

When “immersive” learning goes remote: Interdisciplinary lessons learned in a pandemic

Thistle I. Elias, DrPH, MPA¹, Jessica R. Thompson, PhD, MEd²,

Brandi Boak, BS¹, Denise Jones, MA³, Brandon Ziats, BA⁴

¹Department of Behavioral and Community Health Sciences, University of Pittsburgh School of Public Health; ²Community Impact Office, Markey Cancer Center, University of Kentucky; ³Youth Enrichment Services, Inc., ⁴Youth Opportunities Development

Thistle I. Elias is the corresponding author.

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ABSTRACT

Background: Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, health professional training programs made substantial changes to shift previously in-person student training opportunities to remote settings.

Objectives: We present lessons learned from changes made to one community-engaged internship program, Program-X, that should prove helpful in future times of crisis.

Methods: Program-X places inter-disciplinary graduate pairs of students in community-based organizations that serve marginalized populations, to work directly with program participants and develop tangible products aimed to build organizational capacity. Students get additional training on poverty awareness, health literacy, community violence, food justice, trauma-informed self-care, cultural and academic humility, oral health and advocacy. Upon pandemic onset, given increased community need and community partner feedback, Program-X pivoted quickly, shifting to remote engagement and making critical adjustments to ensure responsiveness to student and community partner needs. Adjustments included: 1) adopting a trauma-informed approach, 2) developing remote mentoring guidance, and 3) doubling site visits to ensure that students and site mentors felt sufficiently supported.

Conclusions: Several program and partnership attributes contributed to our overall program success, including a model of reciprocal benefits, providing supports, flexibility, and long-standing relationships. The university's quick adoption of remote technology and each participating school's commitment to supporting the program model, further enabled effective student-organization-program collaboration. These lessons can inform community-partnered experiential learning programs that may need to incorporate remote components moving forward.

KEYWORDS: Remote learning, Health science student training programs, Community-mentored placements, Experiential learning, COVID-19

Introduction

With the COVID-19 pandemic onset, health professional training programs made substantial efforts to replicate student training opportunities remotely that previously occurred in-person. The numerous challenges for these programs included ensuring student, faculty, and staff safety, along with the safety of community members and others in training spaces (Bell et al., 2020; Brown et al., 2021; Fuller, Heldenbrand, Smith, & Malcom, 2020; Goghari, Hagstrom, Madon, & Messer-Engel, 2020; Salter, Oates, Swanson, & Bourke, 2020). Along with these safety-related adjustments, program directors have described the flexibility and creativity required for continuing health professional student training during the pandemic, which included flexible training hours (Twogood, Hares, Wyatt, & Cuff, 2020), innovative communication methods (Gresh et al., 2021), and the rapid uptake of new technologies among all parties to meet program competencies and training goals (Bell et al., 2020; Goghari et al., 2020).

Technology provided new challenges but also unexpected benefits in student training experiences. Challenges often centered around rapid learning curves for new technology, a deluge of email communication, and access to resources such as high-speed internet at home or in community settings (Fuller et al., 2020; Salter et al., 2020; Twogood et al., 2020). Benefits, on the other hand, included the opportunity to provide broader and/or more inclusive training (Goghari et al., 2020), opportunities to use recorded training sessions to review materials (Kogan, Klein, Hannon, & Nolte, 2020), and the overall uptake of new technology among organizations that may not have previously supported their use (Salter et al., 2020).

In addition to these immediate changes, program directors of training programs have also discussed broader concerns stemming from training adjustments. For example, students completing training remotely miss out on daily experiences, including interactions with patients

or program participants, supervisory feedback, and mentor training as they encounter new challenges in the field (Bell et al., 2020; Kogan et al., 2020; Twogood et al., 2020). This lack of “teachable moments” may affect the non-clinical skills of students necessary for future patient/client interactions, such as communication and use of empathy when engaging with underserved populations (Dedeilia et al., 2020; Fuller et al., 2020). At the same time, programs have explored the importance of mental health, including distress due to the pandemic (Bell et al., 2020; Li et al., 2020), use of trauma-informed self-care to manage traumatic experiences (Brown et al., 2021), and ways to gauge and support student mental health (Chandratre, 2020), such as the use of regular check-ins, stress management resources (Dedeilia et al., 2020; Fuller et al., 2020; Goghari et al., 2020), social opportunities (Dedeilia et al., 2020), self-care strategies (Salter et al., 2020), and ways to handle new competing demands and potential burnout (Gresh et al., 2021; Kogan et al., 2020).

