

The Impact of Campus Friends on Students and Mentors

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Introduction

Background

Campus Friends (CF) is a partnership between Community Living Guelph Wellington (CLGW) and Student Experience at the University of Guelph which provides an opportunity for adults with developmental disabilities to experience campus life. Following a mentorship-style format, CF connects University of Guelph student volunteers (mentors) with adults who have a developmental disability (students) to promote successful individualized student-based campus experiences. Students attend CF one day per week between September and April for up to three years. This year in particular, seven students were in their first year, three were in their second year and two were in their third year. Throughout their time enrolled with CF students are involved in a variety of activities including academic and learning opportunities, volunteering, networking with other students and mentors, athletics, recreation and special events.

Campus Friends strives to accomplish three goals:

1. Meet the identified personal goals and expectations of the mentors and students.
2. Facilitate personal growth related to developing a sense of belonging and wellbeing for students.
3. Foster independence and life-long learning for students by developing skills and confidence in themselves in a range of settings.

In September 2019, the Volunteer Engagement Coordinator at CLGW reached out to the Community Engaged Scholarship Institute's (CESI) Research Shop. CLGW asked the Research Shop to work with them to determine:

1. The extent to which Campus Friends is currently meeting its intended goals.
2. Opportunities for ongoing improvement.

Research Goals

The purpose of this project was to determine the impact of CF on students and mentors based on their individual experiences. The Research Shop team developed the following research questions to measure the impact of CF:

1. Has Campus Friends met the identified personal goals and expectations of the students/mentors? The research team measured this question by:
 - a. Identifying the personal goals of both students and mentors.
 - b. Determining whether or not they met these goals through involvement with CF.

2. Has Campus Friends facilitated personal growth for the students? The research team measured this question by considering how students were able to:
 - a. Develop a sense of belonging and comfort.
 - b. Develop a sense of wellbeing through activities that made them feel good.
 - c. Develop feelings of personal satisfaction.
3. Has Campus Friends fostered life-long learning for students through developing skills, independence, and confidence in themselves in a range of settings? The research team measured this question by considering:
 - a. Students' comfort walking on campus.
 - b. Students' ability to take initiative and problem-solve in daily tasks.
 - c. Students' development of interpersonal skills, including having conversations, interacting with others, and socializing with others.

Methods

The research team used a variety of tools to assess the impact of CF on students and mentors. Students attend CF weekly on Wednesdays or Thursdays of the University's fall and winter semesters. Students were on campus from 9:00am to 3:00pm, and the research team collected data with the students during this timeframe. Data collection with mentors occurred outside of the regular CF hours. The research team collected data in two phases from October 2019 to April 2020, and they used various methods in each phase.

Data Collection: Phase One

Feelings Chart with Students

Students gathered at the CF Classroom Hub in the University Centre (UC) at the beginning and end of each day they were on campus. The Volunteer Engagement Coordinator, a member of the research team, or a mentor walked around the room and asked the students to indicate how they were feeling by choosing an emotion from the Feelings Chart.

At first, the Feelings Chart had four colour-coded sections for students to choose from, including happy, comfortable, sad, and angry. However, after the researchers received feedback from the students and the Volunteer Engagement Coordinator, they revised the chart to include several emotions written across the page. The shift made the chart more neutral and age-appropriate for the students. Upon further recommendation by the Volunteer Engagement Coordinator, the researchers made more revisions. Words appeared in different orders to ensure students did not pick the same word each week based on its location on the page. The research team recorded students' responses in a spreadsheet, which allowed the research team to track each student's emotional wellbeing before and after a day on campus with CF. Researchers used this chart to understand how CF impacted the wellbeing and general satisfaction of the students in a consistent, quantifiable manner. Below, Figure 1.1 shows the original version of the Feelings Chart, while Figure 1.2 displays the final, adapted version.

Graffiti Wall with Students

At the end of the day, a member of the research team also asked students to reflect on their day by answering the weekly prompt. The researcher wrote the prompt on a piece of chart paper and stuck it to the wall. The students read the prompt and wrote their responses on a sticky note, which they stuck on the chart paper (see Figures 2.1 and 2.2 below). The Graffiti Wall allowed students to reflect on their days in a visual and creative way. Each student had a different coloured sticky note, so researchers could track individual progress without displaying names. The researcher stored the chart paper in a binder at the end of each exercise and brought the chart to the CESI office for secure storage.



Figure 2.1: Wednesday Group's Graffiti Wall



Figure 2.2: Thursday Group's Graffiti Wall

Observation

Researchers collected data from the Graffiti Wall exercise and the Feelings Chart for a total of 15 weeks. Facilitating these exercises and interacting with the students and mentors helped the researchers make observations about the experiences of those involved in CF. The findings and key considerations in this report are predominately from the data we collected from the Feelings Chart, the Graffiti Wall, interviews, and focus groups. However, we also integrated our personal observations into the discussion section to enhance the findings.

