

Sociology 1130: Higher Education Policy and Service at Harvard and Beyond: Action Research  
Capstone Project

## Balancing Act: Coordinator Leadership Styles and Practices in Mission Hill After School Program

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### *Abstract*

Mission Hill After School Program is a student-operated PBHA program that provides after-school childcare, homework assistance and curriculum to students ages 6-13+ in the Mission Hill community in Boston. Coordinators in the program are college students in charge of managing both the students in attendance and the student tutors (counselors). The research of this paper sought to determine strong leadership styles and practices for coordinators that allows for both the children and the student counselors to be positively impacted by the program. The research focuses on leadership styles for coordinators of Blue Group, which works with 11 and 12 year olds. The research pieces together data from an expert interview, counselor survey, and current/former coordinator and counselor interviews. The paper finds that it is beneficial for coordinators to focus on building mutual trust and respect with the students, be flexible in nature, communicate clearly, and consider displaying some initial authority. Recommendations for future actions also include improving training of counselors and coordinators, developing an institutional memory, increasing feedback opportunities, and creating a list of tips and tricks.

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*I affirm my awareness of the standards of the Harvard College Honor Code.*

Jennifer Golden

*Executive summary / Blueprint for action*

Overall, the coordinator experiences revealed there can be a lot of variability in the Blue Group classroom across semesters depending on the kids, counselors and coordinators involved. In this way, there is not necessarily one clear leadership approach to be taken. However, my research did reveal some common themes, tactics and general sentiments regarding the program to make it the most effective.

The counselor survey revealed that many of the counselors found their training at the beginning of the semester to be insufficient in preparing them for their role. It also suggested that the counselors did not feel particularly supported by their coordinators, despite having solid relationships. Trends in the qualitative coordinator data revealed an importance of coordinators developing strong relationships with the students in order to build mutual trust and respect. The constant inconsistency of counselor experience levels in tandem with a variety of personalities and learning styles of the kids suggests that coordinators need to be flexible, dynamic, patient and observant. In addition, some coordinators and the interviewed counselors found an overall hands-off approach to be effective, only intervening when necessary. With regard to communication, counselors wish that that approach would be communicated more clearly ahead of time. Counselors also wanted to be receiving more feedback throughout the semester. There was an agreement among both counselors and coordinators that having prior background knowledge on their students would have been useful. Similarly, the expert interview revealed the power of reciprocal accountability for feedback. Some coordinators also recommended the approach of being a little stricter at first in the classroom, as it set a strong precedent later in the semester. The coordinators revealed the value in giving the students some independence and leniency. The expert interview with Kay Merseth revealed the importance of being aware of the community being served. Given these trends and themes, the paper offers a general guiding approach for a Blue Group Coordinator, which suggests focusing on building trust and respect, being adaptable, communicating clearly, consider adopting an initially more authoritative conduct, and be intentional with actions. The paper also provides concrete suggestions for improvement such as ways to better training for coordinators and counselors, the creation of an institutional memory, further feedback opportunities, and developing a document that offers advice, suggestions and successful approaches for incoming coordinators.

### *Introduction*

Mission Hill After School Program (MHASP) is a student led and operated program that exists under the Phillips Brooks House Association umbrella organization at Harvard University. The program provides after school academic support as well as childcare to elementary, middle school and high school aged children who live in the Mission Hill community in Boston Monday through Thursday during the academic year. MHASP provides both homework help as well as engaging curricula activities that promote student's social and emotional development. The children are divided into color groups corresponding to their age and year in school: Red (5-6), Green (7-8), Orange (9-10), Blue (11-12) and Teen (13+) Group. Each group has counselors that work either one-on-one or in small groups with students (depending on numbers and availability). A counselor can attend the program as many days a week as he/she would like, although the typical commitment is one day per week. Each color group also has four coordinators. These coordinators equate to the teachers or principals of the classroom – they oversee the general class environment, help with behavior management when necessary, maintain family relations, and plan weekly curricula and activities. Coordinators attend two days of program per week so that each day a color group will have two coordinators. Lastly, there are five directors – one per color group – who are in charge of overall organization administration work as well as larger program issues. Each director attends program three days per week and there are always at least four directors present on any given day. The program consists of students from Harvard, Wellesley, Northeastern and other neighboring universities who then take on one of those three roles.