As we move through and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic, training programs for future health professionals will consider which adjustments to maintain as in-person training opportunities have resumed. The current literature largely addresses student-focused effects and challenges in meeting program requirements, but not ramifications for community/organizational partners where students may be placed. In this article, the authors, a combination of program administrators and community partners who jointly reflected and contributed to this manuscript, focus on lessons learned from one community-partnered, interdisciplinary internship program for health professional students. Specifically, the authors describe changes made due to the pandemic based on program values and the associated effects on program participants. These lessons can inform approaches to remote or hybrid training experiences among community-

partnered internships programs to positively sustain and prepare such programs for future unexpected crises.

Background

In early March 2020, with the pandemic not yet unfolding locally, sixteen students in school to become health and social service professionals (e.g., graduate students from the University-X schools of medicine, social work, public health, and senior undergraduate students from the school of nursing) participated in the competitive application process to become interns in Program-X, a unique, full-time, paid, community-partnered, interdisciplinary 8-week summer practicum. Program-X is a member of the multi-institutional Program-X Network, which is a collaboration among multiple academic health centers and universities in Pennsylvania and New Jersey and approximately 100 community organizations that links the interprofessional education of health/social service professional students with the provision of health-related services for economically disadvantaged populations (Program Network, 2022). For more than 20 years, Program-X has established multi-year partnerships with non-clinical community-based organizations that apply to be host organizations, and that serve diverse, marginalized populations, including inner-city summer camps, substance use/alcohol recovery programs, immigration/refugee services, early childhood development services, among others. Program-X pays students for all time spent with the populations served, whether engaged in organized site activities or informal time such as sharing meals. Students learn experientially through this daily time with community members, about their lives, perspectives, needs and priorities, as well as from interacting with a variety of program staff. This engagement informs student proposals for projects to complete at their host site (typically due after two weeks immersed at their sites).

Program-X aims to build in students greater awareness of many of the realities of marginalized populations, to become more compassionate and effective practitioners in the future.

Program-X maintains rigorous requirements designed to benefit students, organizations, and the communities they serve. Students are matched with sites based on populations of interest and placed in interdisciplinary pairs to ensure peer support and cross-discipline learning while they develop projects and tangible products for their host site. Host-organizational leaders serve as community mentors, meeting weekly with interns, sharing perspectives on services and their broader community context, and confirming students identify projects that are responsive to organizational need and products that build organizational capacity (e.g., curricula, training materials, and resource guides). This benefit to host organizations has been a long-running and critical component of the program. A Mentor Workshop is held annually before the summer program for community mentors to bolster mentoring skills with interdisciplinary pairs, and a Mentor Appreciation and Networking Dinner is held mid-summer to honor the labor of mentorship and build new relationships. Program-X culminates in a symposium with community and faculty mentors, at which selected students orally present their projects, and all students present the final products developed for their host sites. Community mentors have the opportunity to sign up to receive electronic copies of each organizations' products, as well as access to a community resource table. Students gather weekly at the university for a reflective and didactic component, including: group discussion and problem solving; an experiential poverty exercise; speakers on community violence, food justice, oral health and advocacy, and trainings on health literacy, cultural and academic humility; and trauma-informed self-care. Students maintain a daily journal, submitted weekly, to reflect on their experiences and program readings. Weekly readings include excerpts from current books on incarceration, housing

discrimination and immigration, and current newspaper articles from around the country on creative efforts to address health and social problems. Faculty mentors from across participating schools serve as consultants to student pairs, available to assist in identifying resources or considerations for project development. The full scope of Program-X, including site placements, supports for community mentors, and weekly reflective sessions, has been described elsewhere (Elias, Thompson, Boak, & Cannon, 2021).

As in prior years, students were accepted into the program just before spring 2020. However, within a week of students' acceptance, students, staff, and faculty found themselves, as others across the world, suddenly working in a remote capacity, disconnected from one another, and needing to learn new technology quickly. With less than a month until making community site matches, Program-X administrators immediately began discussing program feasibility and reimagining the historically immersive model.

