



"MBK Connect is uniquely positioned to change the landscape of higher learning for Men of Color scholars."

-President Karol V. Mason, John Jay College



Executive Summary

My Brother's Keeper (MBK) Connect is a cohort-based program for men of color jointly run at John Jay College of Criminal Justice and the Borough of Manhattan Community College (BMCC). At John Jay, the program supports entering students with a summer bridge program that begins prior to their matriculation as degree-seeking students and continues through their first two years at the College. Built upon the lessons learned through existing cohort experiences and in alignment with the frameworks established to guide national MBK efforts, the summer program includes an academic course, tutoring, community building and mentoring, and formalized opportunities to develop and engage in career exploration, experience social and emotional development, and prioritize mental and physical well-being. After students complete the summer programs, they are welcomed into the brotherhood that is MBK, which at both John Jay and BMCC, is housed within the corresponding City University of New York (CUNY) Black Male Initiative (BMI) Programs.

The first cohort of students entered into the MBK Connect programs in the summer of 2023 and this past summer, both colleges welcomed in their second cohort. For students who entered the John Jay program in summer 2023, they were asked to participate in student led focus groups to share their experiences and the impact of the summer program and the continued support on their academic journey at John Jay College. Two focus groups of MBK Connect scholars were conducted with those who were completing their first year at the College and were facilitated by fellow members of the brotherhood. The sessions were recorded and transcribed and the following major themes emerged from the analysis:

Theme 1

The MBK Connect Program Welcomes and Prepares Men of Color for College Success

Theme 2

MBK Scholars Continue to Grow into and Embrace their Unique Identities

Theme 3

For the MBK Scholars, Sense of Belonging is Understood as a Brotherhood

Theme 4

The MBK Connect Program will Achieve its Potential through Evaluation and Expansion In the full report, each of these themes are expanded upon and include a substantial number of direct student quotes. In general, however, the major themes illustrate the benefits and impacts of the program based on the shared experiences of around one-third of the first-year participants.

In the first theme, students explained the reasons why they saw value in the program, their appreciation for the various supports, the effectiveness of the program in helping them bridge the gap between high school and college, and their commitment to supporting each other's success. In the second theme, students discussed the importance of the program in helping them reset their academic expectations, overcome negative stereotypes, develop confidence in their abilities, and take risks in a safe environment. The third theme offers illustrations of the ways in which students embraced and helped grow the brotherhood, the tremendous value they placed on mentorship, and their commitment to holding themselves and others accountable to elevated standards and expectations for excellence. The final theme contains examples of the students' belief in the power of the program as well as their insights into areas for growth, improvement, and further development.



Introduction

The following report presents the findings from a rigorous qualitative analysis of the College's first series of focus groups conducted with the MBK Connect Scholars. While the data analysis and report were written by the staff of the Institutional Effectiveness and Strategy Division, the student groups were gathered by members of the Urban Male Initiative (UMI) and the MBK Connect scholars. In addition, the students conducted research to develop the focus group protocol and script, conducted the focus groups, and transcribed the data.

The College would like to thank Rashad Beliard for his leadership as the 2024 Summer Program Director and during his time as a student at John Jay. Additionally, we would like to thank Joshua Hall, Alpha Sow, Akin Bolanle Bolaji, and Daven Asafo-Agyei for their leadership and participation, in addition to Rashad, as focus group moderators. Additional thanks go out to Maria E. Vidal, who as the Director of the John Jay College UMI supported and mentored these young men. In addition, the mentors and mentoring program were influenced, staffed, and supported by the UMI team.

In the end, two large focus groups were conducted with members from the first cohort of MBK Connect. The focus groups were held in the UMI lounge and as noted above, were facilitated by members of the MBK brotherhood. These scholars underwent a two-part training designed to prepare them to conduct not only a social sciences-based

focus group, but to understand some of the basic focus group methodological principles that undergird rigorous qualitative data collection and analysis.

In addition to facilitating the sessions, the student-led team co-developed the facilitation protocol

and script, which required some basic research into the impacts of cohort programming on minority male success, as well as the consent forms.

To enhance the trustworthiness and dependability of the study, the facilitators recorded the sessions and provided transcriptions to Institutional Effectiveness and Strategy for analysis. The analysis was conducted using a three-stage coding process that began with line-by-line analysis and concluded with a series of four selective codes. The majority of the report is constructed from the open coding process and the corresponding direct quotes (in-vivo) from the students.

