

Mentor Mentee Program for Promoting Mental Health in Korean Youth

South Korea

Colby College

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The goal of the project was to establish a mentor-mentee program between South Korean college students and young adolescents. Having a mentor in one's life could mitigate thoughts of suicide and depression, which is abnormally high in South Korean adolescence.

While we were unable to find additional sources of funding through fund-raising events, we were able to receive additional funding through the Colby Davis Connects Program, which immediately recognized the international impact our project could have.

We came up with the idea of a mentorship program as we are both highly involved in Colby College Asian Student Association and have first-hand experienced academic stress, which is hyper-accentuated in Asian culture. We wanted to raise awareness of societal problems that intersect the Asian/Asian American identity as well as cultural phenomenons that arise due to these societal problems. In addition, Naoki's involvement in CCAK and Jordyn's involvement in Student Health on Campus have made us both experts in our respective fields. The Davis Projects for Peace was not only something we did as a result of our passions but also a test of our leadership abilities in a different environment.

We believe that one of the reasons for the prevalence of mental health problems in South Korea is that the culture has evolved in a way that is demanding of an exacting and rigorous academic curriculum. Less than a century ago, South Korea was considered a third-world country and was significantly less developed than its bordering countries, such as Japan and China, which prospered in the era of technology. However, in the next couple of decades, South Korea's integration into the international market propelled the country to grow at an exponential rate—a rate at which their culture struggled to catch. Consequently, South Korea's academic excellence is now part of their culture and has been a result of meeting the demands of the technologically advanced global economy. We chose our host site as Yonsei University because Yonsei is one of the top Universities that South Korean teenagers dream of being admitted to. Admission into this prestigious university is a major reason that drives academic pressure. We hoped that connecting current Yonsei students with youth could change the youths' perspective of their future career and career goals. Overall, the Yonsei students whom we interacted with were supportive and excited to participate in the project.

While our intentions for the mentor-mentee project were to execute the project in person throughout 4-6 months, the COVID-19 pandemic critically changed the details outlined in our proposal. While writing our proposal in the winter of 2020, we did not expect the pandemic to continue to the degree that it has by the summer of 2021. In the spring of 2021, we had hoped that vaccination would allow for further ease of restrictions by the summer. Unfortunately, South Korea's rollout of COVID-19 vaccinations was significantly limited and occurred later than that of the U.S. Additionally, the law prohibited gatherings

beyond 4 people, and many schools restricted visitors and reverted to online learning. As a result, we had to quickly change our original plan to a virtually held program. It was at this point when we worried that our project would not work, as the idea of a virtual mentorship program did not seem feasible or appealing. However, with the help of the motivated Yonsei students and teachers at the primary school, we were able to take a new approach to the project. Additionally, we were fortunate enough to have Jordyn whose proficiency in Korean allowed for effective communication with both parties.

Our plans changed from fostering individual mentor-mentee relationships to whole classroom interactions. We gathered many university students from Yonsei and had them facilitate live virtual “question and answer” sessions with multiple classrooms within the primary school. We were both a bit skeptical of how the mentees would react. However, it was amazing to see the children’s faces light up when they saw the Yonsei students on their TV screens. It was great to witness the kinds of creative questions the kids asked as they each took turns coming up to the front of the classroom to speak into a microphone. We believe that these passionate Yonsei students will continue to develop strong relationships with each classroom until the pandemic is over. After the pandemic, these mentors would eventually come into the classroom to serve as mentors for individual students.

It took a lot of work to completely change our project during the summer. I would advise future PfP grantees to develop a strong relationship with the community members before arriving on-site. It was because of the help of Yonsei and teachers that we were able to make such a cohesive plan in such a short amount of time. We would like to give special thanks to Youngsuk Yoon who coordinated the program within her elementary school.

We define peace as a construct that all humans must work towards, even if it is theoretically unobtainable. We must work towards peace because, as a species, we each rely on understanding and socially being able to uplift one another. As individuals, each of us has a different notion of peace such as a tangible object, memory, or goal. Our mission for this project has been to introduce our individual definitions and interpretations of mental peace and introduce it to youth who may find its existence beneficial to their mental health. Throughout the project, we have learned to become better mentor figures for future generations of youth.

Personal Statements:

“Not only did the mentors stimulate the mentees’ personal growth, but the relationships also enabled the mentors to rethink about their own lives while formulating their responses to the mentees’ questions.”

-Jordyn Kim

“The extraordinary expectations to reach extreme academic success have ultimately failed many youths to find their own definition of peace. We hope that our project will enable many individuals to grow alongside mentors who can contribute to the youths’ mental health and life goals.”

-Naoki Kihata