Methods

Program-X staff determined several fronts to address, nearly simultaneously, to ensure the 16 students, administrators across five schools within the university, eight community organizations, and funders were committed and prepared to be flexible given the unknown. Over a couple of weeks, two program administrators made extensive outreach to university administrators, program funders, accepted interns, and community organization leadership to gather information and determine the feasibility of moving forward.

Challenges

Program administrators confronted: student fears, financial needs, and expectations for academic credit; community partner needs and state of flux; and university concerns for student safety. Program administrators wanted to approximate the full experience for students to the

greatest extent possible while being realistic about community mentor bandwidth and responsive to organizational needs. Community partners were experiencing significant changes in services, and dramatic increases in community needs, and interested in hosting students, *if* program expectations could be flexible and responsive to emergent needs. Meanwhile, university schools were officially pausing their practica indefinitely pending public health updates.

Rather than the immersive, experiential learning model, a pandemic-response model was outlined that would position students to be exclusively responsive to organizational needs and requests as they emerged and to develop requested products remotely. Communicating details quickly and consistently across partners and students was critical to initiating change and assuring benefits to participants as the public health landscape evolved.

Process of Pivoting to a Remote Program

Program administrators contacted all funders who agreed to maintain student stipend support even if placements were remote (critical since students were anticipating summer income). All but one school's administrators deferred decisions around in-person practica to Program-X administrators. The School of Public Health, out of which Program-X is administered, quickly drafted a protocol and review process aimed at protecting student health and choice. Program-X required new written confirmations of commitment from students, with no penalty for requesting release from the initial agreement. Fifteen of 16 students reaffirmed their commitment. Program-X worked with partner organizations to clarify their level of in-person activities and risk-mitigation policies, which were shared with students. Eleven out of 15 students submitted requests for some degree of in-person placements, if possible, with additional program support.

As the pandemic spread quickly in early April 2020, most local community organizations were immersed in crisis management as Program-X administrators were reaching out to them to learn of their shifting priorities and needs. Several years of close partnerships helped to fuel frank conversations, and eight of nine organizations determined they would still benefit from hosting Program-X interns.

Program Adjustments to “Remote Edition”

Once funders, community partners, and students were reconfirmed, the decision was made that summer 2020 would become ‘Program-X-Remote Edition,’ and administrators pivoted attention to determining how best to maintain core values of the program while operating safely in the pandemic. In **Table 1**, we show the various programmatic changes made to the remote version of Program-X, and in **Figure 1**, we highlight how these programmatic additions relate to the pre-existing Program-X components. These changes spanned across schedule, technology, resources, supports, and other logistics necessary to moving the program forward, aimed to impact student and community partners.