Data Collection: Phase Two

Interviews with Students

Researchers interviewed twelve students to understand the extent to which they were achieving their self-identified goals during CF. The interviews also sought more in-depth information regarding students' experiences with CF. The Volunteer Engagement Coordinator scheduled the interviews and organized them into each student's weekly schedule of activities. The Volunteer Engagement Coordinator also informed the students of their interview date and shared the questions with them beforehand. Interviews lasted anywhere between thirty minutes and one

hour. Initially, the researchers planned to conduct the interviews in-person over the course of two weeks during the students' regular days on campus. However, we only finished five in-person interviews before COVID-19 pandemic restrictions occurred. As a result, we conducted the remaining seven interviews via video conferencing.

Focus Groups with Mentors

The research team used focus groups with CF mentors. The purpose of the focus groups was to evaluate the mentors' personal learning experiences, whether volunteering with CF helped them meet their self-identified goals, the skills they gained through CF, and any challenges they faced. The Volunteer Engagement Coordinator provided an email list of the mentors, and researchers sent recruitment emails that asked mentors to participate in a focus group. Eleven out of the thirty-four mentors agreed to participate. Researchers placed participants into one of four focus groups based on their availability. One member of the research team facilitated the focus groups at the University of Guelph's University Centre (UC), and other team members took notes by hand or on their laptop. Each focus group lasted anywhere between one and two hours.

Results

The following section provides a summary of the results of the qualitative and quantitative data derived from the two phases of data collection. Researchers completed a thematic analysis of the data, which involved organizing the results into themes based on the research goals and indicators mentioned previously. This was done using Qualtrics from the quantitative data and NVivo for the qualitative data. Researchers separated themes into categories related to the mentors' experiences with CF and those related to the students' experiences.

Students

Researchers analyzed the findings from the Graffiti Wall, Feelings Chart, and interview data together to paint a full picture of the students' experience with CF. Mentors also shared their understandings of CF's impacts on students, which the research team integrated into the following themes.

Personal Goals and Expectations

One of CF's primary objectives is to ensure that it helps students meet their personal goals through their development of tangible skills. These skills include, but are not limited to, gaining volunteer experience, communication, confidence, and physical literacy.

The Graffiti Wall and interview findings demonstrated that students who had explicit goals in mind both prior to joining and during CF found it easy to share how CF activities contributed to their skill development. For example, one student reported a desire to improve their interpersonal skills and explained how their informal conversations with fellow students and mentors and their involvement at the CFRU (the campus radio station) helped them develop their interpersonal skills. However, individuals who did not report working towards explicit goals or who could not recall what their goals were at the beginning of the semester showed less ability to draw connections to what skills CF helped them gain. This means that we could not determine whether or not some students achieved their goals.

Eight out of twelve CF students described what their personal goals and expectations were, so they could report what CF activities contributed to their goal achievements. These eight students reported that they achieved their goals and described how they did so.

When researchers asked them which activities made them feel 'good' and 'proud,' students with specific goals described activities that directly related to their goals. For example, several students emphasized gaining volunteer experience as one of their primary goals. They generally related back to their experiences volunteering at the University's Bookstore or working at CFRU when they explained the activities that made them feel good.

Other common goals for students included learning specific subjects, increasing their independence, and gaining confidence. They said they enjoyed activities such as walking alone on campus, attending classes, and volunteering at the volunteer fair to recruit mentors. All of these activities contributed directly to their goals. The ability of students to describe how they have achieved their goals demonstrates CF's capacity to meet the needs of each individual and help them gain important life skills in work, volunteering, and their personal lives. The finding also highlights how, with the guidance of mentors and the Volunteer Engagement Coordinator, students could clearly articulate their skills and how they developed them. This ability to reflect on personal skills is essential when students apply for future employment and volunteer opportunities.

Four out of the twelve CF students did not recall their specific goals for the duration of their involvement with CF. Their responses to interview questions were less oriented to skill development, and more so focused on which activities made them happy or feel good. Though this finding does not support CF's objective of satisfying students' goals, it does highlight CF's role in supporting the personal growth and wellbeing for the students, which is a critical accomplishment itself. For instance, the students who did not report any goals expressed that they enjoyed cultural activities, such as learning about the Day of the Dead, engaging in physical activities like basketball with mentors and fellow students, and volunteering at the Fieldhouse on campus. However, these students did not describe how these activities helped them hone their skills.

Some factors may have affected these four students' responses. Two of the students were in their first year of CF, so they may develop their goals at a later point. However, the remaining two respondents were returning students, so there appears to be no significant experiential difference between students who set goals and those who did not. Also, students may have felt nervous during the interview process, which could have made it difficult for them to answer this question and talk about skill development.

Facilitating Personal Growth

Based on the interview data, every student felt more or equally comfortable with their participation in CF at the time of the interview compared to how they felt on their first day (83% and 17%, respectively). This increased comfort may be the result of the development of a sense of belonging due to the relationships formed through CF. Every student shared that they had friends at CF. Just over half (55%) of them reported that they were friends with some fellow students and acquaintances with others, and 36% said they were friends with all of the students. 9% of the participants indicated they were friends with some students and unfriendly with others. As one mentor explained, a couple students clashed due to personality differences. Overall, however, students were friendly with one another.

