

NITEO: A Qualitative Study of a Supported Education Program for Students Experiencing Disruptions to Their College Education Because of a Mental Health Condition

E. Sally Rogers¹, David Braverman¹, Courtney Joly-Lowdermilk², Lisa Augustine¹, and Pamela Rothpletz-Puglia^{3, 4}

¹ Center for Psychiatric Rehabilitation, College of Health and Rehabilitation Sciences: Sargent, Boston University

² NITEO Program, Boston University

³ Department of Interdisciplinary Studies, School of Health Professions, Rutgers University

⁴ Department of Clinical and Preventive Nutrition Science, School of Health Professions, Rutgers University

Objective: The rates and severity of mental health conditions among young adults are troublesome. Mental health conditions among college students impact educational attainment, future employment and earnings, as well as quality of life. Our objective was to assess students' experience and perceptions of the core components of NITEO, a college reentry program designed to assist young adults who have dropped out of or taken a leave of absence from college. **Methods:** We conducted a qualitative study of the core components of NITEO, employing an applied interpretive approach and conducting semistructured interviews with 31 former NITEO students. Data were examined using thematic analysis. **Results:** Analyses revealed four themes: (a) NITEO catalyzes personal growth and connection, (b) coaching builds skills and promotes accountability, (c) peer mentors are supportive role models, and (d) other students in the program impact the program experience. These findings suggest that the different components of NITEO foster skills and resilience while providing a supportive community. **Conclusions and Implications for Practice:** Our study illuminates the potential of programs such as NITEO to facilitate recovery and return to college for students on leave or who have dropped out due to mental health conditions.

Impact and Implications

This study qualitatively assessed participants' experiences and perceptions of the core components of NITEO, a program that facilitates students' return to college after a leave of absence or dropping out due to mental health conditions. Program components are designed to boost academic resilience and holistic wellness and to alleviate isolation; all to facilitate a successful return to college. Findings offer valuable insights for collegiate educators and mental health professionals, underscoring the potential of reentry programs such as NITEO to support students' academic success and well-being.

Keywords: college mental health, college dropout, college leave of absence, mental health, young adults

Supplemental materials: <https://doi.org/10.1037/prj0000642.supp>

This article was published Online First April 17, 2025.

Adrienne Lapidos served as action editor.

E. Sally Rogers  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3741-4595>

David Braverman  <https://orcid.org/0009-0004-0677-5592>

Courtney Joly-Lowdermilk is now at Bridge Educational Engineering, Manchester, Massachusetts, United States.

The authors thank the Gayle Berg Research Fund at Sargent College for its support of this study. The authors thank the developers of the program: Dori Hutchinson, Larry Kohn, and Courtney Joly-Lowdermilk as well as the generous philanthropic donors to the center who made the NITEO program possible. The authors thank the codirectors of the program Chelsea Cobb and Paul Cherchia as well as the college coaches who are all devoted to helping NITEO students.

E. Sally Rogers played a lead role in conceptualization, formal analysis, funding acquisition, investigation, supervision, and writing—original

draft and an equal role in methodology and writing—review and editing. David Braverman played a lead role in data curation and investigation, a supporting role in formal analysis and validation, and an equal role in project administration and writing—review and editing. Courtney Joly-Lowdermilk played a supporting role in conceptualization, formal analysis, methodology, project administration, and writing—review and editing and an equal role in validation. Lisa Augustine played a supporting role in validation and writing—review and editing. Pamela Rothpletz-Puglia played a supporting role in formal analysis, writing—original draft, and writing—review and editing and an equal role in methodology and validation.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to E. Sally Rogers, Center for Psychiatric Rehabilitation, College of Health and Rehabilitation Sciences: Sargent, Boston University, 940 Commonwealth Avenue West, Boston, MA 02215, United States. Email: erogers@bu.edu

The rates of mental health conditions on college campuses are high, both domestically and internationally (American College Health Association, 2022; Auerbach et al., 2018; Lipson et al., 2022). During the past decade, the number of mental health conditions reported in the United States grew steadily, resulting in over 60% of college students meeting the criteria for a mental health diagnosis in 2021 (Lipson et al., 2022). Though recent data suggests some improvement in college mental health when compared to previous years, the most current Healthy Minds survey found that 38% of students reported experiencing depression and 36% anxiety (Healthy Minds, 2024). Research has found a bidirectional relationship between mental health and academic success, and that mental health problems, which often emerge in young adulthood, negatively impact academic performance and attainment (Arria et al., 2013; Bruffaerts et al., 2018; Hartley, 2011).

The economic consequences of mental health conditions and curtailed educational achievement are significant (McDaid et al., 2019). Individuals with limited education are more likely to be employed in entry-level jobs and to earn low wages (Doran & Kinchin, 2017; Luciano & Meara, 2014; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2023). Seabury and colleagues examined economic losses that can be attributed to mental illness, but more importantly, the potential for educational attainment to have mitigating and beneficial effects (Seabury et al., 2019).