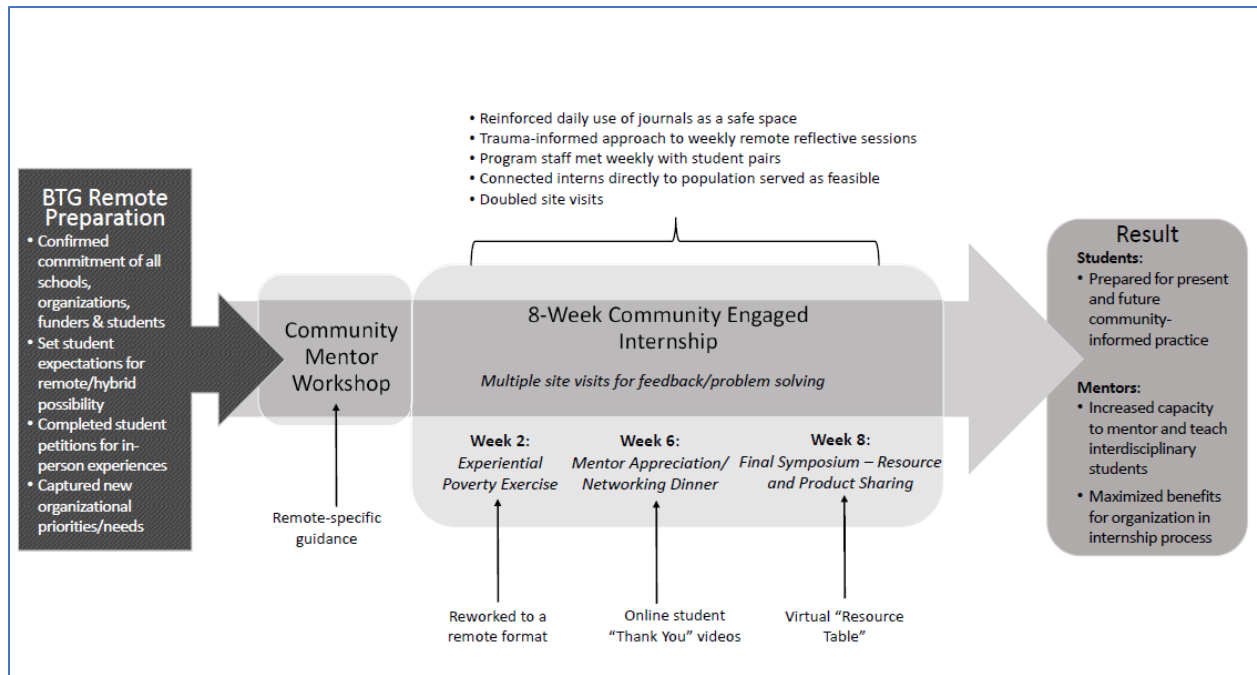


Figure 1. Program-X Remote Edition additions to pre-existing components

Program-X administrators utilized remote technology to transform weekly reflective sessions to on-line synchronous sessions, including guest speakers, utilizing breakout rooms for small group discussion and overhauling a complex full-day Experiential Poverty Exercise (Thompson, Goldberger, & Elias, 2020). Program-X administrators worked with student pairs to develop regular weekly schedules, including daily time spent in shared online working sessions to maximize student engagement in organizational activities and within their interdisciplinary pairs. Students were directly affected by whether organizations had shifted to providing services remotely or maintained in-person services. For example, students placed at two summer camps were able to engage with children daily via virtual programming the organization created, while students placed at an organization for women in substance use recovery were unable to attend group programming due to technology and confidentiality concerns.

Administrators determined it was critical for students to receive additional emotional support in summer 2020, while reducing the mentoring expectations of community mentors, given the added complexities and trauma of the pandemic and ongoing racial reckoning/social protests occurring during a largely remote and isolated practica. Program administrators increased visits with each student pair from monthly to weekly to discuss student concerns and needs, provide reminders about logistics (e.g., deadlines), and gauge how each placement was going. Program staff also increased site visits (online) to connect with community/organizational mentors. Program-X incorporated a trauma-informed approach into each weekly group reflective session via check-ins and added an “Intro to Trauma-Informed (Self) Care” in one reflective session. Check-ins were intended to establish a safe space to acknowledge how students might be feeling coming into the session and set the tone to encourage respectful, honest sharing and processing of experiences at students’ sites (Brown et al., 2021).

Finally, several additions were also made to better support community partners. The annual Mentor Workshop was held remotely and significantly revised to incorporate new ‘remote’ mentoring scenarios and pandemic-specific guidance. In lieu of the annual Mentor Appreciation and Networking Dinner, students developed two-minute videos expressing gratitude to mentors, which were shared via email. The newly remote final symposium incorporated a virtual ‘resource table’ of community social service and resource links for community partners to easily access, and with the permission of community partners, electronic copies of all final products developed for each organization for attendees to share, download, and utilize.

Tools for Evaluating Change

Through the normal course of operations, Program-X utilizes an array of a half dozen tools for continuous quality improvement including pre- and post-survey data on student attitudes about poverty, student evaluations of speakers and trainings, faculty mentorship, community mentorship and sites, and review of student weekly reflective journals. Community mentors complete evaluation forms about the interns and overall program experience. This annual data collection is described in-depth elsewhere (Elias et al., 2021; Thompson, Boak, & Elias, 2020), and these data were critical to assess partner and student experiences of the new programmatic elements and changes which took place due to pandemic restrictions. We utilized a reflexive approach to supplement the evaluation data, acknowledging personal experiences among program staff and organizational partners, and aims to bridge practice and research, describing challenges faced and responses to these barriers (Etherington, 2004). The University's Institutional Review Board considers this work for instructional purposes and exempt from review.

Findings

Throughout the planning, pivoting, and real-time problem-solving with the initial onset of COVID-19, our efforts were facilitated by several values-driven program and partnership attributes.