All students said that they had someone they could trust at CF, including the Volunteer Engagement Coordinator. Mentors also identified examples that demonstrated how students formed connections, such as through chatting with mentors and other students over lunch. This finding demonstrated how CF fostered strong connections between the students, mentors, and the Volunteer Engagement Coordinator.

Students also built connections with people beyond those directly involved with CF, which increased their sense of belonging further. For example, one mentor explained, “Volunteering [at the Bookstore and the Fieldhouse] has given the students both a purpose and a connection on campus. [Volunteering] creates opportunities to build relationships outside of Campus Friends.” In fact, 90% of students reported interactions with people who were not part of CF. These interactions were primarily with hospitality staff during lunchtime, although some students mentioned interactions with people they met at a booth in the UC, at a special event, or with someone running an activity in the UC.

In addition, students reported a strong sense of wellbeing and personal satisfaction. The Feelings Chart morning data showed that 85% of responses reflected positive emotion, 9% reflected a neutral emotion, and 6% reflected a negative emotion. In the afternoons, 76% of responses were a positive emotion, 21% were a neutral emotion, and 3% were a negative emotion. Since percentage of positive emotions is less in the afternoon than in the morning, this could indicate a less than ideal day with CF. However, it was the neutral emotions (such as tired), rather than the negative ones that increased in the afternoon indicating that students were simply exhausted from a long day on campus, rather than feeling negative about their day. In fact, throughout the interviews, only two out of twelve students reported ever having a bad day at CF that directly related to their experience there. These results remained stable for the duration of the data collection. The results highlighted a more nuanced understanding of the students’ experience throughout the year. Still, they indicated overall satisfaction with CF.

Two thirds (67%) of the students felt comfortable going to classes, while others did not comment. Both students and mentors reported that many students did not attend classes often, which could be a factor in the lack of responses to this question. Through the Graffiti Wall data, all students reported a favourite part of the day several times per semester. Their favourite parts of the day included physical activities, such as Zumba, and cultural activities, such as watching the tractor pull on campus. Students had ‘least-favourite’ parts of their day, too, but 38% of entries did not elaborate on this topic. Least-favourite parts of their day included the day going by too quickly, attending the library to do worksheets, counting binders at the Bookstore, and not being able to attend classes. When prompted to answer this question during the Graffiti Wall activity, students found it very easy to express their favourite part of the day, but struggled to come up with something they did not enjoy. Students’ least favourite aspects of CF are therefore quite minimal and are not indicative of any major issues with CF activities.

In summary, Campus Friends had a dramatically positive impact on students. The positive impact is demonstrated by the high level of positive emotions in the Feelings Chart responses, interview responses that indicated a sense of comfort on campus, and friendships formed between students.

Fostering Life-Long Learning

The measures used to identify students’ life-long learning were independence, confidence, problem-solving, skill development, and interpersonal interactions with others.

Independence and Confidence

The most common impact of CF that mentors noticed was students' increased confidence and overall comfort. As one mentor explained, "On the first day in the Fieldhouse, no one wanted to be the first to volunteer, whereas now, they are all doing it without hesitation." Another mentor elaborated on this point. They shared how they started volunteering later in the semester, so they were unaware of the tasks to complete at the Fieldhouse, but the students told them how everything worked.

The mentors mentioned other examples of student confidence and comfort, including students who:

- Talked more during group discussions;
- Went to the washroom on their own;
- Went to the UC to buy lunch by themselves;
- Talked to people at the booths in the UC;
- And led mentors around campus.

Mentors attributed the ability for students to feel comfortable and confident in these tasks to the independence that CF encourages. As one mentor explained, "[The Volunteer Engagement Coordinator] isn't there all the time holding their hands, so it forces them to be independent."

Graffiti Wall data showed that students reported participating in independent activities. Activities included doing physical exercise (e.g., Zumba and walking and swimming at the Athletic Centre), participating in special events (e.g., the volunteer fair), and working at the CFRU radio station. Regarding comfort level walking on campus, approximately 60% of students said they were comfortable walking places independently. However, they preferred walking with other people, such as fellow students or mentors. Of the remaining students, 25% shared that they were uncomfortable walking alone on campus, but they would be comfortable walking with others. As discussed by mentors in the focus groups, students were comfortable walking shorter distances (e.g. to the washrooms and to buy lunch in the UC) independently. This finding demonstrates how CF – through both scheduled activities and everyday tasks – allows students to build the confidence and comfort necessary to complete these activities and tasks independently.

Problem Solving

Students reported different ways they would approach a situation that they were unsure of, and several students mentioned that they would seek help from multiple sources. Three quarters (75%) of students said they would go to the Volunteer Engagement Coordinator for help, and most students said the Volunteer Engagement Coordinator would be the first person they ask for help. Half (50%) of the students also commented that they would ask a mentor for help in addition to the Volunteer Engagement Coordinator. One student also mentioned that they would ask a fellow student, and another responded that they would try to problem solve on their own. This demonstrates that despite being independent and confident in a variety of tasks involved in CF, students do still rely on both the Volunteer Engagement Coordinator and the mentor for assistance if necessary.