The selective codes represent the most impactful themes that emerged from the analyses of the focus groups. In short, they provide the most pertinent findings, and they are as follows:

Theme 1

The MBK Connect Program Welcomes and Prepares Men of Color for College Success

Theme 2

MBK Scholars Continue to Grow into and Embrace their Unique Identities

Theme 3

For the MBK Scholars, Sense of Belonging is Understood as a Brotherhood

Theme 4

The MBK Connect Program will Achieve its Potential through Evaluation and Expansion



The MBK Connect Program Welcomes and Prepares Men of Color for College Success

Unsurprisingly, when students found out about the opportunity to join the MBK Connect program through the summer program, it was the variety of incentives that drew them in. A number of students commented on taking advantage of getting their academic journey started early and were especially interested in not having to utilize their financial aid to do so. One student mentioned that it was not only the class, but also getting familiar with the College early that attracted him. He noted, "not only am I getting free, 3 credits for free, [but] also learning more about the building...[it's] like you're having your own tour pretty much." Outside of the class, the incentive that was most discussed was the MetroCard, which both aligns with a benefit present in many of the College's cohort programs and one that reflects John Jay's commitment to meeting student needs. Transportation across the city can be expensive and as one student explained, "transportation definitely means a lot because not everyone lives in Manhattan, and everyone is traveling from different areas. I am traveling from Staten Island and some people live in the Bronx you know."

While the incentives were an important benefit and characteristic of the program, many of the focus group participants commented on how they were welcomed into the program and how it made them feel. The MBK Connect staff took the time to not only email potential participants, but in many cases called and spoke with them on the phone. This act of warmth resonated strongly with a number of the scholars. Responses included:

- I remember getting a call and it was like the deadline, the last day to sign up and I was like...I should really do that.
- I got the email, but I was just like all right, it's just another email. But the call, it was something else.
- Yeah, that call, that email was nothing. Like they called me...like damn, this sounds like a real person, like that's a person.

One student even indicated that the call made him feel special, like he was being recruited. He exclaimed that "it's like you're being recruited for the army." From the onset, the students, who John Jay refers to as scholars once they join, felt welcomed and that they belonged.

After being welcomed into the program and getting acquainted with the staff and their professors, the students were provided with a number of additional supports. These included educational supports, extra-curricular activities, community building occasions, and even some opportunities to meet with professionals of color. One participant expressed his amazement at getting to meet John Jay's President as well as some lawyers and what he took from the experience. "It was like y'all brought...the president and y'all brought some lawyers too. I feel like that was a good way to show like, oh, if y'all want to keep going down this path, this is where you go." A number of students also commented on the impact of the tutoring, but one student in particular expressed how utilizing tutoring as a proactive measure, rather than only to correct poor grades, changed his perspectives. He stated, "tutoring it helps, it allows me to get stuff off of my chest.... it feels like I'm a little bit more prepared for the test instead of going in blind." This is key as a major focus of the program is to bridge the gap between high school and college preparation and this comment reflects the type of change the program is designed to elicit. Finally, there were several comments about the workshops, especially the ones focused on networking. Students attending John Jay typically come from environments where there are lower levels of social capital, so there is an intensive focus on providing opportunities for students to gain new experiences and get exposed to new environments. Here are two particularly insightful statements about the networking workshops:

- [The] networking definitely [helped]...compared to if I didn't have those networking skills and didn't learn about all of those networks."
- 46 I definitely think the networking classes definitely helped [and] having the upper (senior) people talking to us about how good networking is definitely has helped me to use that outside, like when we did the fairs and talking to [people].

In addition to the formal supports, the scholars commented on how they felt that the staff, faculty, and fellow students were also looking out for their health and well-being. Several students commented on their appreciation for opportunities to use the athletic facilities and the weight room and also shared that informal groups of young men would go to the weight room to work out and support each other. One

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student recalled a difficult medical situation that they experienced during the summer, one that required him to miss time, and he commented on how helpful and understanding the staff and faculty were in ensuring he was supported and set up for success.

Finally, the scholars expressed a genuine appreciation for the environment and how the program helped them effectively transition from high school to college. Some students noted how they were convinced that college was not going to be that different from high school and that it would be easy. A few of the participants shared some of the experiences that successfully disabused them of the notion that what worked in high school would enable them for success in college. One student shared honestly how his misconceptions led him to not take his class seriously in the beginning and how that mistake came back to hurt him. "I was told college was gonna be easy, it was gonna be like a vacation. College is gonna be mad easy, [it's] gonna be a vacation and...[then] I took math, it was easy but then I got [expletive]." The student's statement was met with agreement from other participants about how the coursework was tougher than they expected, but also how the overall approach from the faculty, the techniques they were taught, and the confidence instilled by staff helped them to adjust. Two comments that reflected this sentiment include:

- When I came during the summer, I seen everyone was chill [and] I'm like what is there to be stressed about, [we] have to work, but it's not impossible like that."
- When I came back in the fall, I thought it would be crazy, but I learned that it is not crazy, it just takes time management, and you just have to do the work."

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A number of the comments also reflected just how unprepared the students believed they were to succeed. The scholars provided commentary on how they were not sure if college was for them and just how important the MBK Connect program was in helping them understand they could be successful and that they belonged. Two especially poignant comments were:

- **Before the summer class I would sit there in high school and I would think, like think college is going to be some hard [expletive], like this is going to be difficult, like this is not going to be easy right. I really don't think I will be able to do it. I'm going to have to try bro, but I don't think I can do it. But once we took that class in the summer, everything was different. Everything was way different, like it gave me a whole different meaning to college. It actually made me want to come to college.
- friends in college. I knew this institution. I knew the classrooms and I knew some of the professors at least. It kind of gives it a different meaning then, as I went from being that senior in high school that was super scared of college to that same summer wanting to, like actually wanting to go to college.