Coordinators of MHASP exist in a unique position of working closely with both the children and the counselors. As a result, they must navigate two different types of relationships and dynamics. They are leaders to both groups, and are faced with the challenge of conducting the classroom in such a way that promotes the goals of program. Furthermore, a coordinator's behavior, actions, and decisions on how to operate the classroom can subsequently set the tone for the classroom. MHASP interestingly balances daily goals for students with larger longer-term aspirations. At its most fundamental level, Mission Hill After School Program provides a safe space for after school childcare. On a daily basis, the hope is that students finish their homework, perhaps get some reading completed, and overall have a good and easy day. Meanwhile the

broader goals are for the students to improve in school and develop social and emotional skills as well as role models among the staff. Given the nuances of the coordinator role, I am interested in exploring the research question: *what are strong leadership styles and practices for coordinators that allows for both the children and the student counselors to be positively impacted by the program?*

To address this question, I collected and analyzed both qualitative and quantitative data. The data sources included an interview with Harvard Graduate School of Education Professor Kay Merseth, interviews with current and former MHASP Blue Group Coordinators, a survey sent out to current and former Blue Group Counselors, and a focus group with two current Blue Group Counselors. The resulting information and findings led me to determine a general guiding approach for coordinators as well as concrete suggestions of improving trainings, creating institutional memory, increasing feedback opportunities and developing a document with advice for success. The overall proposal of this paper offers recommendations and an action plan for the MHASP community. To be implemented, these suggestions need to be communicated to MHASP staff – primarily coordinators and directors. However, because the recommendations offer advice to coordinators and concrete improvements to the program’s construction, they would be beneficial to both coordinators and counselors.

### *Literature Review*

Before delving into my own research approaches, it was important to identify pre-existing information regarding leadership. While there is not much previous research on leadership development of college students with regard to after school programs, there has been prior work addressing general best practices of leadership and broader student leadership development. James Kouzes and Barry Posner wrote *The Student Leadership Challenge: Five Practices for Becoming an Exemplary Leader*, which researched and analyzed successful leadership experiences over the course of thirty years in order to determine the list of five. The practices include modeling the way, inspiring a shared vision, challenging the process, enabling others to act, and encouraging the heart. The authors note that leadership is about behavior and therefore anyone can adopt the necessary actions (Kouzes and Posner, 2014, 9). The concept of modeling the way entails leading by example and ensuring actions correspond to the shared values (Ibid, 9-10). That shared vision occurs when a leader talks and listens to others and enlists

them in a common mission (Ibid, 11). The text also reveals that an exemplary leader is not afraid to take the initiative as well as experiment (Ibid, pp. 12). Furthermore, in acknowledging the importance of team contribution, effective leaders create a collaborative environment of trust and solid relationships (Ibid, 13). The last practice of encouraging the heart translates to recognizing each individual's contribution and effort and celebrating successes (Ibid, 14).

Another piece of research that addresses student leadership is *Leadership from the Inside Out: Student Leadership Development within Authentic Leadership and Servant Leadership Frameworks* by Dr. Christa Kiersch and Dr. Janet Peters. The overall goal of the research is to determine the ways in which student leaders can be developed, and this paper provides recommendations based on its analysis. The research is targeted towards opportunities within higher education programs and/or courses. The authors propose four principles and suggest that such notions can apply to any leadership development program (Kiersch and Peters, 2017, 160). The first recommendation is the use of hands-on activities and simulations for leadership development, particularly in the early stages (Ibid, 161). The second suggestion is for leadership experiences and the overall development journey to incorporate reflection and self-observation opportunities (Ibid, 161). Third is the incorporation of concepts, material, and expert sources to help students develop adequate knowledge (Ibid, 161). Lastly, the text suggests that students have opportunities beyond the classroom to practice, apply and further develop these leadership skills (Ibid, 161).