Growing awareness of mental health conditions on college campuses has informed the development of interventions for college students (Ebert et al., 2018; Moghimi et al., 2023; Sommer et al., 2018; Worsley et al., 2022) with several hundred studies of effective interventions designed to address depression, anxiety, and stress (Cuijpers et al., 2021). However, students who opt to or are required to take a leave of absence (whether formal or informal) for mental health reasons cannot be served by on-campus programs once they are no longer enrolled. In addition, most current interventions are aimed at symptom reduction and, while beneficial, are not sufficient to build critical skills and supports needed for successful college reentry.

In the public health system, there has been a growing emphasis on “supported education” to assist young adults in completing their high school degree, to enroll in college, or pursue a career path (Ellison et al., 2015; Killackey et al., 2017), including programs serving young adults with first-episode psychosis (Center for Practice Innovations, 2024; Kane et al., 2016). Only a small percentage of individuals attending these programs have attended college (Ellison et al., 2015; Kane et al., 2016), suggesting that the demographics of the individuals served in these programs differ in important ways from NITEO.

NITEO Model

Recognizing the need of young adults with mental health conditions who have dropped out or taken a leave of absence because of a mental health condition, we developed a program (NITEO) designed to facilitate return to college. NITEO is a fee-for-service program offered by the Center for Psychiatric Rehabilitation at Boston University (Center for Psychiatric Rehabilitation, 2024; <https://cpr.bu.edu/wellness-and-recovery-services/niteo/>). This one-semester, structured intervention is not a clinical mental health service but rather operates within a psychiatric rehabilitation center which emphasizes building skills and accessing supports. NITEO is grounded in Self-Determination Theory with a focus on building

student autonomy, academic competence, and social relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2008).

Eligibility and Recruitment

Up to 19 students from any college or university, who can attend in person, are accepted each semester into NITEO. Participants typically learn about the program through mental health providers, schools, or online research. NITEO accepts students whose goals and values align with the program’s mission of developing academic success, psychological well-being, and social engagement. Philanthropic support provides financial assistance to eligible students who cannot cover the fee.

Program Structure

NITEO is deliberately housed on a university campus, embedded in a large psychiatric rehabilitation center, rather than a mental health setting, allowing participants to retain their student identity while simulating the demands of college. Over a 15-week semester, students attend, in person, 3 days a week, for a total of 21 hr. Core components of the program are academic and wellness classes, individual coaching, and social activities. Table 1 provides a sample weekly student schedule (additional information is from the Center for Psychiatric Rehabilitation, 2024 at <https://cpr.bu.edu/wellness-and-recovery-services/niteo/>).

Academic and Wellness Classes

Classes integrate lectures, multimodal exercises, and discussions to cultivate academic proficiency and wellness and are co-led by two instructors and a peer mentor (PM). Instructors, who also serve as coaches, are typically licensed professionals with master’s degrees in counseling, social work, or education.

Individualized College Coaching

A cornerstone of NITEO is individualized coaching. College coaches provide support to facilitate skill development and progress toward students’ academic and wellness goals. Coaching sessions, held for 1 hr weekly, use a strengths-based, active approach. Coaching activities may include completing college reentry paperwork, educating students about possible academic accommodations and campus resources, and organizing academic materials and assignments. Optional follow-up coaching is available after the program ends to ensure a successful transition. (Information about the coaching process is available in Rogers et al., 2023. Our inquiry into the student experience and the coaching was part of one overall study; though there was no overlap in the student and coaches data, the same methodology was used for data collection [semi-structured individual interviews] and the qualitative data analytic approach).

Peer Mentorship and Social Engagement

Peer mentorship is another key element of NITEO. Alumni of the program are hired in the compensated role of PMs to support class instruction and organize various social outings, such as excursions to museums or sporting events. These activities foster social connectedness and engagement, helping students overcome isolation and build interpersonal skills and confidence.

The objective of this study was to explore and qualitatively assess participants' experiences and perceptions of these core components of NITEO.

All research procedures were reviewed by the Boston University Institutional Review Board and considered exempt from human subjects' oversight.

We used an applied interpretive approach in a basic descriptive qualitative study (Kahlke, 2014; Leavy, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015) and collected data via individual interviews. An applied interpretive qualitative approach is like other qualitative traditions, except no additional dimension or framing is applied. For example, ethnography is framed to understand individuals' experiences within a culture, whereas a generic or basic qualitative study seeks to understand how people make sense of an experience without the lens of a qualitative tradition (Leavy, 2014; Kahlke, 2014). Due to pandemic-related restrictions, all interviews were conducted and recorded via videoconferencing.

We recruited students who had a sufficient “dose” of NITEO to provide their perspectives about program components. The inclusion criteria included students (a) who had completed at least 50% of the program (including both coaching sessions and classes) between 2016 and 2020 and (b) willing to participate in an individual interview to describe their experiences. We sent recruitment emails first, followed by text messages, to eligible NITEO students. From an eligible pool of 120 students, we contacted students from the most recent cohorts and worked backward until we achieved our target number for recruitment. We chose $N = 30$ as our target sample to ensure that we could conduct a systematic, in-depth examination of the views of students and a sufficient number of participants to reach saturation. Interviews were ultimately conducted with $N = 31$ former NITEO students and lasted approximately 90 min; participants received a small stipend.