While many of the students indicated that they felt unprepared for college prior to the summer program, there was a near universal agreement that the MBK Connect program is focused on the success of all the scholars. There was an appreciation for the focus on community success and support and an indication that being in a program built on relationships and connections was critical to individual *and* group success. One student explained that "[The program] made me feel like everywhere I go I would have somebody to talk to [and] I think the MBK program helped." Another participant expressed a feeling of comfort in the fact that "I know that I'm not left in the dirt or the dust... I'm not left in the dirt because no matter what, I have at least somebody to fall back on." There were even a couple of comments where the scholars noted that group success is the goal. These included:

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- [Success is] getting A's as a group, like the favorite part is when we got A's as a group, and we all worked together."
- You know we don't want this [just] for us, you know we want to be at graduation with all of us together and not just one of us but all together as a group to prove like, hey these statistics [on college success for men of color] are wrong and show that we can all graduate."

As an expression of appreciation for the program, one student even suggested that "I think that you should make that our own fraternity, like you should pledge for two years." Although it is still early in the process, it is clear that the MBK Connect scholars are benefiting greatly from the program.

MBK Scholars Continue to Grow into and Embrace their Unique Identities

For traditionally aged college students, especially those coming straight out of high school like the majority of the MBK scholars, college represents an opportunity to engage in self exploration and the development/realization of the truer sense of self. This intentional exploration, which is especially important for men of color, is an intentional aspect of the MBK Connect program. Whether through formal community building programming such as Guy Code, or when interacting in the lounge, during workshops, or when working with the faculty, staff, and especially the peer mentors, the program is designed to offer both a space for exploration as well as facilitation of the process. One scholar expressed that "if you don't show who you are, not too many people will get to know you." Another participant noted that "[in] guy

This was a common theme amongst the focus groups—putting yourself out there and both learning who you are and sharing that person with the brotherhood. code, you don't always wanna put everything out there, but I learned to get comfortable and learn that it's a safe space." This was a common theme amongst the focus groups putting yourself out there and both learning who you are and sharing that person with the brotherhood. Another related theme that emerged was an intentionality in defining what personal success is. These conversations were included in the workshops that the students attended, and they offered some of the following statements, which reflect how the program helped them understand their identities and define their place in the world:

Success is being able to take pride in the things you do. I feel like there [is] a difference between accomplishing things and having or comparing what others think is big, but it meant nothing for you."





- "[Success is] doing it your 110 [percent]. And your 110 might not be the next person's 110, but it's your 110... so can you get up in the morning [and] look yourself in the mirror?"
- "Success is money, I'm joking...money is how my mindset used to be, but my father told me never chase numbers because numbers are infinite. I try to go for experiences...honestly the memories that you have and the impacts you make [are important]. I wake up every day thinking how can I experience or impact a person."

Another student expressed a great deal of appreciation for the opportunities that allowed him to assess who he was and who he wanted to be.

**MBK has just brought more of me out like [in high school] I would pretty much not talk to no one and getting here helped me a lot. Like, I would not be in such a position right now if it was not for MBK. I would be home right now, sitting down doing nothing.

Just riding my time waiting for college to end.

A specific aspect of identity exploration and expression that came up during the analysis was the impact that the MBK Connect program had on helping students combat the internalization of negative stereotypes. These students were well aware not only of the disproportionate success rates for men of color in K-12 and in higher education, but also the messaging that they were just another statistic. While many of the participants expressed gratitude for the program and, in fact, indicated that their awareness of these stereotypes was part of the reason they wanted to attend the program, they addressed how the program helped them reject the stereotypes of unpreparedness and the unlikeliness of their success. The following statements encapsulate many of the comments expressed during the sessions:

"I would say another thing is that some stereotypes are like colored men when they go to college, they are not prepared for it. But MBK, like it mentally and physically prepared us for what college was going to be. [By putting us] in a college setting and already having friends, I think that was a win-win."

If feel like some stereotypes is that...we are going to college; we just got right out [of high school and] it isn't for us. MBK helped us...actually do this because, off the summer foundation, we were able to get a piece of that schoolwork and a piece of college itself. I feel like it helped with that, that we could finish school."

Further expanding on the theme of identity development, and as an extension of combating and rejecting stereotypes, the participants shared their experiences in becoming more confident young men as a result of the MBK Connect program. One of the scholars noted that the program "taught me to speak up...if you don't feel comfortable speak up," while another indicated a similar concept, that "putting yourself out there is a lot of what I learned during the summer program." Another student shared his experience with learning about "a diagram [where] you had different comfort zones, and it taught me people who lived outside their comfort zone were more successful." As a result of the community building and identity development work, one scholar shared his experience of engaging more with the brotherhood as the summer went on.