In addition, *The Handbook for Student Leadership Development* offers in-depth, detailed insights and curation of previous college-student leadership research. It provides suggested research design plans as well as subsequent action plans to address potential concerns such as student involvement. The book builds upon the suggestions of Kiersch and Peters, and highlights the inclusion of formal training, good role models, and opportunities for meaningful participation as well as space for reflection (Komives et al, 2011, 103-104). Another significant concept the text presents is that students newer to leadership development require more direct activities such as role-plays and simulations. In contrast, those that are more experienced would benefit from a broader exposure, such as case studies (Ibid, 115-116). Lastly, the handbook provides ample instruction, examples and resources on levels of assessment of leadership programs, which can be extrapolated to general leadership assessment (Ibid, 187).

Lastly, *After-School Prevention Programs for At-Risk Students* discusses the importance and potential influential impact of after school programs as well as offers a step-by-step guide to constructing an effective program. The book is structured into eight parts: Organizing an After-School Program, The Group-Centered Approach, Combining Learning and Counseling into One After-School Program, The Role of Motivation in an Ongoing Year-Long Program, Group Process, Self-Efficacy, and Cohesion: Applying the Principles of Change, Interaction in a Year-Long Program, Solving Conflicts and Problems, and After-School Programs and the School Mission. With regard to the scale and degree of reach of after school programs, the book notes that “approximately eight million students in the United States attend after-school programs (Durlak et al, 2010a)” (Harpine, 2013, 1). Such a mass after-school program population suggests the potential for impact. Harpine in particular emphasizes a group-centered approach to after school programs in which learning and counseling are combined into a single group program (Ibid, 1). Indeed, Harpine reveals that “research shows that programs stressing change through group prevention lead to higher academic achievement, a lower dropout rate, reduced absenteeism and truancy, and fewer behavior problems. Rejection, teasing, bullying, and fighting are all reduced (Wandersman and Florin 2003)” (Ibid, 115). While Mission Hill After School Program may not wholeheartedly fall under Harpine’s definition of a group-centered program, they do share some components. And as such, after school programs have great potential for impact on students, with the ability to “help at-risk students rekindle the joy of learning and rebuild their self-efficacy...” (Ibid, 115).

Each of the sources previously mentioned provides an ideal framework and foundation for successful leadership practices and development approaches. The literature on leadership styles and practices especially helped inform my research questions. In my own experience with MHASP, I had already recognized many of those recommendations in the program, but I realized it would be beneficial to ask other people involved in the program if they witnessed those leadership styles as well. In this way, the ideas presented in the literature were incorporated in tandem with the data collected from Mission Hill After School Program specific affiliates. My research specifically provides a connection between the topics of general leadership practices and after-school programs. Leaders in after school programs are unique in that the time spent with the students is limited to a few hours each day, which is small compared to the amount of time the students spend in other environments (such as school or at home).

### *Methods*

In addressing my research topic, I conducted one cycle of action research in which I gathered my evidence, conducted my analysis, and then developed a proposal for recommendations. I engaged the Mission Hill After School Program community in participatory research. For this research, I define the community as coordinators and counselors (both current and former) who have worked within Blue Group (11-12 year olds). I chose to focus specifically on Blue Group because effective leadership styles can differ depending on the age of the students. If my findings are useful to the MHASP community, then such methods and research approaches can be extrapolated to the other color groups. In researching effective leadership styles, I incorporated data from multiple sources: an expert interview from Professor Kay Merseth of Harvard's Graduate School of Education, interviews of current and former Blue Group Coordinators, and interviews and surveys of current and former Blue Group Counselors. I gathered a variety of datasets and triangulated data from these different sources, in order to attempt to gather a comprehensive picture of coordinator and counselor experiences.

I began my research with an interview of Professor Kay Merseth in order to get a more objective account of leadership styles and after school programs, independent of MHASP. Merseth is highly involved in Harvard's Graduate School of Education and holds expertise in topics including leadership and schooling. I had had Kay Merseth as my professor in the fall of 2018 for a class on education, so we already had a foundational relationship when I contacted her via email for an interview. I made sure to gain her consent in participating in an on-the-record video taped interview. In our interview, we discussed leadership practices, goals and impact of after-school programs, and later talked specifically about MHASP and concrete areas for improvement. One limitation of this expert interview is simply that it is catered to one opinion, rather than multiple experts. This was due in part to the scale of the project and time constraints. However, I tried to supplement this limitation with the literature and preexisting research and findings outlined above. Future elaborations could involve interviewing more experts.