Skill Development

Students self-reported information about skill development through participation in the Graffiti Wall exercise and interviews. The Graffiti Wall data captured skill development across five areas, including technical skills, problem solving and resilience, communication skills, independence,

and physical literacy. The various skills they reported were a result of different experiences they had during CF. For example, volunteer experience at the Bookstore helped students gain merchandising skills (e.g., stocking shelves and stickering and labelling products). Many students also reported that they learned new skills about how to run a radio station while they were at CFRU, such as how to use a microphone, play music, and record their voice. All of these activities present students with opportunity to experience new things and develop skills in areas they may not be exposed to otherwise.

The students also enhanced their physical literacy as they gained knowledge, confidence, and competence when they learned new physical activities. Some examples included Zumba, Aqua-Fit, mood walks, and dance.

Many students reported that they developed skills through the worksheets. Some skill development included reading, writing, counting money using flashcards, and oral communication skills.

Students reported skill development in the following frequency during the interviews: social and problem-solving skills (42%), confidence (25%), and communication skills (17%). Regarding communication, one student reported skill development specific to learning and listening to what people have to say, getting along with different types of people, and understanding the importance of body language.

Finally, some students stated that university class attendance increased their knowledge in several subject areas. They mentioned knowledge development in science, nutrition, math, and writing. One student referred to learning about “subtext and tension building” through a creative writing class. As previously mentioned, many students said they were more confident compared to when they first started CF, and some were more confident interacting with others. One student reflected on their increased confidence in class attendance compared to when they first began CF as they shared that they started to raise their hand and participate in the class.

In summary, Campus Friends positively contributed to the life-long learning of students. Through responses to Graffiti Wall prompts and answers to interview questions, it was clear that CF provided students with an opportunity to engage in activities that increased their independence, confidence, problem-solving, and allowed for increased interpersonal interactions; all of which provide students with knowledge and skills that will be beneficial to their future goals.

Mentors

Reasons for Volunteering

During the focus group discussions, mentors expressed a variety of reasons for why they initially volunteered with CF. Some mentors had experience working with adults with developmental disabilities in the past or had a friend or family member with a disability. These reasons were quite clear and personal in nature. The majority of mentors, however, did not have any previous experience working with adults with developmental disabilities.

Many mentors mentioned a general learning experience as a reason to volunteer with CF. Mentors viewed CF as an opportunity to learn outside of academia and gain a different perspective that is not available through their degree. Mentors whose degrees would not

necessarily lead them to a career that involves people with developmental disabilities (e.g., science, economics) particularly emphasized this reason. One mentor explained that they learned very dry content in class and liked the opportunity to do something different where they could learn skills. Mentors also indicated that they sought out a volunteering opportunity that was unrelated to their classes and provided stress relief. One mentor explained that they “wanted to have a couple hours off not thinking about school,” and another said that they “always wanted to volunteer for something non-science [related] as a stress reliever.” CF therefore provided some mentors with an opportunity to do something that was completely different course-intensive programs.

On the other hand, mentors whose degrees may lead to a career that involves people with developmental disabilities (e.g., psychology and family relations and human development) saw CF’s learning opportunities as ones that complemented what they learned in class. One mentor mentioned that they hoped to gain experience working with people with developmental disabilities to see if they would be interested in pursuing the area as a potential career.

Many mentors said they initially wanted to volunteer with CF because it was interesting and unique, although most of them continued volunteering because it was a rewarding experience. For example, one mentor explained that volunteering with CF “is incredibly gratifying work, especially knowing that your support can help brighten someone’s day.” Similarly, another mentor mentioned that volunteering with CF was important because of how it made them feel when they interacted with the students and had a positive impact on them.

Although all mentors identified reasons for volunteering only some had specific expectations or goals they sought to achieve through Campus Friends. Often, mentors recognized the impact that CF had on their skill development only after they began volunteering.

Impacts and Benefits of Volunteering

Mentors shared various ways that volunteering with CF impacted them, many of which intersect in different ways.

Many mentors explained how CF allowed them to gain a deeper understanding of people with developmental disabilities and their experiences. This benefit was particularly related to mentors who were in disciplines that were more relevant to people with developmental disabilities. They mentioned how CF helped them better understand the things they learned in class as they saw them in practice. One mentor explained, “Life is not out of a textbook, so stuff that you learn in class isn’t always applied.” Another mentor shared that a class they took “glorified” disabilities and did not talk about the difficulties associated with living with a developmental disability. CF helped mentors learn about and understand people with developmental disabilities in a way that was different from, or complemented, what they learned in their courses.

In addition to expanding what they learned in class, many mentors explained that volunteering with CF affirmed their goals for future schooling and career choices. One mentor explained how they had originally joined to gain experience and learn more about the area of disabilities. CF helped them realize that working with people with developmental disabilities was a path they wished to pursue further in the future. Similarly, another mentor shared that their volunteer experience “definitely reaffirms that I want to work with people, especially in terms of teaching and leadership opportunities.” One mentor even stated that CF related to their ambitions for graduate school. This demonstrates the far-reaching impacts that CF had on its mentors.