In the beginning when I came to MBK since the summer...I didn't really know where to sit at the beginning. I didn't know anybody at first, but throughout my time at MBK my confidence has grown...[I've] become better and more confident in myself."

Another shared how his understanding of college success was now rooted in confidence and that this realization occurred through interactions with his peers. In his view,

"Going to college [is] 50% academic, 20% networking, and 30% building your character. So, in building character there is something in confidence [and this is] one thing I did not have when I came to college, and I found that through the [brother] sitting next to me."

Leadership and professional development constitute one of the program pillars and there is programming designed to provide students with the opportunities to develop and strengthen their leadership skills.

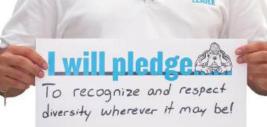
Some students also shared how they have started to apply their newfound confidence into professional settings. Leadership and professional development constitute one of the program pillars and there is programming designed to provide students with the opportunities to develop and strengthen their leadership skills. There were multiple examples offered by the focus group participants of when they approached individuals in professional settings, took the opportunity to reach out to industry professionals, and even to speak in front of audiences. One individual explained that as a result of the programming,

I made connections with federations and spoke to a lot of lawyers. It's just, it's not something I would traditionally do out of nowhere or just go on the train and striking a conversation. [These] are behaviors I don't find myself doing. I started noticing [them] when I came out of college."

Of all of the axial codes, the development of confidence had the most quotes and individual codes. Perhaps the best statement regarding how the scholars view the development of confidence as a result of their MBK brotherhood was shared by one young man who noted "confidence is like growing a backbone."

The development of confidence as a result of the identity development work is a key finding and one also connected to the theme that the MBK program provides a space where student feel free to both explore their identities and, in their words, to fail. A number of the scholars expressed their discontent with failure as well as an appreciation that the MBK program is aiding them in their efforts to succeed. One student noted that the program has helped him succeed in life because he "[doesn't] look at failure as an option. Some-





Failure can be viewed harshly and as undesirable, but there were a number of the participants who expressed gratitude that they could make mistakes and learn from them in an environment that supported and understood them. They did not see failure as a negative, but rather as a steppingstone to future successes. One young man stated "you've gotta fail first. You will know what mistake you made that was wrong... like not everything is easy. You can always accomplish things you want, but you have to push yourself forward." Another student went even further in expressing his appreciation for the opportunity to explore and to fail.

Success is failure. In order to succeed you have to fail first and then when [you] fail, you learn from your mistake and then you keep on going...you fail again then you get up again and then you keep on going until you learn from your mistake. You cannot call yourself successful because there is still room for failure, but now you already have the experience and the experience you gain from that."

It is clear that the MBK Connect program has been instrumental in helping the men in the brotherhood engage in the hard and important work of identity development.

For the MBK Scholars, Sense of Belonging is Understood as a Brotherhood

The language of brotherhood, community, and group success is incorporated into the mission and the goals of the MBK Connect program. Accordingly, programming includes both formal and informal opportunities for the scholars to find their place, develop friendships, and establish connections. The focus group participants commented on the impact of connecting with other young men of color in the classrooms, in the lounge, during workshops, and even when playing pool or hanging out. Some members also commented on how the connections led to informal study groups, concert outings, and life discussions. An element of the analysis that really was evident, however, is the appreciation for how the space and the opportunities allowed for the development of a sense of belonging—a community that the young men quickly entered into and became participating members.

The language of brotherhood, community, and group success is incorporated into the mission and the goals of the MBK Connect program.

The phrase brotherhood is used often within MBK Connect and not only describes the greater purpose and goals, but is also used in the very programming provided to students. Based on an analysis of the focus group data, it is clear that the term is impactful and reflects what is typically referred to in academic circles as a sense of belonging. Its about community, but it is deeper and more personal. The sentiments shared by the young men regarding how they view the program offers insight into the pervasive impact that entry into an affinity-based, college transition and preparation program can have. The participant expressed an appreciation that they

The participant expressed an appreciation that they were in an environment where they were seen for who they are, where they did not have to explain or justify themselves, and where they found their people.

were in an environment where they were seen for who they are, where they did not have to explain or justify themselves, and where they found their people. Some of the strongest indicators that the existence of this intentionally designed brotherhood is having a profound effect on these scholars are found in the following statements:

- I felt like I can be honest with him, I can say whatever, and I wasn't judged.
- Who a lot of people get out of [their] comfort zone because they fear being judged, and... this program, when it comes to the incoming freshman, it helps."
- "I'm a pretty weird person, so I have been told, but they don't really care. They really understand. They don't look at my faults as a bad thing, they really embrace it."
- "Through the summer I was very antisocial. I meet a whole bunch of friends and stuff, [and] they didn't care, they saw me for who I was."

