomic impact and psychosocial effects (Beier, Rosenfeld & Spitanly, 2000). Of the participants in the mentoring program through VIP Online Academy, 46.9% indicated post-program that they strongly believe that they can obtain outcomes that are important to them; the number was 41.40 pre-program. Additionally, post-program 35.17% expressed that they strongly believe they can succeed at most tasks compared to 30.30 at the program's onset. Although representing modest gains, it is important to remember that the program was conducted during the summer and during a period of pandemic-isolation— a season and climate in which one might reasonably expect some level of self-efficacy loss among students. These outcomes are also important to recognize because they demonstrate character strength and determination to overcome challenges during a challenging time. Less modest, and perhaps more important, were the gains registered among the program's participants that reported the lowest levels of self-efficacy. Within the entire cohort of students 5.63% initially disagreed or strongly disagreed that they were "able to achieve most of the goals they have set for themselves"; at the program's conclusion that number dropped to 2.53. Likewise, those who strongly disagreed or disagreed that they can obtain outcomes that are important to them dropped from 6.93% to 2.95; and the number of those who strongly disagreed or disagreed that they can succeed at most tasks dropped from 10.10% to 4.66. Finally, the number of those who disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement "I can succeed at almost any endeavor to which I set my mind" dropped from 6.71% to 3.7.

RESULTS (CONT'D)

Although preliminary in nature, these findings of improvement among those within the cohort with the lowest levels of reported self-efficacy at the program's onset are worthy of further study. Although the program showed benefit for its participants overall, the greatest beneficiaries of the program and the mentor/mentee relationships which the program utilized appear to be those young men and women who could be considered most "at risk."

In the responses, participants further indicated that they strongly agree that mental health is important, and they expressed that they can "persevere during hard times." These results are significant in recognizing that these youth have the desire to move beyond their barriers, and support provided by a trusting adult can assist in this. The results also demonstrate a noteworthy level of resilience in these youth as well as the ability to forecast positive outcomes in their lives.

Mentee surveys were scored and data was collected in Survey Monkey. Initially, data collected demonstrated major themes, such as resilience, impact of the presentation, understanding the perception of mental illness and self-awareness and the improvement of self-efficacy. The analysis was conducted to test whether self-efficacy improved from initial assessment to final assessment. In sum, the goal of the data analysis was to discern whether mentoring aspects of the VIP Online Academy were linked to youth's outcomes, such as an increase in perceived self-efficacy, self-awareness and expectations.

AGE OF PARTICIPANTS
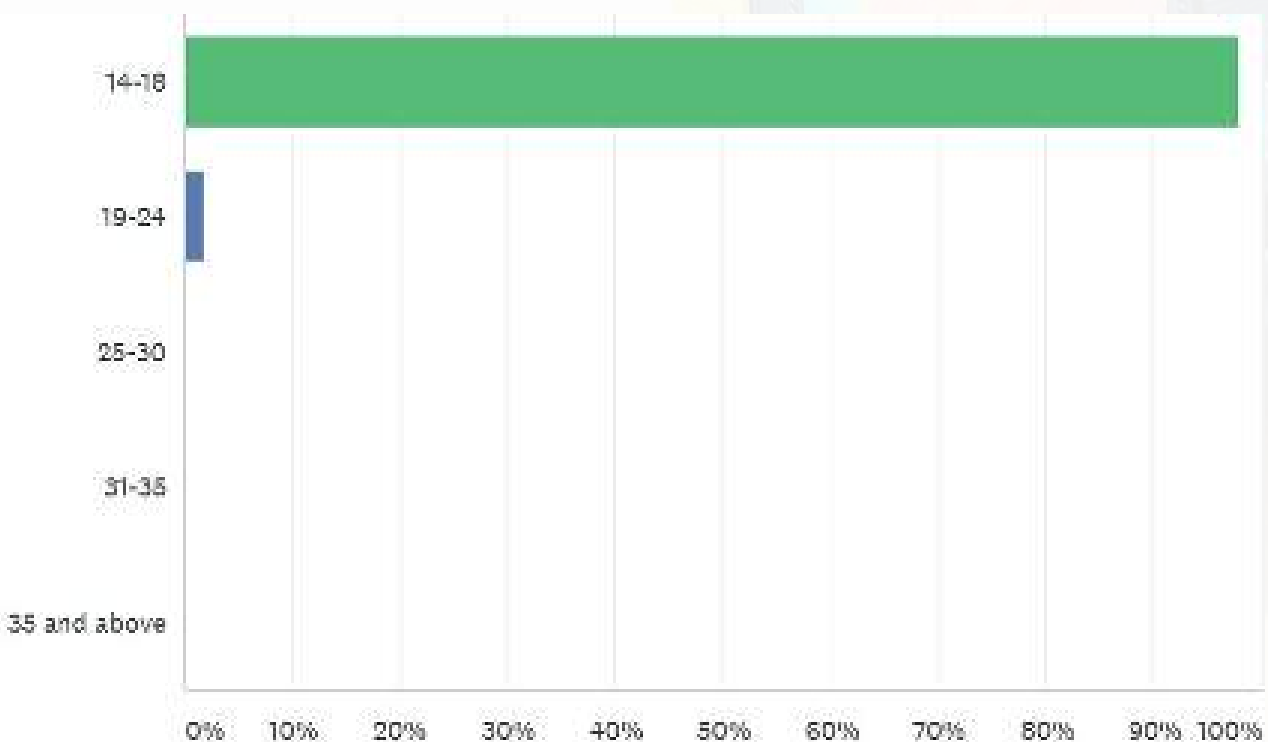
DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS

Mentee surveys were examined for qualitative and quantitative data. A series of descriptive quantitative data was conducted to explore self-efficacy. Data indicates that post-program 46.9% strongly agreed that they can obtain outcomes important to them, compared to 41.4% pre-program. Those who disagreed and strongly disagreed dropped from 6.99% to 5.08%. 86.92% believed or strongly believed that will "be able to successfully overcome many challenges." This response saw a modest increase from pre to post survey (2.5%), with gains witnessed again in those who initially strongly disagreed with that statement, which went from 6.53% to 2.53. The data suggests that participants felt more confidence after taking the course. Literature supports this data by indicating that youth's self-efficacy is important to recognize because its primary purpose is to increase the youth's sense of self (Meyer & Bouchey, 2010). The average mean in self-efficacy questions is 4.2 with the highest result in achieving goals in oneself and the lowest score in believing that they can do tasks well.

When examining the qualitative responses of respondents, many themes supported the increase in self-efficacy. Importantly, responses included strong themes in self-resilience, with statements that include, "anything is possible as long as you work for it" and "no matter the obstacles that we face, you must keep going (see appendix A)." These statements are powerful, and further evidence the connection between mentor and mentee is impactful and can be an essential component of long-term success. Further, research indicates that youth engaged in a responsible and positive mentor relationship can reduce their risk of engaging in at-risk behaviors. When mentees enhance self-efficacy within themselves, this resiliency coupled with long term, positive adult relationships can mediate negative effects of adverse and maladaptive behaviors (Beier, Rosenfield, Spitalny, Zansky & Botempo, 2000). Major themes derived from participant statements are a strong sense of belief in oneself; that anything is possible "as long as you work for it"; and "never to give up on something you want to achieve."

DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS
(CONT'D)

When analyzing the respondent's perception of their ability, approximately 71.73% believe that they are a person of worth with 48.18% of respondents indicating that they take a lead in things most of the time. This data strongly correlates with open ended themes of drive and motivation. This evidences that youth have innate desire to do well, and when provided with opportunities to grow, they feel confident. Respondents have also indicated that they feel that there are others in their community who look like them and are also successful. Interestingly, this data corresponds with responses from mentors, who have prioritized mental health research and personal self growth. When the mentee respondents indicated a strong sense of belief in oneself, they ignite self-motivation and a desire to do better than in previous experiences. Similarly, mentors who have studied the curriculum strongly indicated positive efficacy "….but to know that you are ultimately your best to meet their needs by seeing the who (sic) picture, rather than just a narrow view of what might be just in front of them." Through a strong mentor-mentee relationship, youth are deepening their relationship with themselves as well as others. Research has shown that youth have already experienced disappointment in past relationships with adults, and therefore, frequent endorsement of consistency, accountability and positivity within the mentor relationship can negate the negative effects of past experiences (Rhodes, Reddy, Roffman & Grossman, 2005). With a leading 71.73 of youth indicating that they believe in their self-worth, it truly epitomizes the impact that mentors may have on youth.