Another aspect of my research included eight interviews with Blue Group Coordinators (four current and four former), in order to gather qualitative evidence as well as stories that highlight personal experiences in the role. Some of these coordinators have worked together and overlapped on semesters, but each one had their own experience for their terms of service. Many

of these people I had a personal relationship with, either from working with them as co-coordinators, having them be my current coordinator, or through the MHASP community. Consequently, there is the potential that my existing could have either bolstered or hindered their responses. Either they were hesitant to be fully honest or they felt more comfortable in being honest. To address these potential limits, I tried to ensure that the interview questions were unbiased and vague enough to leave space for the coordinators' own interpretation. These interviews were crucial in determining trends in leadership styles and practices that were deemed successful and effective. Especially because the people interviewed have worked with different students and counselors, if there were statements that were made consistently across semesters, then it could be determined that the trend was significant. One possible limitation of this approach is that it is by no means comprehensive of all previous and future Blue Group Coordinator's experiences. Each person's experience and goals for program is unique and their expectations vary. In addition, it is important to consider the possibility of bias because I work(ed) with many of the people interviewed (even if there were no unequal power dynamics). In each of these interviews, I presented the option of confidentiality and the use of either a pseudonym or no identification. For all of my interviews, I presented consent forms and clarified any questions or concerns prior to starting.

In my research, I also sent a survey via email to current and former Blue Group Counselors, and gathered anonymous responses. The survey was sent in a reminder format two additional times in an effort to obtain more replies. The goal of the survey was to receive more quantitative feedback on counselor's experience and dynamics with coordinators. As such, the survey operated under the format of a scale of 1-5 for each question (with answers on the scale of "strongly disagree to strongly agree," "very unprepared to very prepared," and "none at all to a great deal" depending on the nature of the question). The survey was sent to 45 counselors, and received 17 responses (37.78% response rate). Before the survey began, there was a consent form page that indicated if respondents agreed to the terms then they should click next and fill out their answers. Similarly to the limitations of the Blue Group Coordinator interviews, these responses are by no means comprehensive. The results do span a variety of experiences, which is good in providing insights to multiple types of counselors. Because the survey remained anonymous, it is unlikely that there is bias regarding positionality or concerns that a counselor's coordinator will learn of their opinion.



After the majority of the survey results were in, I conducted a focus group with two Harvard counselors, to provide an opportunity to elaborate on some of the survey's trends. Such a setting also sought to provide another space for feedback and experiences and recommendations. Originally, the focus group had four counselors committed, but two did not show up. One of the counselors has been involved with MHASP, and specifically Blue Group for years, while the other counselor is only in their second semester (after a long hiatus). As such, these varying levels of commitment were useful in determining what information and feedback may be specific to someone with more or less experience. Again, I presented the option of confidentiality and provided consent forms prior to starting. Also similar to my coordinator interviews, there was the possibility that my prior relationship in some way influenced these counselor's responses. But again, I tried to speak infrequently, keep the questions neutral, and allow for the counselors to explore their own experiences.

In analyzing each of these data sources, I first and foremost looked for trends and repetitions of language, ideas and themes across coordinators. I looked at consistencies in the survey data, and sought to identify explanations for any outliers or splits in responses (such as experience level, year in school, overall relationship with coordinator). I then took the counselor feedback offered in the focus group and compared it to the coordinator experiences to identify commonalities and opportunities for leadership that seemed beneficial to both groups. I lastly consulted the data from my expert interview and preexisting research to identify broader suggestions and recognize if and how they were to be incorporated in the suggestions. I also identified any concrete and tangible recommendations made by coordinators, counselors or experts throughout the research process and determined based on the trends and overall feasibility which ones might be beneficial to suggest for action (in conjunction with my own ideas for action). While the proposed recommendations have not been implemented, they are offered in enough detail such that they are readily available to apply to MHASP if the current coordinator and director staff would like.