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A sentiment that was shared frequently by the scholars in relation to the concept of the brotherhood was the ability to trust each other. One participant noted "when I think of brotherhood, I think of people you can confide in, people you can trust." Another stated that one of the most important aspects of the program was "having the opportunity to talk about anything and opening up." Yet another student noted that they "see [a brotherhood] as someone outside the family, that I can confide in, a guy obviously that I can confide in." This was a theme that was shared multiple times in reference to the mentor/mentee relationship (discussed in depth later in this section) and reflected a desire and need for the scholars to engage in the establishment of personal relationships that allowed and encouraged them to be honest and vulnerable. Two statements that illustrate the importance of trust within the brotherhood include:

My mentor was really helpful. I trust him a lot. I feel like I can tell him about anything in my personal life and school."

On the personal side, my mentor was someone I can trust. You can't always tell your personal thing... because it needs to be in a small space...after getting to know him more, I understand this."

We're all different [and the program helped us] forge bonds with people that you don't know." Another individual expressed how the brotherhood has enabled him to appreciate the differences in others.

When I compare myself to another brother, I [see] that some people have different skills, and you can learn from another brother and gain their skill. It taught me that it's not a one-person game, like you don't have to do all the work to get all the skill in your arsenal. You can go and ask someone else for some help.

Perhaps the greatest indication that the focus group participants are truly in a brotherhood is that they engaged in a significant amount of playful banter during the sessions. Typically, with young men, its when they start to joke with each other that it is evident that they respect and care for each other. Some examples of the comradery indicative of a brotherhood are:

My mentor was complete trash, I'm joking."

The scholars also shared an appreciation that the MBK
Connect brotherhood provides them with an opportunity to
grow together and to really appreciate each other. There is
a recognition from the participants that they have different
life circumstances and are different people, but also that the
brotherhood provides an opportunity to see other
young men as "twin brothers [who are] going to
experience the same thing." One of the students
noted that it's the growing together
that allows for strong bonds to
form. He stated, "I see a
brotherhood as a bond
that forms even though
we don't know each other.



- "Give us a chance to challenge our mentors [and] have more games to challenge the mentors. We undefeatable right now."
- The bowling was brought up and I heard about that... how you going to let them treat you like that? I gotta let you win sometimes."
- open right. I wanted to have some fun because I'm always studying hard, and I was kinda bored. I looked through their Blackboard and sent them a picture and a message [to] say you see what happens when you get caught lacking and when I [saw] the person, they were frozen and now when I see them, their [laptop is] always off."

Although a number of important topics were discussed, the most addressed topic during the focus groups was the mentor/mentee relationship. The mentorship model utilized for

the MBK Connect program involves an intentional development and utilization of men of color as program peer mentors. As the program continues to grow each year, there is a larger pool of past mentees who can serve as mentors and this past year saw a number of first-year cohort mentees accept the charge to become program mentors. Given the focus on a brotherhood, one which is typified by familial language, rooted in trust, and indicative of genuine care and concern for the success of others, it is unsurprising that the data analysis resulted in codes focused on how mentors directly impact mentee behavior.

Given the focus on a brotherhood, one which is typified by familial language, rooted in trust, and indicative of genuine care and concern for the success of others, it is unsurprising that the data analysis resulted in codes focused on how mentors directly impact mentee behavior.

A number of the participants spoke to how their mentors were focused on identifying and calling out behaviors that needed adjustment. These behaviors ran the gambit from traditional high school behavior to issues of professionalism to academic effort and proactively seeking out help and support. The mentors, who were typically upperclassmen, were drawing not only on the training and mentorship of faculty and staff, but also on their own transitions from high school to College. Additionally, it must be noted, again, that the mentorship program utilized by the MBK Connect program was guided and primarily staffed by the College's Urban Male Leadership Initiative (UMI). Utilization of the model and the hard work and efforts of the staff and student leaders were essential in supporting the mentorship of the mentors. As a result, the mentees benefited from mentors who were prepared and tasked with holding their mentees accountable. As one participant noted, "my mentor kinda helped me keep on track...making sure I was staying on top of work [and] showing up to class on time." One of the scholars noted that the check-ins, whether they were desired or not, were key to his success. Yet another expressed an appreciation for the "tough love" shown by his mentor, which in his mind, validated that the mentor truly cared for him. He stated "[it's about] the tough love aspect because it [is] not just tough, it [is] the love behind it, and my mentor don't be playing games." Some of the scholars expanded on the concept of mentor "tough love" by sharing the following:

- "I did it to myself, I made [a] bad choice, but my mentor asked what is your reason to come to college if you are going to act like this. I want you to pick up your act and start doing your stuff, your schoolwork."
- "I was called out for my [expletive] and told to start doing my [expletive]...it was the realization where I needed to change mentality. Everything is easy, I can do better. I just had to do the work now because if I don't then I would never get to it."
- "He does inspire me to do better although I'm very lazy as [expletive]...like I procrastinate so [expletive] much."