Increased communication skills were the most common impact that mentors discussed. CF helped mentors become more aware of how they spoke and how they could communicate in different ways, so various groups of people could understand them. One mentor said that communication skills specifically included learning how to “take a step back and reframe wording and phrasing.” Other mentors stated that they were “in a bubble” in their program and that since CF was much different from their classes, it was a great way to learn how to communicate with different people.

Communication was also a common theme when mentors discussed transferable skills needed to achieve future goals. For example, one mentor was in finance and explained that many people do not understand finance. In the future, they will need to explain complex topics to people, and they thought that learning how to interact with people with developmental disabilities would help them build those communication skills. Similarly, another mentor explained that they wanted to become a doctor, so they could draw on this experience to help them communicate with people in a clinical setting. They also added that they think these skills would help with any career path or goal.

Mentors highlighted other positive impacts from their participation in CF, including:

- Being adaptive;
- Patience;
- Empathy;
- Openness;
- Problem solving;
- And interpersonal skills.

Training

Some of these impacts were due to the training the mentors received. Mentors explained that their training involved the following:

- Videos that normalized disabilities;
- Education about nuanced language use (i.e., “person with a disability” rather than “disabled person”);
- Activities that reframed phrases from different angles;
- Education about how mentors could express themselves empathetically;
- And education about boundaries and effective communication.

Most mentors found the training informative and helpful. They said it left them feeling much more comfortable with volunteering. One mentor mentioned that it was nice to meet the other mentors and hear about their experiences.

The main challenge mentors had with the training was its timing. There was a consensus that it would be more helpful to have the training at the beginning of the semester. However, this timing would mean that mentors would have to make an advanced commitment to volunteering far, so CLGW could organize the training accordingly.

Relationship with Students

An impact that most mentors did not expect was the personal connections and relationships that they built with the students. One mentor shared, “I came in thinking I wouldn’t make friends with the students and [I] was doing it for volunteering, but now I’m building relationships with them as much as with anyone else I encounter day-to-day.” Three mentors mentioned how they expected to take on more of a caregiver role, rather than build friendships, which they did.

Many mentors said that sharing common interests with the students created opportunities for stronger connections. One mentor suggested the CF should expand this area. They explained that it would be meaningful for mentors and students to do more activities together that revolved around shared interests. They said that while it is nice to know about similar interests, it is important to actually act on them with the students.

Besides common interests, the mentors provided a variety of examples of the ways that students and mentors formed connections. Connections often involved simply talking about each other’s week over lunch, which one mentor compared to “catching up with a friend you haven’t seen in a week.” Another mentor explained that they know a lot more about the students than the students know about them because they ask many questions, and the students are open to talking about their lives. This openness on the part of students allowed for connections to be formed.

While several mentors mentioned that they formed friendships during CF, a conversation in one of the focus groups made it clear that this relationship had a different dynamic than friendships the mentors were used to. The mentors explained that while students were encouraged to be independent, mentors were still in a position where they might need to help the students or direct them if necessary, which was a different dynamic than they were used to in a friendship. Multiple mentors explained how they assisted students with their schedule, kept track of the time, and reminded students when to move to the next activity. This different friendship dynamic could be due to the power dynamics inherent in any mentor-student relationship, where the mentor is inevitably in a position of authority as a result of their experience (in this case, the mentors’ extensive experience as a student at the University). Nevertheless, all mentors spoke to the positive relationship and personal connections they built with the students thanks to CF.

Perspectives on People with Developmental Disabilities

The relationships that the mentors formed with the students impacted the mentors’ perspectives on people with developmental disabilities.

As mentioned previously, most mentors came into CF with little to no experience working with people with developmental disabilities. Many of them recognized the biases and expectations that this gap in knowledge created. For instance, one mentor explained how they did not know that the students would be so high functioning. Another person mentioned that they did not expect to interact with the students on such a personal level. One mentor attributed these expectations to the “biases and stigmas about people with disabilities in society that affect us subconsciously.”

Mentors’ volunteer experiences with CF expanded their understanding of people with developmental disabilities and opened them up to new perspectives. One participant stated, “[Volunteering with CF] changed my outlook on what having a disability looks like and how building a friendship can happen.” Similarly, another mentor explained how their outlook of

people with developmental disabilities shifted when they realized “how smart and adaptable” the students were.

While several mentors’ mindsets changed, many also expressed the specific lessons they learned about engaging with people with developmental disabilities. These lessons primarily centred around the idea of “taking a step back.” One mentor shared that they learned it was best to take a step back to let students reach their full potential and do their best. “Steps back” often meant that mentors let the students figure things out on their own and provided support as needed rather than hovered over them. “Steps back” may remedy some of the issues of power dynamics mentioned in the previous section, as it allows mentors to reflect on their role in the relationship with students. Moreover, they highlighted the students’ capability and independence, which may amplify mentors’ positive perspectives on people with developmental disabilities.