Respondents answered questions on personal abilities and have indicated that they value the expert experiences of others. This provides youth with a sense of encouragement and hope that may be lacking in other areas of their lives. Results strongly confirm that 34% of respondents agree that they can relate to experts in their lives. Remarkably, the term "expert" can relate to anyone the youth perceives to be credible. It is with this understanding that mentorship programs that undertake the credible messenger model are likely to be more successful. Respondents open ended statements indicate that the presenter disclosed overcoming personal struggles that was inspiring for youth. Some indicated that "perseverance is very important to succeed through life." Strong data with correlated open responses powerfully indicate the influence of role models in youth's lives. Not only is the connection influential, but desired. When examining youth programs throughout the country, a common theme is the desire to connect with a like-minded individual, to not be isolated or alone in their experiences. Especially, now during COVID-19, youth are significantly more likely to engage in at risk behaviors because of limited supports and activities. Therefore, the mentor-mentee relationship is critical to ensuring consistent progress. COVID-19 has caused significant disruption in millions of people's lives. According to recreation science, leisure is a phenomenon that provides opportunities for self-actualization and social activities that improve cognition and emotional maturity (Ettekal & Agans, 2020).

DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS (CONT'D)

Although the study discussed was pre-COVID-19, the impact of the pandemic and social isolation is relevant, confirming that the mentor-mentee relationship is significant, needed and essential in providing youth with consistency. Vulnerability is a risk factor associated with the world's current climate. Presumably, without the accountability and reliability of the mentor, youth are at higher risk of either regressing to or continuing with negative habits and routines. Literature indicates that youth need to feel connected, cared for and valued (Ettekal & Agans, 2020), which are all aspects of the mentor-mentee relationship. When addressing the needs of youth and their perception of "experts" in their lives, it is also important to recognize the needs of the mentor during these unique and challenging times. Data supported the correlation of the relationship and influence of a formal support system.

Formal supports are relationships between youth and family that can include mentors, school staff, coaches and religious leaders. Of the responses, 60% indicated that their parent is the most influential person in their lives. However, from 07/13/2020 to 08/17/2020, this category was reduced. It is unknown if the reduction is based on interactions from other supports, such as the mentors. Respondents have indicated that they feel that they "need a person to talk to." Another response reflected that the presenter would say the same things as that person's mother, reinforcing the message of positivity and the need for self-growth. Overall, it is evident that youth are influenced by those who make them feel valued and accepted.

A major theme derived from the presentation of the curriculum is the understanding between mental health and self-awareness. Additionally, the curriculum data results demonstrated that the course material was easy-to-follow, adding to the motivation to better put into practice theories and personal experience. Statements that indicated, "There are many ways to participate in research such as conducting and analyzing or implementing findings; my personal preference for research" support this finding. Both adults and youth have the desire to excel and gain personal satisfaction. This correlation motivates both to thrive past normalized expectations and boundaries. Especially during COVID-19, youth need trusted adults to help them understand restrictions, navigate virtual learning and coping with various stressors (Ettekal & Agans, 2020). It has been found that the curriculum was organized, professionally supported and well received amongst all participants.

LIMITATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

These results provide preliminary support of the VIP Online Academy mentorship programs for youth impacted by various challenges and stressors. Some of the obtained associations may be attributed to both the mentor and mentee's desire to obtain self-efficacy and self-awareness. With a bigger sample, it would have been helpful to test for differential patterns in "combined" groups, such as race/ethnicity and self-efficacy, cultural competence of mentor- mentee pairings and length of time in program. These factors can later be explored in larger studies. Additionally, the presence of a control group would have allowed researchers to examine if the VIP Online Academy's program was the only influential component for the youth or if there were other external, compounding factors.

It is evident that the program supports a theoretical framework of self-determination and the credible messenger model. Overall, youth expressed feeling supported, as evidenced by the increase in positive responses to self-efficacy questions between July and August. Youth felt comfortable relating to the presenter, who also shared personal experiences of trauma. It appeared that youth began to feel more supported and began to feel more proud of themselves from when they first started in the program. Importantly, this data is largely supported by outside studies and literature, paving the opportunity for evidence-based research. It was clear that youth are able to build meaningful relationships with adults who also have lived experiences.