I don't like being told what to do...I don't like someone telling me oh you gotta do this and you gotta do your assignments. But if you tell me in a way [where] I can tell you want the best for me [and that] you're not a person that's towering over me, that's a way different experiences."

In addition to demonstrating tough love, the mentees also identified the myriad ways in which their mentors show up for them. One student expressed that their mentor is "kinda like [my] older brother, I can call them at any time." It was this concept, showing up and being dependable, that was transformative to the mentees based on their comments. It was clear that the mentees knew they could count on their mentors based on their actions and this knowledge was instrumental to their early college success. Statements validating this theme include:

- "Sometimes I would tell myself that there [is] too much going on and I don't know how to manage my time with other things and pay attention to school... I would ask him for help, and he would tell me I will be here if you need anything."
- **Mv** mentor not only helped me with the schoolwork. but he helped me...with programs. Like my mentor helped me with getting into Apple Corps. I didn't know Apple Corps was even a thing, so without my mentor I would have never even known that. 55
- Mv mentor also helped me inside and out of school like he would make sure my grades were good, and he would also check on me outside of school."
- "I know for my first mentor; I play video games with him a lot and you can talk about anything, [and] it doesn't always have to be education. He would give me life advice and that goes a long way because some people don't get that in their college experience."
- He gave me financial tips, general advice more than iust academically whenever I came to him with a question. Not only that, but when I even asked for like internships from him, he would get on top of it."
- "He helped me with my resume in the fall semester, which was super, super helpful."

The mentors worked with the mentees to help them see that high school and college are not the same and they need to adjust.

A theme that emerged to help explain why the mentorship relationship has been so strong is the focus on setting standards and expectations for the mentees. The mentors worked with the mentees to help them see that high school and college are not the same and they need to adjust. In sharing a conversation with his mentor, one of the participants stated that "when I came I was really confident [in] all of my skills and then I got to the classroom and I realized I'm not the smartest person in the classroom, like I'm not always gonna be the best." While sobering, the mentor worked with the student to understand that it is about working hard and getting the help you need. Another student noted he came into the program with a certain standard and his mentor supported his elevated expectation. "For me it was just getting better grades than men of color, the regular standard, doing more than good and not just [meeting expectations or] the regular standard." In addition to helping the mentees reset their expectations and strive for excellence, the mentors helped the mentees understand how to collaborate with the professors as college students instead of approaching them as high school teachers. One of the students shared the following regarding his growth when addressing and working with professors:

"The professors are big scary adults, and they can ruin your life whenever they want to.... like you really have to fight with them to argue with them [and] try to get your grade up because in your head they control you. You gotta just work your way around until you figure it out. But I discovered not to argue, but to negotiate more."

It is apparent that the focus on creating standards and elevated expectations rubbed off onto the mentees. A number expressed dismay at some of the behaviors that they saw from other students entering into the program. They were particularly opinionated about the stipends being provided for program attendance. A sentiment expressed by the students was that if the mentees don't show up, they should not get the full financial benefit. Some of the comments included:

"So, like if you did show up every day [you should get] \$1000 and if you didn't show up every day, [you should get] \$800."

Think about it...you come every day do your work, boom, and that's it. But then some guy bombs, doesn't do no work and he gets a \$1000? I'm taking his \$1000. The thing is if that person [expletive] up in the program they didn't get the band."

ff you don't show up you get your money taken away."

As shown with the preceding sections, the bonds that have been created between the mentors and the mentees in the MBK Connect program are strong. They are so strong, in fact, that they have even continued beyond the formal program requirements. One of the students noted that although no longer his mentor, his former mentor "would still check in on me when I was in the hall [and] pause and ask me questions, so even though he wasn't my mentor, he would still act like he is my mentor." Another indicated that "after the summer and everything we started to keep in touch with schoolwork and everything to make sure that I'm on top of my academics." Yet another scholar explained that mentorship, at its core, is about a relationship built within the brotherhood. He noted:

[It] definitely feels like more of a relationship...even after the summer program...it was just having someone [who wasn't] there just to be there. It was either they were there to...actually spend their time to help with these relationships and definitely help us when it came to us going to college.

The act of showing up and seeing the mentees as they are, whether the formal mentoring relationship was still active or not, resonated with at least one of the participants who stated "[my mentor] understood me and seen where I was coming from. He bonded with me and put a lot of trust in [me]." Perhaps the most succinct comment regarding the impact of the mentor and mentee relationship came from a scholar who explained that "the mentor that I got helped me, pushed forward to some one that I want to be."

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The MBK Connect Program will Achieve its Potential through Evaluation and Expansion

The students want to see this program continue and believe strongly in its impact and potential. Given their strong convictions that it needs to continue, to grow, and to thrive...