<b>Research Question</b>	<b>Type of Collection</b>	<b>Person(s)</b>
Current/Former Blue Group Coordinator's insights on best leadership practices	Qualitative (interview - video recorded and voice recorded)	Current Coordinators (4) and Former Coordinators (4)

Current/Former Blue Group Counselors insights on Coordinator dynamics	Quantitative (anonymous survey with some open-text qualitative questions)	Sent via email over list of Blue Group Counselors from the past four semesters. 17 responses.
Expert insights on leadership practices	Qualitative (Expert Interview)	Kay Merseeth
Current Blue Group Counselors general leadership suggestions	Qualitative (interactive Focus group)	Two current Blue Group Counselors with varying years of MHASP experience

Table 1: revealing the breakdown of data collection and the intended purpose for each approach

### *Data and Findings*

In analyzing the current and former Blue Group Coordinator experiences, it became clear that there can be a lot of variability in the Blue Group classroom across semesters due to factors such as the groups of kids, counselors and coordinators. Indeed, the majority of the current Blue Group Coordinators revealed that the current dynamic of the classroom is relaxed due to strong counselors and a new set of students, allowing the coordinators to adopt a more hands-off approach. As a result, these current coordinators have a different experience with leadership and behavior management techniques. When asked about advice for handling more serious situations such as students bullying, a first-year who is currently in her first semester of coordinating for Blue Group revealed, “I actually haven’t ran into a ton of big issues like that”. In contrast, former Blue Group Coordinators appeared to have more difficult instances and interactions with students. One former coordinator, who has now returned to counseling, recounted how she “totally underestimated the amount of work that goes into being a coordinator,” calling the role “draining” and recounting how the students would oftentimes “talk back a lot”. These types of experiences are contingent on the students in the classroom and the counselors available to alleviate some of the work. In this way, there is not necessarily one clear leadership approach to be taken. However, my research did reveal some common themes, tactics and general sentiments regarding the program to make it the most effective. These findings can first be compartmentalized into each of the data collection approaches, and then are triangulated to form

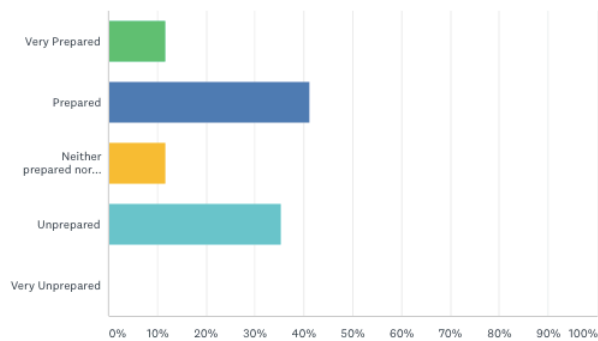
concrete recommendations.

*From the Counselor Survey:*

A significant portion of both new and returning counselors felt that their training led by coordinators for program at the beginning of the semester was inadequate. Nearly half of respondents revealed that they did not feel prepared for program after the training at the beginning of the semester.

How prepared did you feel for program after training at the beginning of the semester?

Answered: 17 Skipped: 0

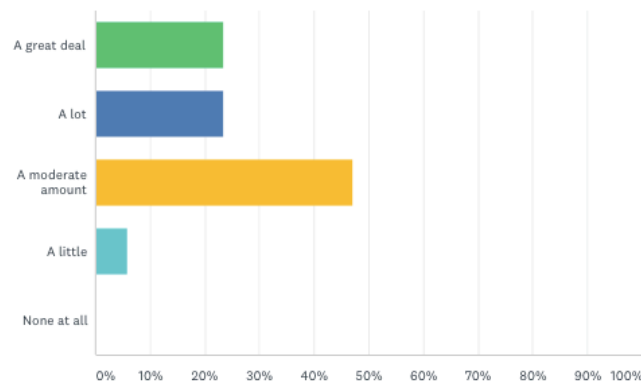


**Figure 1: Survey results indicating a feeling of insufficient preparation for many counselors**

In addition, the survey results revealed that the majority of the counselor respondents indicated that they felt supported by their coordinators "a moderate amount" despite indicating strong relationships with their coordinators in the other questions.

How supported do you feel by your coordinator?

Answered: 17 Skipped: 0



**Figure 2: Survey results indicating counselor's feelings of moderate support by coordinators**

Indeed, everyone but one respondent selected “agree” or “strongly agree” to the statement “I can approach my coordinator with any program-related issue” (the one respondent marked the neutral “neither agree nor disagree”). And the majority of respondents felt that they could give their coordinator honest feedback.