Ensuring Reciprocal Benefits

A key value which drives Program-X is our belief that true community-academic partnership means ensuring reciprocal benefits (Dopson et al., 2017; Elias et al., 2021), and these are built into our program model. But under crisis circumstances, risks and benefits of partnership may be suddenly more apparent, and unequally distributed. Given that organizational partners are serving marginalized populations, under significant additional stress even as the

pandemic began, it was agreed that the internship program should prioritize responding to increased community needs over other program expectations. Our students readily accepted that assertion, recognizing their learning, mentoring and work would be of a different type than in the original community-immersed model. In turn, community mentors expressed readiness to discuss the pros and cons of hosting students, brainstorm possibilities with program administrators, and ultimately to receive additional student support in chaotic times. Ultimately, 8 of 8 community mentors: 1) indicated ongoing use of the products that past years' interns had developed; 2) confirmed that all current projects and products were responsive to their organizational and population need; and 3) anticipated using newly created products moving forward.

Flexibility

As Program-X administrators negotiated ensuring shared benefits under emergency circumstances, flexibility in the program structure was vital (Bell et al., 2020; Goghari et al., 2020; Gresh et al., 2021; Twogood et al., 2020). This flexibility allowed us to shift program expectations to ensure students could maximally benefit from peers and community mentors, and ensure mentor organizations would have needed assistance and tangible takeaways from student projects (see **Table 2** for example quotes on student and mentor experiences).

Providing Supports

This program has a track record of providing specific supports for students and mentors, as a contribution to shared benefits (Elias et al., 2021). Given heightened anxiety and confusion due to the pandemic and social unrest, program staff aimed to increase supports for students and partner sites (e.g., weekly check-ins with student pairs and doubling the frequency of site visits). Students indicated the weekly check-ins with Program-X staff helped them to feel supported in a remote year (rated 4.53 on a Likert scale of 1 [low] to 5 [high]), and 6 of 8 community partners

indicated increased site visits were helpful. Providing trauma-informed care and self-care resources for students and modifying the Mentor Workshop to reflect new challenges in virtual service provision and mentoring all appeared to increase the support felt and used by students and partner organizations (see **Table 2**).

In particular, building a trauma-informed approach into the Program-X structure to support students' mental health and wellbeing throughout their program experience has proven beneficial (Bell et al., 2020; Brown et al., 2021; Li et al., 2020). Students are challenged in their immersive experience, encountering issues of poverty and community dynamics that may be unfamiliar. When this is additionally layered with times of social unrest, community violence, health emergency, or natural disaster, ensuring students have a sense of how to manage trauma-informed self-care and feel sufficiently supported is critical to their welfare and quality of community-based work.

Importantly, the university facilitated Program-X by rapidly purchasing an easy access platform for remote engagement, which allowed for student engagement in weekly group reflective sessions and collaborative project development with their student partner. This also allowed community mentors the ability to meet with students weekly and have students engaged in remote activities that some sites began (such as job readiness training with youth). Additionally, each participating school maintained support for their students' engagement with Program-X and financial commitments for student stipends despite the uncertainty of what would evolve. No additional supports were available to facilitate program administration time which increased exponentially, and as such faculty and staff engagement reflected a commitment to the purpose and partnerships of the program.

Attending to Relationships

Maintaining successful and long-lasting partnerships requires attention, reliability, and consistent communication to build and maintain trust (Nichols, Anucha, Houwer, & Wood, 2013). Over years of partnership, community partners have shared (verbally and in evaluations) appreciation that the program does not “drop-off” students at their sites but remains connected throughout the program through site visits and events and available to problem-solve. Through the years, university partners have tried to be thoughtful and strategic in communication, respectful of community partners’ time and competing priorities, and to earn trust as fellow decision makers. Program administrators have aimed to maintain contact with community partners outside of program periods, reaching out to invite guest lectures, co-present, co-author, and share in awards. Community partners have reached out to university partners for evaluation needs, connections to other university contacts, student resources, and with job postings and board positions. This prior investment and establishing trust through the years allowed us space to problem-solve and negotiate about how placements and projects could be adjusted given the emergent and evolving pandemic, ensuring our ability to meet each other’s and students’ needs. Consistently investing in relationships in non-crisis times allows for healthier partnerships and easier problem-solving when crises do hit.

Our long running efforts at building strong partnerships may have paid off most notably when none of the parties (university administration and faculty, community organizational leadership and mentors, students and funders) opted out of engaging during this crisis time of summer 2020; all parties remained committed to determining what it would take for program success in meeting all partners’ needs and expectations.