Through an analysis of the focus group reports, it is clear that the MBK scholars see the program as a vital resource for men of color. One of the scholars explained that "you know, just having [the chance] to start your college career, that is a W right there." Expanding on this idea that getting started the summer before your first year is a win, another student shared his feelings that "we are getting an opportunity that not many people have, like to get a head start. So, I take that seriously. Not many people stick together through college, and I take that seriously." Other students expressed the opinion that had they not attended the program, they and some of their brothers may not have made it through their first year. Some comments shared include:

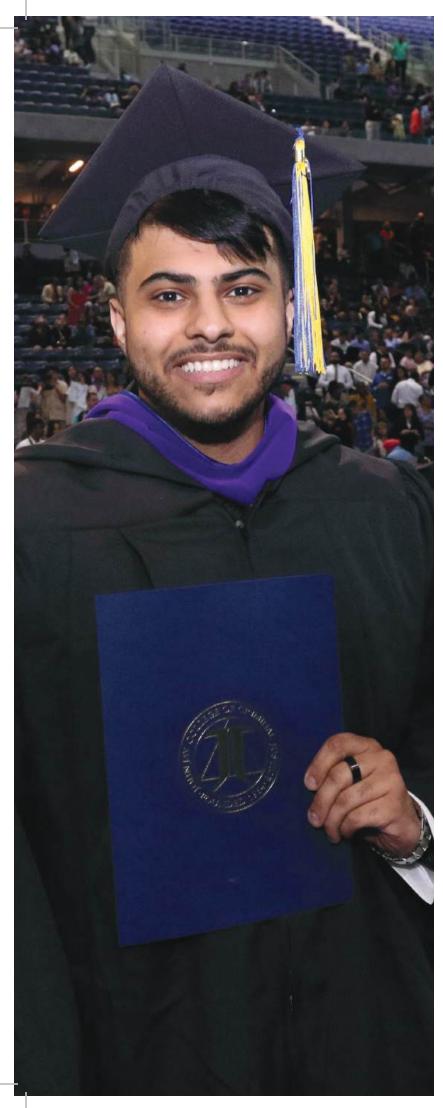
- I do like this program, and I want it to keep going because it the only thing that keeps me going sometimes 55
- "I can say it help[s] everyone here because like if we didn't have this program we would have all been lost."
- I was skeptical at first. Definitely as the summer went on and even after going through the semesters... I think that's going to help retention a lot."

The students want to see this program continue and believe strongly in its impact and potential. Given their strong convictions that it needs to continue, to grow, and to thrive, it is valuable to look at the themes that emerged when they were asked about what they would change.

The first area where the scholars identified opportunities for improvement was in regard to expanding the opportunities to develop community outside of the formalized mentoring relationships. While the community expanded organically through informal activities, the students recommend that moving forward, the program creates intentional opportunities for bonding across the existing groups. This particular suggestion reflects the benefits that the students are experiencing throughout the summer and the desire to further increase the bonding of the brothers. Some of the comments include:

- I would probably do more fun activities that involves everyone, like I'm your mentor and I'm only inviting my mentees. I would do something that more fun and involves everyone."
- I would have a specific week where I switch up the groups...let's say you have your group and mentor. You're stuck with those people the whole summer, but I would switch up the group, so you get to know everybody."
- "I would probably try to get more involvement, like for more people to know each other because I would see a lot of people and be like I wanna know them."
- I would've made a lot more group activities. I think the only times we got to be in groups is when we got to meet with our mentors, but [some] of...our friends were in other mentor groups, so we didn't really get to see our friends out of class or out of the program when we had free time."





A related suggestion was to add more activities, especially those outside of the college.

A related suggestion was to add more activities, especially those outside of the college. Multiple participants expressed the desire to have formal activities at different venues across the city and to even consider creating a "sports day" where the brothers could get to know each other better through physical activity and competition.

Another area where the participants indicated that they would like to see some additions was in regard to the academic classes. This is a reflection of the appreciation shown by the students for the opportunity to begin their college career early. One of the scholars explained that "for people who do want to take a head start, take the two classes, but for people who just want...that one class...it's more of an option." Another participant, noting the difficulties he experienced in taking five classes during the fall semester, believes that offering more classes at once will better prepare students for the workload of a regular academic semester. He stated, "the one class, it did a little push, but it didn't really give [you the] umph, you know what I'm saying." Finally, another student indicated that given how much some students don't want to take a math class in the summer, they should get to choose one class and be forced to take a math class. "everybody should [have to take] math classes like MAT 108...because when it came to the fall semester, I was pretty stressed with that class. [That] class should have been provided more in the summer than other classes because it feels like everyone doesn't like math."

Another participant...believes that offering more classes at once will better prepare students for the workload of a regular academic semester.

Finally, in addition to making adjustments to the opportunities for community building, number of activities, and academic offerings, the focus group participants provided recommendations regarding program corrections. First, the students noted that there was too much confusion regarding what the MBK Connect Program is. In the minds of many of the students, it was only a summer program, so they were surprised when there were workshops, continued mentoring opportunities, and expected attendance at events without a

stipend. Although multiple students noted that they did not expect the program to continue, they were pleased that it did. One of the scholars shared that "I thought this was going to be a one-time thing and then I found out like you know, surprise! But it wasn't a bad thing. It wasn't a bad thing, especially after doing the summer thing, it was not a bad thing." Another student expressed joy that the program was growing while also stating "MBK was only advertised as like a summer thing and then it became a year-long thing and now it's about to become a whole college experience."