Challenges

Although mentors experienced several meaningful impacts due to their time as a volunteer with CF, they still faced challenges, including the following:

- Navigating the age difference between mentor and student.
 - Some participants found it difficult to deal with the shift in the friendship dynamics that occurred when the students found out that they were older than most of the mentors.
- Figuring out the mentor’s role in supporting the students.
 - One mentor pointed out that they had trouble figuring out if they were too directive. For instance, if a student did not pay attention, the mentor questioned if they should have told the student to focus. This mentor expressed that it was hard to figure out where to stand between being a friend and being authoritative.
- Gaging the limits of students and not pushing them too hard.
 - Mentors reported that they wanted to set goals for the students while they completed the worksheets, but they had trouble identifying if a goal for a particular student was achievable. One mentor worried that if they set a goal too high, it would make the student feel discouraged if they could not reach it. However, if they set the goal too low, the student might think the mentor did not think they were capable.
- Maintaining connections with the students from week to week.
 - One mentor explained, “Sometimes, it’s hard [to maintain connections] because it seems like they forget you. You may mention a show you know they like, and then they don’t remember the conversation you had. You feel like you related well one week, and then the next week, you’re starting from the beginning again with them.”
- Creating personal boundaries.
 - Mentors said that some of the students lack hard boundaries. They shared that it was challenging to figure out ways to work with a student’s lack of boundaries when they tried to build connections. One mentor explained that setting boundaries could strain the relationship if, for example, a student likes to hug a lot, but the mentor does not. The mentor would not want the student to take their boundary personally, which could hurt the relationship.
- Navigating appropriate topics of conversation.
 - One mentor shared that they had a hard time drawing the line about how to talk to students about topics such as alcohol. For example, one student told their mentor

that they had champagne on their birthday. Another mentor discussed a similar situation where a student mentioned that their drink would taste good with vodka. This mentor was surprised, and they did not know how to respond. Both agreed that it was challenging to navigate these situations sometimes.

Despite these challenges, mentors expressed that their experiences volunteering with CF were overwhelmingly positive.

Key Considerations

This section discusses the main ideas that emerged in the results and warranted further attention.

SMART Goals and Weekly Reflection

As mentioned previously, four out of twelve students did not share a specific goal they had, and thus, they struggled to indicate how CF activities helped them gain certain skills. It may be helpful if all students and mentors received training about SMART goal setting, which could help CF fulfill its objective for all students to meet identified personal goals. SMART goals are goals that are Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic, and Timely. They allow individuals to break down what their goals are, which are often otherwise vague and hard to achieve, and they highlight exactly how students will achieve their goals. For example, if a student's goal is to enhance their communication skills, they should express that, and they should also explore what communication means to them, how they will measure achieving this goal (e.g., narrating at CFRU a certain number of times), whether it is a realistic goal, and how long they think it will take to achieve it. After this training, students could discuss their goals with the coordinator, mentors, and their fellow students at the start of each semester and add or change any goals as they see fit. The use of SMART goals is relevant to students and mentors as mentors can use them to determine what they hope to achieve as a CF volunteer.

CF may want to consider giving students opportunities to reflect on how the activities of the day tied back to their overall goals for the semester. CF could incorporate something similar to this project's Graffiti Wall. However, the Graffiti Wall method may need modifications to be more accessible. It might be beneficial for each student to have the chance to do reflections in whatever capacity they feel comfortable. For instance, they could share the reflection verbally with a mentor, write down their response themselves, or draw how CF activities relate to their skill development. Given that COVID-19 will severely limit access to the university campus during the Fall 2020 semester, reflection activities could occur in several ways. For example, students could reflect via Microsoft Teams, video platforms such as Zoom, or independently. The exercises might help students reflect on their learning experiences and progress towards their goals. Several students mentioned in the interviews that they knew they developed skills, but they struggled to articulate what they learned. A regular reflection exercise may facilitate the development of self-awareness and confidence as students track their growth.

SMART goals and reflections might also help students understand what transferable skills they gain throughout CF, which is critical for professional development for job and volunteer applications. This has the potential to help graduating students effectively highlight their skills

and experience in job and volunteer interviews, which CF could measure as a tangible outcome. It might also be helpful for mentors to work with students about how to communicate these skills on their resume (if students expressed that they wanted to look for future employment).

Finally, SMART goals and reflections create an opportunity for students to have a written record of everything they accomplished during CF. In turn, the written record may increase their satisfaction with the CF and their wellbeing and confidence.

Problem Solving

Most students reported that they would seek help from the Volunteer Engagement Coordinator as a first step if they were unsure about something, and most students also said that they would go to mentors as a second step. As mentioned previously, three quarters (75%) of students said they would go to the Volunteer Engagement Coordinator for help, and most students said the Volunteer Engagement Coordinator would be the first person they ask for help. The students' trust and overall positive relationship with the coordinator were evident across the interviews. However, one student noted that they would go to the coordinator because they are "an adult," and it was clear that most students viewed the Volunteer Engagement Coordinator as an authority figure. As a result, students seeking out the coordinator first may be partly due an assumption that this is what they are expected to do and may be connected to the 'taught-helplessness' model embedded in various hierarchical roles. This raises questions about the students' confidence regarding independent problem-solving or accessing support from their peers.