*From the Coordinator Interviews:*

Coordinators believe that the most important aspect of their role with the students is building mutual trust and respect. Indeed, every coordinator interviewed spoke of the importance of either building trust with the kids and/or gaining their respect. Any coordinator can do that through focusing on forming relationships with each kid. To build trust, a number of the coordinators revealed that that mainly comes as a result of time spent with the kids, which also contributes to familiarity. But in order to make that time productive and impactful, coordinators recommended having conversations with each of the kids every day. One former Blue Group Coordinator, who has been a coordinator for Blue Group and other color groups for four semesters, noted that he “just made an effort. Especially because I didn’t know anyone it’s like really everyday talk to each kid and like, try to get to know something about them everyday by just hanging out for a few minutes with them while they’re doing work”. A current coordinator in the first semester of her term similarly mentioned, “I think the best thing you can do is really work to form a relationship with each of your kids, whether that’s walking some of them home, different ones home each time to get to talk to them, or like, having little conversations at the beginning of each day, like getting to know them. I think it’s the best way to learn how to lead them and how to do that. Because you figure out what works well with some kids, what works well with others, and you can individualize your approach a little bit more”. Gaining respect requires a bit more authority. As one current Blue Group Coordinator - who was first an experienced counselor and now in his second term of coordinating - notes “building respect, it is hard, because it means sometimes you have to be mean”. He acknowledges though that “building respect definitely helps us build more, like increase impact, because someone respects you, respects your opinion, then they’ll listen to you and hear what you have to say”.

Another finding from the interviews revealed that because of the variance of the counselors' experience and the range of personalities / learning styles the students have, a coordinator needs to be flexible, adaptable, observant and patient. As the coordinators

mentioned, building the relationships with the students allowed for a more individualized approach to leadership styles. Thus, being in this role requires the ability to observe and understand each person's dynamic, be patient with the kids, and be able to change your approach to leadership depending on the student.

In terms of their approach to leading, many of the current coordinators opted to be hands off of the counselors while former coordinators' classroom dynamics called for more action. This difference can be attributed to variations in students in the classroom as well as both the number of counselors and potentially their experience level. Many current coordinators try to first be hands off and then intervene if necessary. One current Blue Group Coordinator in his first semester notes, "for the most part is letting the counselor-student relationship grow on its own. Because if I try and force it, nothing is going to happen. But if they figure out something that they have in common, they start talking, then that genuine relationship is what will help them work with each other". Coordinators let the counselors handle situations because such engagement can help counselors grow their relationship with their students. Such an approach is valuable because stronger, more experienced counselors can offer more support to the coordinators.

Another key finding that was consistent for the majority of current and former coordinators was that they wished they had known more information about the kids they would be working with prior to starting their role. They believed such information could have helped them learn more quickly each student's unique personality and behavior. As one current coordinator, a first-year in her first semester highlights knowing "what works best for these people... what is normal for them? ... [Is a mood] really out of character?" can be quite beneficial. Having that background knowledge would make the coordinators more aware of what was normal for a student and pick up on the student's cues (such as if they are headed towards a shutdown) allowing them to be better equipped to take action.

The data also revealed that some of the coordinators began their role with a more authoritarian style of leadership in which they established boundaries and rules, and were a bit stricter. This approach of course depends on a coordinator's personality and comfort level as well as balancing leadership styles with their co-coordinator. At the same time, upon reflecting on her first few weeks in the role, one current coordinator who initially adopted a stricter voice was

satisfied with that approach. She explained that it set an early precedent for respect, and allowed for her to become more lenient over time, but still be firmer when necessary with success.

Lastly, the coordinators recognized that since Blue Group consists of 11 and 12 year-old students, it is important to offer some leniency and choose battles intelligently. As one former coordinator recognizes “as they get older, they have more agency”. That age lends itself to a desire for independence, and each student has his/her own personality. And as a current Blue Group Coordinator notes, “giving them little bits of independence and freedom within it, I think, tends to make them like you and respond to you a little better”. Thus, taking this approach also contributes to forming a stronger relationship with the students.