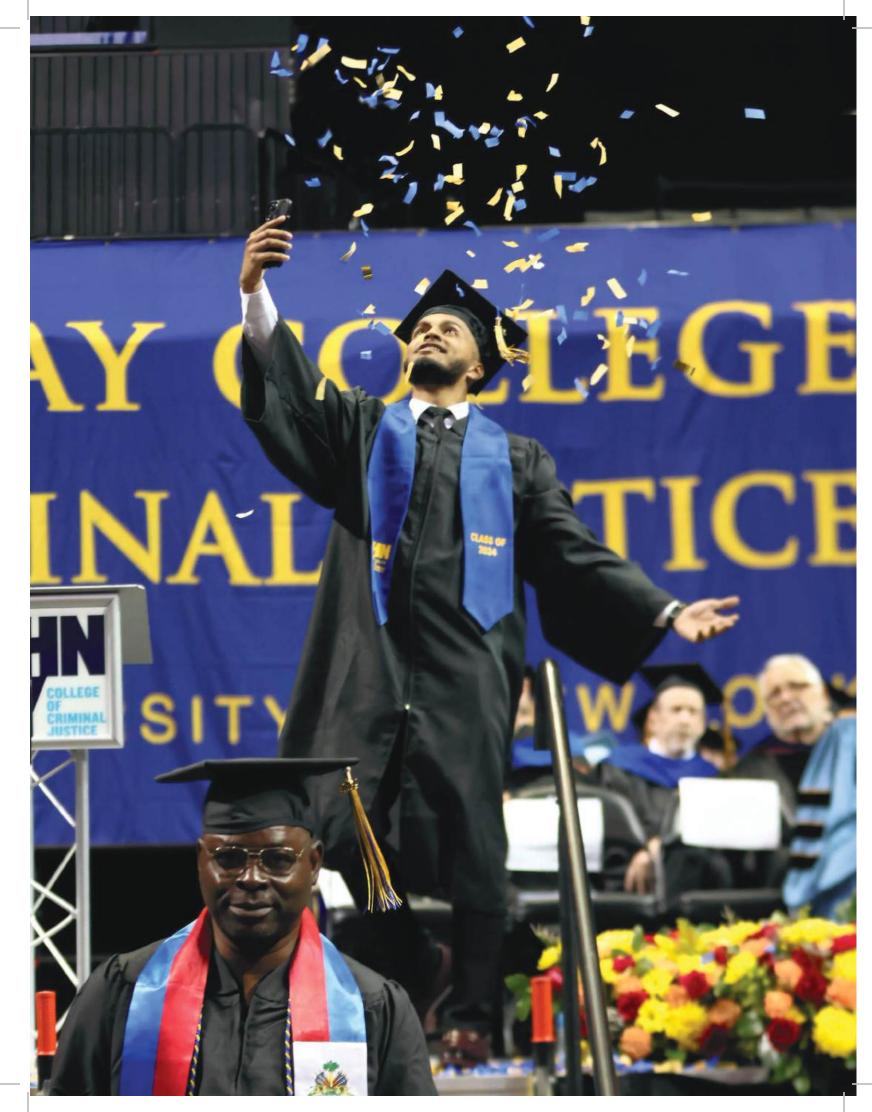
The most critical comments were directed at the mentoring part of the program. Given the importance of and value placed upon the mentoring relationships, it is not surprising that the students would reflect on the aspects that could and should be enhanced moving forward. One area where the participants recommended changes was in regard to the training of the mentors. There were a number of comments shared about some mentors who were less organized than others, were not always dependable, and who struggled with timeliness. One of the students noted that their mentor was "kinda unorganized" and "were getting things done last minute." Another described their mentor as being "a little distant" and disconnected during some of their interactions. Yet another student expressed concern that "the check-ins wouldn't even last five minutes." One comment that summarizes some of the concerns regarding the mentoring is that at times, "it was a little messy." In short, there were a number of students who shared their mentoring experiences with other members of the community and students became aware of who the most connected, engaged, and dependable mentors were. Given the high bar set by some of the mentors, as indicated in a preceding section, the mentees became aware that there was a range of effectiveness and were more critical of the mentors they saw as less responsible and dependable. The number of positive comments regarding mentorship outweighed the negative comments, but based on the results, this is an area where improvement can and needs to be made.

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Notes	



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This is an issue of national importance—it's as important as any issue that I work on. It's an issue that goes to the very heart of why I ran for President—because if America stands for anything, it stands for the idea of opportunity for everybody; the notion that no matter who you are, or where you came from, or the circumstances into which you are born, if you work hard, if you take responsibility, then you can make it in this country."

-President Barack Obama

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