A CF goal is for students to develop independence, so it might be valuable to explore this area further with the students to understand their motivations when they ask for help. CF may consider discussions about a problem-solving protocol with the students. The protocol could emphasize the importance of reaching out for help, alongside the importance of trusting their own problem-solving skills. This approach may be helpful to identify areas for opportunities that reinforce the development of the students' independence and their problem-solving skills.

Empowering Students and Mentors to Plan Activities

Students and mentors shared multiple suggestions about potential changes to the activities involved in CF.

Several students mentioned that they did not have the opportunity to attend class, but they expressed a desire to do so in the future. One student mentioned that they would prefer engaging more fully in the classes they attend rather than simply observing them. Some students also said that they wanted to have more input about their schedules and the activities they participated in.

However, the overall opinion of mentors was that class attendance was not necessarily useful, and sometimes, it was challenging for the students. Despite their feedback, it is still important to promote inclusion and think about any additional ways that class attendance might benefit students. Students who attend class feel included in the university experience, even if they do not necessarily understand the material. One mentor had a useful idea as they shared, "It would be interesting if mentors could teach a class based on their program, and the students could

choose which mentor they want to work with ... Professors aren't able to tailor the class, but the mentors will be able to." CF may consider implementing this suggestion, which would be easy to conduct online. Online instruction from mentors would address students' desires to attend class, and it is appropriate given the immediate future of CF due to COVID-19 campus restrictions.

Most of the students said that they tried new things through CF. Interviews and Graffiti Wall data findings highlighted that the Volunteer Engagement Coordinator encouraged students to pursue activities outside of their typical comfort level. Some students reported that they felt challenged by this encouragement, but afterwards, they felt pleasantly surprised by how enjoyable the experience was. The Volunteer Engagement Coordinator played a significant role in introducing students to new experiences and facilitated personal growth in the students through CF activities.

However, there were additional activities that students hoped to try, such as swimming, attending specific classes, and joining clubs. Mentors and students shared that while CF considers their input during programming, the implementation of their input is not systematic. Understandably, there is little room for CF to incorporate their suggestions because CF includes mostly activities planned in advance. CF may want to consider hosting brainstorming sessions with students and mentors towards the end of the first semester to address this gap. These sessions could provide an avenue for students and mentors to share what they would like to do during the following semester, what they would like to change about CF, and what should stay the same. A major objective of CF is for students to get a 'university experience,' and this approach could amplify that goal as students choose which classes and extracurriculars they want to attend and how they want to tailor their skills throughout their involvement with CF. However, the once per week 9am-3pm schedule that CF operates under continues to pose a limitation to which activities students can become involved in.

Given the current social context, it is likely that CF will take place with mentors, students, and the Volunteer Engagement Coordinator in a physically distanced context, online, or a combination of both. As such, this new format may allow students, mentors, and the Volunteer Engagement Coordinator to discuss potential changes to the CF that align with their goals and allow for more flexibility in their programming.

Flexibility

It was common for mentors to mention flexibility, specifically when they compared this year to previous years. Many mentors explained that this year was much more flexible when it came to both students' schedules and scheduling the mentors into various time slots. One mentor expressed that the previous coordinator had more of a structure, whereas this year, there was more flexibility in what students could do. This flexibility, as mentioned in the previous section, allowed students to try new things.

The mentors appreciated the flexibility for themselves. Two mentors indicated that they would not be able to volunteer with CF if it was less flexible. One of them explained that they were not sure if they would continue with CF this year. The previous coordinator set two-hour blocks, and they were worried that their schedule would not work with any of them. However, they ended up continuing with CF because the new Volunteer Engagement Coordinator made the scheduling flexible for them.

This flexibility for mentors may not always be beneficial for the students. As one mentor explained, “[Flexible scheduling may not be good] for the students because then there are people joining and leaving during different activities. But it’s hard when the students’ schedules vary, too.” Essentially, more flexibility for mentors may mean more disruption for students. It may be beneficial for future CF planning to balance these two conflicting issues and the needs of both students and mentors.

Campus Friends Format

In addition to flexibility, the mentors also presented several interesting opinions related to the overall format of CF. The report discusses the two most prominent themes below.

Group vs. One-on-One

Many mentors distinguished between instances when CF was more group-based and times when mentors and students worked together one-on-one. The mentors articulated the pros and cons of each approach. They explained that it was nice to see the students and mentors interact together, which allowed students to gravitate towards mentors and other students they shared interests with. It also gave space for the students to build relationships with many different mentors. However, one-on-one time made the CF experience more intimate and personal. One mentor shared that they preferred one-on-one activities since it let them share things that someone would not be able to share in a larger group. Advantages exist for each format, which means that a balance of both approaches may be important for CF to consider moving forward.

Working with the Same Student vs. Different Students Each Week

Another distinction that mentors made was the difference between working with the same student each week compared to working with different students each week. There was a diversity of opinions from the mentors about which format was best.

Mentors expressed that working with different students all the time negatively affected their ability to form strong connections with particular students. It also makes it hard to know the students’ strengths and weaknesses.