Conclusion

Overall, these findings suggest the importance of programmatic and partnership attributes, that impact the ability to respond to shifting needs in times of major change or crisis. By revisiting expectations of shared benefits, providing supports, flexibility and responsiveness to partnerships, program administrators and community partners were able to make rapid and effective decisions about needed programmatic adjustments. Program requirements which reflect these values, such as pairing students for peer support, students creating tangible products for host sites, and delivering the community mentor workshop, have helped to fortify the program and partnerships when unexpected challenges, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, occur. In addition, our program has benefitted from sustaining changes made in summer 2020, utilizing technology strategically for increased didactic options and maintaining the incorporation of a trauma-informed approach to trainings. Similar experiential programs may want to engage in thoughtful discussion between program administrators and community partners regarding intended and realized benefits of programming, and where additional supports may be needed, building robust and responsive partnerships that can be sustainable through unexpected crises.

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Table 1. Changes made to Program-X Remote Edition

Program Changes	Affected	
	Students	Community Partners
Schedules and meetings		
Formalized weekly remote/hybrid schedules between students and community mentors	X	X
Completed student petitions for in-person options to inform scheduling (case-by-case basis)	X	X
Doubled site visits to support host site mentoring and student project development	X	X
Set weekly meetings of program staff with student pairs to support their experience	X	
Supported students' daily on-line connections with peers to ensure optimal partnered work time	X	
Technology		
Supported use of Zoom via the university	X	X
Facilitated remote connections between interns and organization staff/population when possible	X	X
Reworked weekly reflective sessions for remote format, including breakout rooms and check-ins	X	
Resources and Supports from Program		
Allowed host sites to determine student project idea from program start rather than having protracted time of student discovery and negotiation	X	X
Implemented trauma-informed approach to reflective sessions*	X	X
Revised Mentor Workshop with addition of remote program-specific guidance and role-play scenarios*	X	X
Students created "thank you" video for mentors in lieu of appreciation dinner	X	X
Created virtual "resource table" for CBOs at symposium		X
Created opportunity for community mentors to sign up/receive electronic products designed for each other*		X
Reinforced use of daily journals as a safe space for students to process and share with program staff – critical in time of social unrest, fear, loss and confusion in the pandemic*	X	

*Changes the program has continued after resuming in-person placements and training.

Table 2. Community host organization and student reflections on shared benefits and support

Shared benefits	
Community host organization benefit*	<i>BTG interns made a significant impact to [our organization] by providing capacity and assistance to our summer scholars program. We would not have been able to promote this platform w/out their guidance and dedication.</i>
	<i>Our [interns] were AMAZING. We were so impressed with their ability to adapt to remote work and still have such a positive impact on our organization through their interaction with our kids via Zoom the educational videos that they created.</i>
	<i>I believe the [students' project] was well received by the staff at a time when COVID and Black Lives Matters were dominating the headlines and staff's minds.</i>
Student benefits**	<i>It reminded me of the passion I have to advocate and serve the underserved. I feel more prepared and have a better understanding of what it takes to be effective.</i>
	<i>I feel more experienced working with people outside of the acute medical setting, which is very different. The fact that I was able to be more myself while still helping people is a really nice change of pace from hospital work.</i>
	<i>I have a better understanding of the challenges that underserved populations face on a daily basis. I have a better sense of how to interact and what resources to provide.</i>
Support	
Trauma-informed approach**	<i>It made me feel more comfortable at the start of reflective sessions and more likely to participate as the session went on. Also, I enjoyed hearing about how others were feeling and how I often was not alone in my own feelings.</i>
	<i>Trauma informed lens is very important and something that becomes second nature the more you use it so it was definitely valuable to me. I love check-ins and think more companies and groups should incorporate it.</i>
	<i>I felt the check ins were a nice way to connect with each other given the remote setting. Normally a lot of peer support would come from side conversations and small talk, so incorporating a structured replacement for this time is important I think.</i>
Site visits**	<i>The site visit was really helpful for us. [BTG Staff] was really helpful in facilitating a conversation with [mentor] about our roles and time constraints and what exactly we needed from her, based on everything we had told her about our experience. I feel like every time [staff] met with [mentor] our experience got better.</i>
	<i>It kept everyone on the same page. Would've felt that everyone would be lost otherwise.</i>

*Summer 2020 Community Mentor Survey

**Summer 2020 Student Survey