*From the Counselor Focus Group:*

One of the counselors in the focus group is a junior and has counseled for the past three years, and the other is a senior, who was a counselor in his freshman fall semester and now has returned for his second semester this spring. Despite these differences in experience, both counselors appreciated that their coordinators gave them space and had a hands off approach. The counselor who is a junior said that she “prefer[s] kind of seeing how I handled the situation first, and then calling in a coordinator if I need help”. And the counselor who is a senior revealed that his work with his student felt “disrupted if the coordinator came in and assisted... I didn’t feel like I was a making a connection.” The counselors felt that this hands-off style allowed them to develop stronger relationships with their kids.

Additionally, the counselors revealed they sometimes felt that the coordinators did not always provide enough communication and left expectations (particularly around behavior management) unclear. One counselor explained that they look to their coordinator to set an example for the classroom dynamic, but “with these particular kids, [they] don’t always know what [the coordinator’s] expectations are”. And that lack of communication can prolong a counselor’s ability to become comfortable and familiar in the classroom.

In order to be as useful and supportive in the classroom for coordinators, the counselors indicated that they wanted to receive more feedback throughout the semester (both when they are doing things well and poorly). Already in place is mid-semester counselor check-ins, where

counselor and coordinators discuss how the semester is going so far. But one counselor expressed a desire for coordinators to “keep tabs on the counselors as well” and mentioned that “it’s always encouraging” for a coordinator to explicitly indicate when something was done well. Coordinators may work up the courage to indicate points of improvement throughout the semester, but it can be just as valuable to let a counselor know when he/she is on the right track.

Lastly, the counselors think that having access to more information on the students would be incredibly beneficial. One of the counselors reveals, “I wish there just like a place where we have access to all the kids information, like at least a picture of them and their name”. Because each counselor gets assigned to only a few kids, they don’t have the opportunity to build relationships with or get to know the others. The other counselor mentions how there are nuances to student’s relationships and “knowing that dynamic would be helpful”. The information provided could include everything from standard information about the kids, to their personalities and helpful tips to know, to their time spent with other counselors on the other days each week.

*From Professor Kay Merseth:*

After discussing in general the opportunities of impact for after-school programs and overall leadership styles, Professor Merseth and I discussed MHASP specific areas of improvement. Professor Merseth highlighted how coordinators need to keep counselors in mind, and inform them ahead of time of student’s backgrounds and possible factors that could be contributing to a rougher day (“food insecurity” or “the holidays are coming up”). As such, coordinators need to have more awareness of their students’ backgrounds so that they can pass along that information to the counselors. They should seek questions such as where are the students coming from, what are some of the neighborhood specific issues? In addition, there needs to be clear communication regarding roles, responsibilities and feedback. Professor Merseth said her “Advice for leadership is being really clear about what [the] responsibilities are in terms of being a coordinator”. She offers the phrase *reciprocal accountability*. The idea being coordinators hold counselors “accountable to do this job, to be here, to do the best job you can, to come to me with problems. But similarly, I [a coordinator] want you to come to me with how I’m doing. Am I serving your needs?” Thus there needs to be time and space for feedback, so that

counselors can give honest feedback regarding the coordinator's performance. Professor Merseth reveals that reciprocal accountability is a "Powerful technique in really being aware of all the ramifications of what you do".

*Blueprint for Action:*

Given these data and findings, the recommendations for actions can be divided into two categories: general suggestions for Blue Group Coordinators and concrete changes and improvements to the structure of Blue Group.

*A General Guiding Approach for a Blue Group Coordinator*

- Focus on forming relationships with each kid (and each counselor) to build trust and respect
- Be flexible, dynamic, and adaptable
- Communicate with the counselors your expectations and their role in the classroom
- Depending on comfort level and personality, consider initially employing a bit more authority (to help establish respect)
- Be honest with the students, intentional with your actions, and recognize that comfort will also come with time, patience, and trial & error

*Concrete Changes and Improvements*

1. Improve training for Coordinators and Counselors

In order for coordinators to be able to adopt a more hands off approach, the classroom needs to have strong, well-equipped counselors. While a training environment will always be different than being at MHASP in person, there are ways to make the learning curve for both coordinators and counselors feel less steep. First, the role simulations and engagement of scenarios for both counselors and coordinators need to be more realistic and Blue Group specific. Examples should be explored that have really occurred in the past semester, so that they are relevant. Second, incoming coordinators should spend some time shadowing and observing current coordinators to see and learn firsthand practices and approaches to conducting a classroom that seem effective. This component will allow for incoming coordinators to witness



everything from logistics to tactics to successful leadership styles, and will make the first day of program much more familiar.