However, working with different mentors “helps the students open up with who[m]ever they are with and who[m] they are paired up with that day.” It also helps the mentors get to know everyone. One mentor explained, “There is more risk involved in having a [single] one-on-one [relationship]. For example, if the friendship isn’t working out well, then the student would be at a disadvantage the whole semester.” In the future, CF may want to consider opportunities for students to engage with different mentors and opportunities to do specific activities with mentors who have common interests with a particular student.

The Mentors’ Experiences

Student and mentor responses illustrated that the relationships and connections they formed with each other were essential components of the overall CF experience. It is vital to ensure that CF recruits new mentors each year. It is difficult to determine a systematic approach to volunteer recruitment since mentors shared several reasons for why they decided to volunteer with CF. While the reasons varied, mentors from many disciplines with different goals shared that they



had an overwhelmingly positive experience with CF. This finding means that volunteering with CF may be relevant and meaningful for all University of Guelph students, regardless of their prior experience, degree program, or future goals. In the future, it may be beneficial to have mentors present at the University of Guelph Volunteer Fair to recruit potential volunteers and answer their questions. CF could use the positive testimonials in this research to attract new mentors during the Fair and through online recruitment, which may be increasingly important in light of COVID-19.

As previously mentioned, the only problem mentors identified with the training was the timing of it. Mentors agreed that it would be more helpful to have the training at the beginning of the semester. It is important to recognize that this timing would mean that mentors would have to commit to volunteering far in advance to organize the training accordingly. COVID-19 restrictions mean many students are used to involvement in online events, so hosting CF training online could be appropriate, and it may create more room for flexibility.

In addition, while the mentors expressed a positive experience volunteering with CF, they commented on some challenges that they faced. Future training could also address some of the challenges that the mentors discussed.

Limitations and Challenges

Research Involving Adults with Developmental Disabilities

The research team ran into some methodological challenges throughout this project. As mentioned previously, the research team had to revise the Feelings Chart multiple times based on feedback from both the Volunteer Engagement Coordinator and students. This process demonstrates the importance of open communication and the ability to adapt when researchers work with adults with developmental disabilities.

The initial intent of the Graffiti Wall was to create a visual display of the students' reflections about their time with CF. Since Campus Friends occurred in a room that was not used exclusively for Campus Friends, we were required to remove the chart paper from the wall each week. This exercise might have been more beneficial if answers from previous weeks remained on the wall, providing students with the opportunity to re-visit their previous responses each week. Overall, the Graffiti Wall was a great opportunity for students to participate in the research on a weekly basis. After a few weeks, students would often inquire about the question of the day as soon as the researcher arrived, which showed their excitement for the activity. The research team's weekly attendance also helped us build rapport with the students before the interviews.

Despite the Graffiti Wall's success and the development of rapport, the initial student interview process was challenging, which required a shift in methods. Many students were nervous, and they associated the word 'interview' with high-pressure situations like job interviews. As such, we quickly changed our approach for the interviews as we began with ice breakers and called them 'conversations' to ease tensions. Some students still felt nervous, which may have limited their answers.



In the future, it may be beneficial for researchers who work with individuals with developmental disabilities involve them in every step of the research process. It is particularly crucial to involve them in the planning phase of the project, which may help them take ownership of the research and increase their confidence in their participation in it. A participatory approach may lead to more accurate and meaningful results. It might also allow CF students to better understand research practices, which is a critical part of the university experience and something that many students said was important to them.

COVID-19

COVID-19 pandemic restrictions changed how we collected interview data. While the research team planned to conduct the student interviews in-person, we had to do seven out of twelve of them via video conferencing to accommodate the pandemic restrictions. The students we interviewed online were familiar with video conferencing and appeared comfortable when they spoke with us. In some ways, the online interviews made the setting feel more relaxed as it was more casual and flexible compared to the rigid nature of the in-person interviews. It is unclear whether this inconsistency in data collection protocol impacted the reliability of the data, which makes the inconsistent nature of the interview protocol a limitation of the work.

CF also shifted to an online format due to COVID-19, so the Graffiti Wall and Feelings Chart data collection stopped before the end of the semester. While the focus groups finished before the pandemic restrictions, the unexpected university closure resulted in less data collection than the researchers anticipated. Fortunately, we collected enough data throughout the year to conduct effective data analyses and share relevant findings and recommendations.

Conclusion

The primary goal of this project was to evaluate the extent to which CF currently meets its intended goals and to offer insight for ongoing improvement. The research team engaged in five methods of data collection, including the Feelings Chart, the Graffiti Wall, observation, interviews, and focus groups. This report detailed the findings based on these methods and organized results into one of two categories – students or mentors. Within these categories, we analyzed and organized themes based on the research goals and indicators. Finally, we connected results together to discuss key considerations related to CF's goals, weekly reflections, problem-solving, empowering students and mentors to plan activities, flexibility, the format of the CF, and the mentors' experiences. The data indicate that CF provides mentors and students with several positive experiences. If CF wishes to expand these positive experiences moving forward, they may want to ensure that students have opportunities to set goals and participate in activity planning. CF may also need to remain flexible to accommodate an online format. We hope that the considerations offered in this report assist CF as it continues to provide mentors and students with meaningful, fulfilling experiences and crucial skill development.