Creating Mindful Programming
in a Virtual Setting

Francesca Marchese González, B.A. GIST & B.A. WSGS
Education Intern at GirlForward

Introduction

The Social Justice Internship is a year-long internship program in which students have the opportunity to be partnered with a Chicago non-profit organization and engage in significant community work. As part of the SJI cohort, I served as the Education Intern at GirlForward, a non-profit based in Chicago and Austin that seeks to provide academic, personal, and professional development resources for high school and college girls who have been displaced from their home countries.

My role as the Education Intern consisted in supporting the Education Program Manager, Samera Hadi, with any tasks related to the Virtual Tutoring program. This included supervising Tutoring sessions, attending and facilitating events for our tutors and students, and contacting both tutors and students about matters regarding the tutoring program. In addition, with the help of two classmates, we performed a series of focus groups and surveys for our WSGS 399 Capstone project focusing on the barriers that GirlForward students face in their transition to college. Since this is my second internship with GirlForward, I have been very lucky to work once again with a community that focuses on supporting each individual’s own power and potential, that works in growing the whole person rather than only our students’ academics.

My supervisor, Samera, and I while supervising a Virtual Tutoring Session.

Learning Objectives

1. As a result of being a Social Justice Intern for a whole academic year, I want to apply my knowledge of leadership studies and intersectionality in order to better serve the GirlForward community.

2. As an active member of the GirlForward community, I want to develop long-lasting and proactive relationships with the students and the staff.

3. As a result of this being my second internship with GirlForward, I want to identify the different aspects that make up a non-profit organization from a holistic perspective.

Programming Strategies

Given the COVID-19 pandemic, the Education program had to undergo several changes, all of them which required that its programming be offered online to the students of the Chicago and Austin centers alike. Therefore, the programming my supervisor and I created this past year has been centered around finding ways to better support our students and tutors despite the physical distance. To do so, we divided the ideation and management of the activities and programs between us: she took care of the tutors’ trainings while I focused on the programming delivered for students outside of the Tutoring program.

Regarding programming, my responsibilities included:
1. Holding office hours weekly for students attending college, to support them in ways that Virtual Tutoring might not.
2. Running the new Instagram initiative, Meet Our Tutors, through which students would be able to get to know their tutors and what they do outside of the Tutoring space.
3. Facilitating Tutor Circle meetings for tutors to get to know each other and share their ups and downs within the Virtual version of the Tutoring program.

My main objective through all of these programs was to be able to sustain the sense of community that so many students and all tutors associate with GirlForward, which is hard to achieve through a virtual setting. Thus, I worked to make the collective space of Virtual Tutoring more amicable and accessible for all involved, so that it would become a space where tutors and students alike felt like everybody knows their name. In addition, my constant interaction with the students allowed me to build stronger rapport with them by getting to know their personal journeys and their achievements. In strengthening these relationships, I believe I was able to help make the Virtual Tutoring space a more welcoming one, in which we could foster relationship building between students and tutors as would happen in person.

Identity and Leadership

Understanding our own identities is a very important skill within the space at GirlForward, not only to understand our place within the organization, but to better understand our privileges as members of the community who are serving this organization. Given the diversity that is present within the student population that GirlForward serves, it is important to be aware of the biases that we may hold about immigrant, refugee and asylum-seeking students and from what ideologies or past experiences they may be stemming from. Therefore, through our programming, we encourage members of Virtual Tutoring, students and tutors alike, to reflect on their own identities and how they play a role in the relationships they build within the space. In addition, having the tutors engage in this reflective work themselves sets the example for students to do ask themselves: “Who am I? What power do I hold? And how can I use it for good?”

In being part of such an empowering community, students and tutors alike are also encouraged to reflect on what kind of leader they are, and how they can use their own gifts for good. As a tutor myself, it is empowering to hear students talk about their aspirations and goals for the future. However, it is also common for students to look up to their tutors or other staff in search of guidance or advice on how to address specific things. In building these strong peer relationships, students are able to learn that they are as capable as their tutors in getting their homework done, of being active members of their community, and even of supporting GirlForward in the future. Furthermore, students have their own opinions about how the Tutoring program, virtual and in person, can be improved to better support their needs. These opinions and suggestions have been voiced out throughout this past year through the interviews done for my Capstone project and through the surveys we have performed in this latter part of the academic year. These actions highlight the power of leadership that they all hold within this space and outside.

Reflection

With the work I have done with the students and the tutors at GirlForward, I have learned the ways in which each member of the Tutoring Program is an asset to the whole community. In using their own gifts and talents, empathy, energy, etc., tutors have always been an important asset to support and keep pushing forward our GirlForward students. And in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, tutors proved to be the most important link between GirlForward and the students, providing constant support and encouragement in a period when our students felt more distant than before. As for the students, in sharing with us their journey, the students have shared with us their love and their knowledge, two things that bring us tutors and interns joy and certainty in the work we share with them. Thus, working to build these relationships, even once after the pandemic is over, is a priority for the Education Program, since they are the backbone of the work being done in the classroom and the sense of community that distinguishes GirlForward from other similar spaces.

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