## 2. Create An Institutional Memory

While counselors and coordinators rotate through MHASP, many of the kids have been in the program from ages 6 to 13+. It would be incredibly beneficial to create short biographies for each of the students that includes a photograph, name, and then information about their personality, behavior in program, techniques that have historically been effective, any pieces of information that might make it easier to connect to the student. Both coordinators and counselors could contribute to the content of these biographies. They could then be circulated to counselors and coordinators ahead of the start of the semester and be referenced throughout. In this way, despite a lot of staff turnover, there can be a consistent familiarity with the students in MHASP. In turn, counselors will feel more comfortable taking on more responsibility in the classroom with kids that are not their direct pairing. The familiarity will also contribute to greater cohesiveness and sense of community.

## 3. Increase in Feedback Opportunities:

There are already mid-semester check-ins between coordinators and new counselors, however additional feedback opportunities will allow for both counselors and coordinators to adjust their leadership approaches when necessary. Coordinators can be more proactive about acknowledging both exemplary and non-exemplary counselor tactics in the classroom with a quick text, email or conversation during the walk to the vans. To avoid any discomfort, counselors can provide feedback and suggestions to coordinators through an anonymous survey (perhaps it is sent out monthly) as a way to help coordinators continue to improve.

## 4. Compile and Circulate List of Tips and Tricks

Finally, there are some elements of being a coordinator in which universal tips and tricks can apply or at least provide some guidance. Before coordinator turnover at the end of each semester, the outgoing coordinators typically meet with the incoming ones. However, the suggestions provided can easily get lost or forgotten, so keeping a recorded document that covers topics ranging from behavior management to curriculum planning could be beneficial. For

example, one behavior management tip provided during my interviews was using time limits as a strategy to get students back on track with work. Another general suggestion was for coordinators to get to know each kid individually and remember smaller details such as his/her preferred snack choice to indicate that the coordinator pays attention and cares.

### *Discussion and conclusion*

This research paper sought to determine effective leadership styles and practices for Blue Group Coordinators of Mission Hill After School Program that allows for both the children and the student counselors to be positively impacted by the program. In order to address this topic, I collected data from multiple sources using a variety of methods. I first interviewed Professor Kay Merseth from Harvard's Graduate School of Education, as she holds expertise on leadership and education and could provide a more objective perspective. One piece of advice Professor Merseth provided was for coordinators (and subsequently counselors) to develop a stronger awareness of the community being served. She also introduced the idea of reciprocal accountability between coordinators and counselors in which coordinators hold counselors to high expectations and expect honest feedback regarding their own performance in return. I interviewed four current and four former Blue Group Coordinators to gain qualitative insights into their experiences and styles of leadership they found to be effective. The coordinators stressed the importance of developing mutual trust and respect with students (and counselors) through the formation of relationships. They also emphasized the need to be flexible, adaptable, observant and patient in the classroom and with the students. They discussed the benefits of taking a more hands-off approach initially as well as stricter demeanor at first. And lastly, they recognized a need for more background information prior to starting their role. I also sent out a survey to current and former Blue Group Counselors in order to receive more quantitative data regarding counselor-coordinator relationships, and learned that there seems to be a gap in training quality as well as communication because the counselors did not feel strongly prepared or supported in the classroom. Lastly, I expanded upon the trends from the survey results and held a focus group with two current Blue Group Counselors to better understand their experience and suggestions for improvements, and learned of their appreciation of the hands-off style, and desire for more communication, feedback and student information. Triangulating all of these data sources along with preexisting literature on leadership and after-school programs, I was able to

determine a general guiding approach for how coordinators could conduct a classroom as well as concrete improvements such as improving coordinator and counselor trainings, the development of an institutional memory, an increase in feedback opportunities, and the compilation and circulation of tips, pieces of advice and suggestions for incoming coordinators.

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