In conclusion, the pattern of findings, specifically those relevant to the strength-based, mentor-mentee relationships, indicates essential features of the VIP Online Academy. Factors such as length of the mentor-mentee relationship, cultural competence and impact of COVID-19 may be components to consider in future research endeavors. This study contributed innovative understanding to the unique needs of adolescents and their experiences in at-risk environments.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended to continue research associated with the mentor-mentee dyad, utilizing the credible messenger model.

It is further recommended to develop research that examines the impact of youth during COVID-19.

It is further recommended to continue to explore self-efficacy in youth over a long-term period.

It is further recommended to conduct research on the mentor relationship, and the mentor's perception of self-efficacy, self-determination and overcoming challenges.

It is further recommended that longitudinal and formalized research will provide additional insights in order to develop evidence-based models using the VIP program.
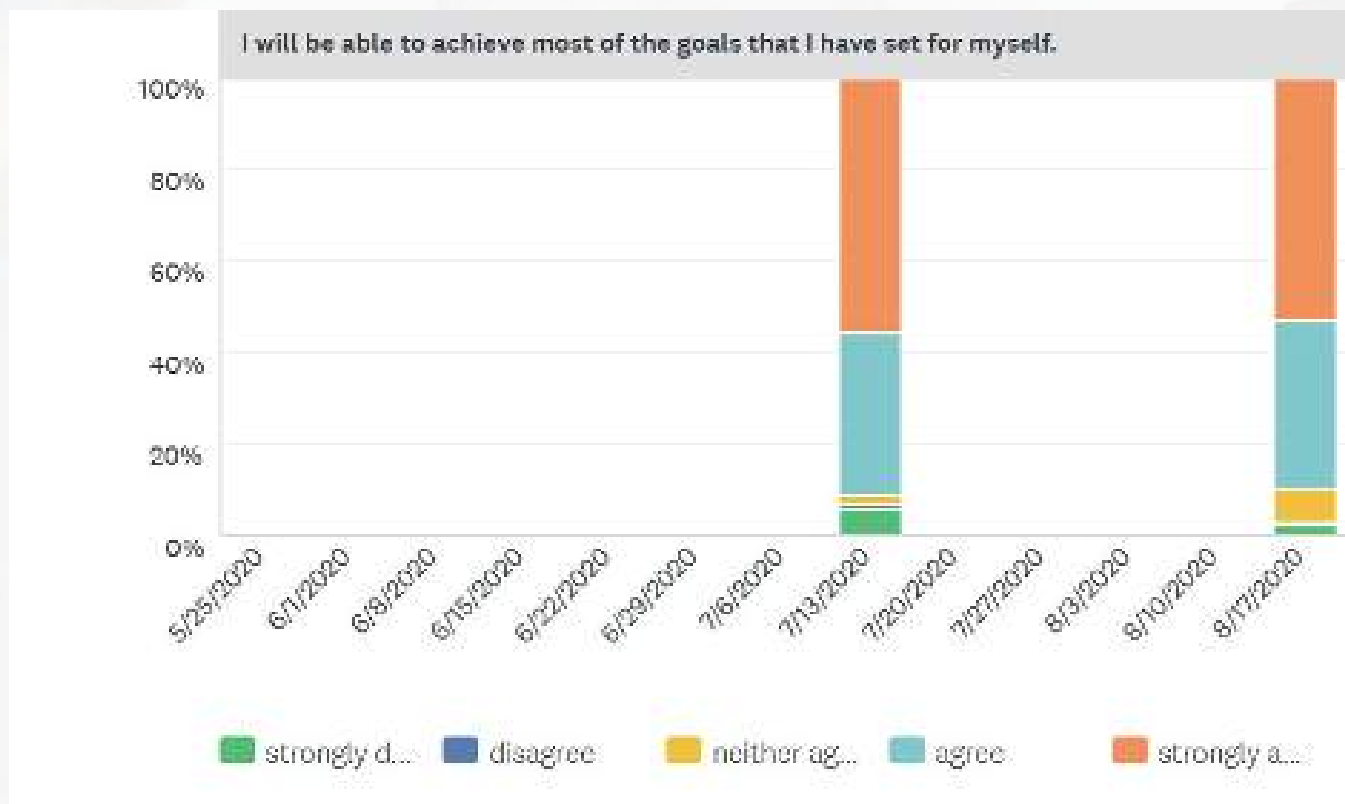
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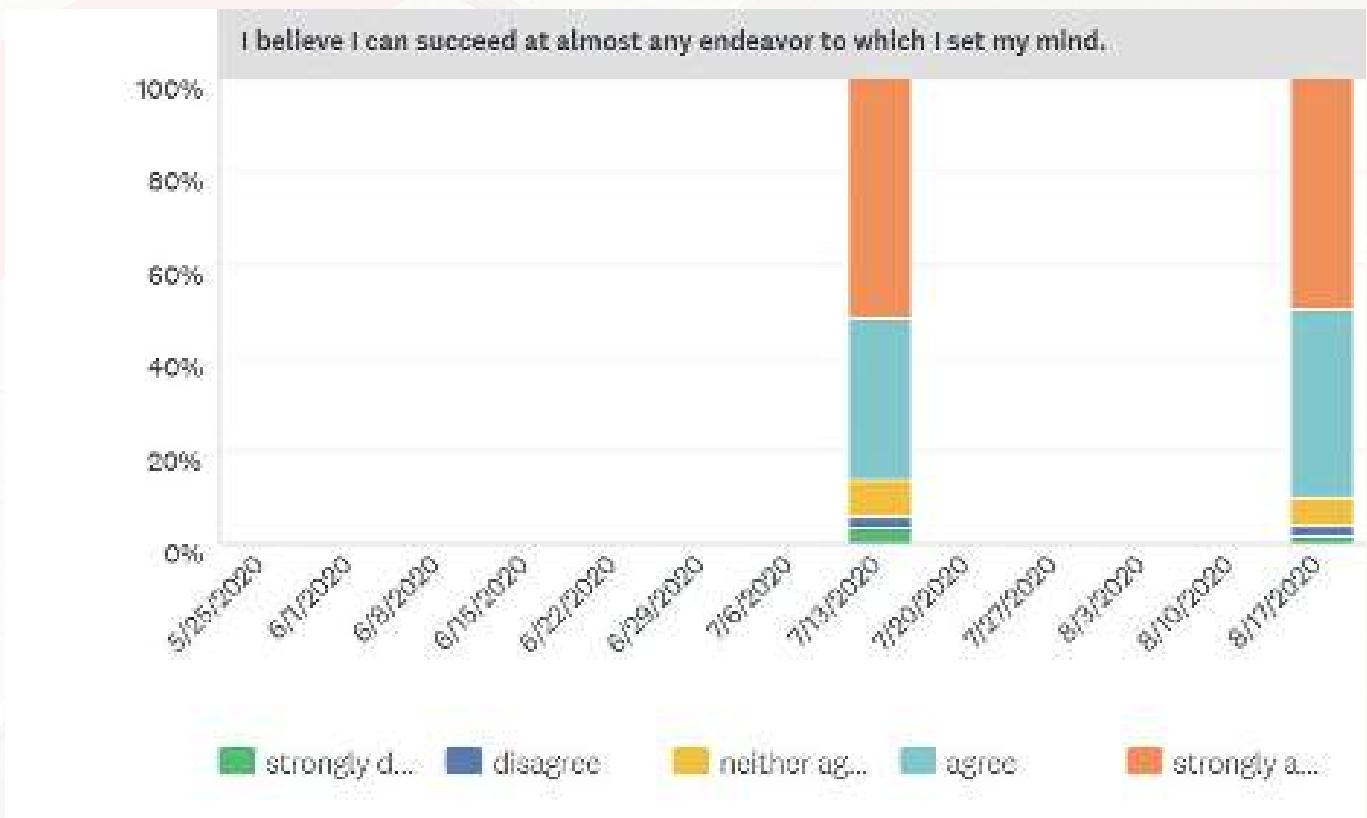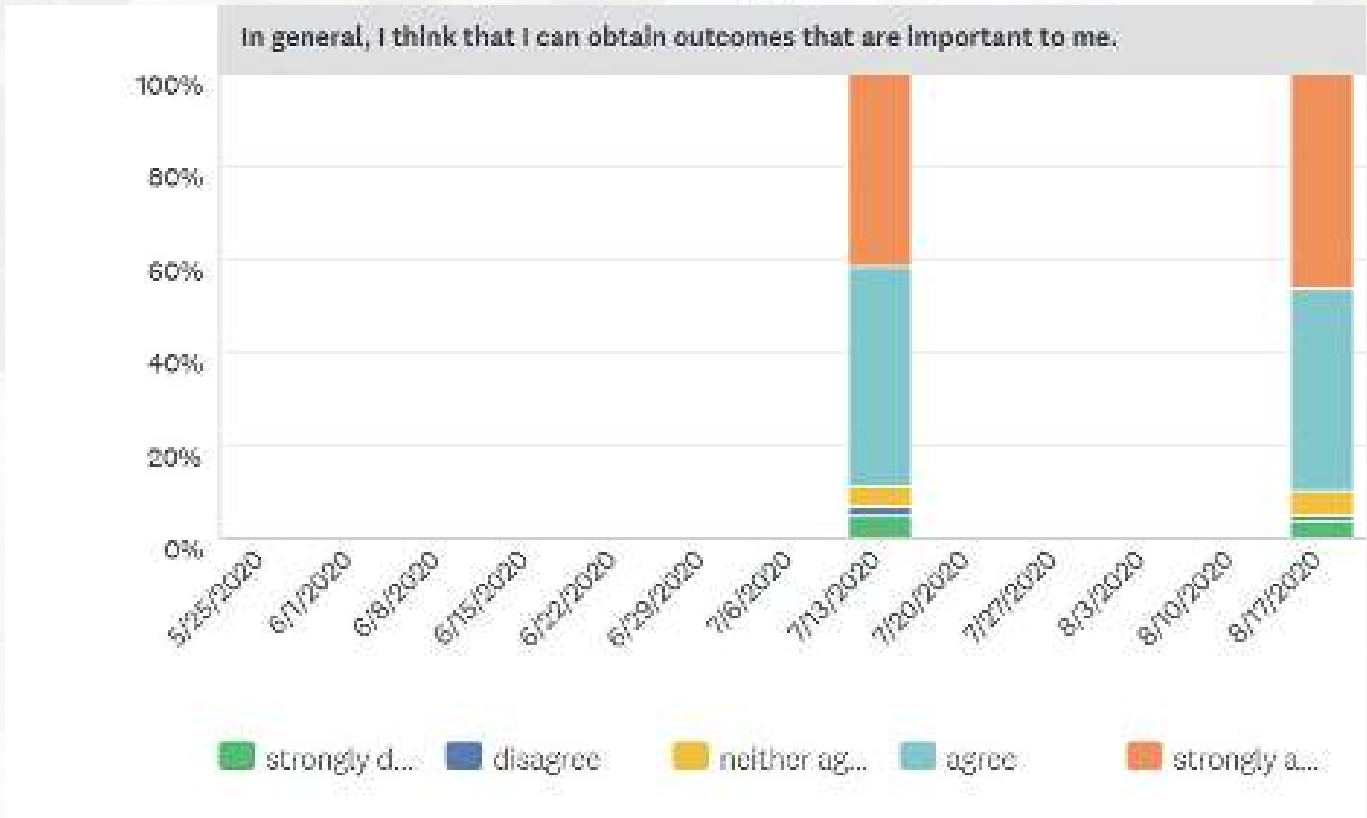Ettekal, A. V., & Agans, J. P. (2020). Positive Youth Development Through Leisure:
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I will be able to achieve most of the goals that I have set for myself.

Legend: strongly d... | disagree | neither ag... | agree | strongly a...

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In general, I think that I can obtain outcomes that are important to me.

strongly d... | disagree | neither ag... | agree | strongly a...

I believe I can succeed at almost any endeavor to which I set my mind.

strongly d... | disagree | neither ag... | agree | strongly a...

REFERENCES (CONT'D)

Compared to other people, I can do most tasks very well.

Legend: strongly d... | disagree | neither ag... | agree | strongly a...