Two content experts, including one coauthor (Courtney Joly-Lowdermilk), developed a semistructured interview guide. Questions were developed to facilitate in-depth exploration of the student experience in the program and their views about its components. Small adjustments were made to the interview guide based on the first three interviews to achieve a conversational flow. (The guide is available in the [Supplemental Material](#)).

Table 1
Example NITEO Weekly Schedule

Time	Monday	Wednesday	Friday
10:00–11:00 a.m.	Writing seminar	Photovoice	Academic seminar
11:00 a.m.–12 p.m.	Writing lab	Wellness seminar	Advanced academic seminar
12:00–1:00 p.m.	Lunch	Lunch	Career seminar
1:00–2:00 p.m.	Ideas worth discussing	Healthy relationships	Lunch
2:00–3:00 p.m.	Mindfulness and stress resilience	Open studio	Peer mentor led
3:00–4:00 p.m.	Peer mentor led	Peer mentor led	Off-campus social outings
	on-campus activities;	on-campus activities;	2:00–5:00 pm
College coaching	College coaching	Anything goes fitness	
College coaching	Board games		Community service
	A look at the arts		
4:00–5:00 p.m.			

Data Collection Procedures

All interviews were conducted by a coauthor (David Braverman) using Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act-compliant videoconferencing software between July 2020 and April 2021. Privacy and confidentiality procedures were reviewed and consent obtained from participants to record the interviews. The interviewer, a NITEO alumnus, was trained in qualitative interviewing procedures and supervised by the senior researcher (E. Sally Rogers). This experience in the program proved valuable for establishing a comfortable rapport and engaging participants in an in-depth and open discussion. The interviewer kept a reflexivity journal to ensure that findings were shaped by participants' contributions and not by his preconceptions (Morse, 2015a).

Data Analysis

Audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed verbatim with NVivo software artificial intelligence service for analysis (Lumivero, 2024). Using content analysis, we aimed to generate descriptive themes that encapsulated the NITEO experience (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Initially, the researchers (David Braverman and E. Sally Rogers) independently reviewed and coded transcripts to formulate preliminary codes. The researchers then met to compare coding, discuss discrepancies and reflexivity, and cocreate a list of agreed-upon categories. Interrater agreement for the preliminary codebook was established at a high level: using 14 transcripts we arrived at an interrater agreement in excess of 90%. Following this, one researcher applied the coding framework to the remaining transcripts. Emerging codes were considered throughout the process. Further development and assignment of the codes within the original framework proceeded recursively, identifying and extracting direct quote exemplars of helpful and unhelpful aspects of each component of NITEO. Interview transcripts underwent a meticulous review to ensure the context and accuracy of direct quotations. To achieve a unified understanding, the coders engaged in thorough discussions regarding the themes and supporting quotations with a senior qualitative researcher (coauthor Pamela Rothpletz-Puglia).

Several steps were taken to establish trustworthiness of the data. Experienced qualitative researchers were on the team for credibility, and thick descriptions of the themes and details about participants are provided for transferability. Team meetings occurred at each phase to reach consensus and agreement on data analysis and interpretations for dependability, and reflexivity, and the team members' positionality in relation to the participants was examined throughout the process (Aburn et al., 2021; Chavez, 2008).

Results

Demographic Characteristics

Participants were on average 21.13 years of age (range: 18–26; $SD = 2.29$), and most identified as being White (71%) and unmarried (100%). A total of 64% were previously enrolled in private institutions, 30% in public colleges or universities, and the remainder (7%) were enrolled in both (students could be taking classes in two institutions). Students were almost evenly divided with respect to attending school in-state (54%) versus out-of-state (46%). Additional details are provided in Table 2.

Table 2

Demographic and Clinical Characteristics of Student Sample ($N = 31$)

Characteristic	<i>M (SD)</i>	
Age	21.13 (2.29)	
Characteristic	<i>n</i>	%
Gender identification		
Male	17	56.7
Female	11	36.6
Gender nonconforming/other	2	6.7
Race/ethnicity		
White	21	67.7
Black/African American	2	6.5
Asian/Pacific Islander	5	16.1
Hispanic/Latino	2	6.5
Other	1	3.2
Level of educational attainment prior to enrollment		
High school degree	3	9.7
Some college	28	90.3
Employment/volunteer status		
Employed part-time	12	38.7
Volunteer part-time	3	9.7
Unemployed	16	51.6
Living situation		
Independently (alone/partner/roommate)	9	29.0
Family	20	64.5
Campus housing	2	6.5
Primary psychiatric diagnosis		
Schizophrenia spectrum disorder	6	19.4
Mood disorder	16	51.6
Anxiety disorder	8	25.8
Substance use disorder	1	3.2
Year of enrollment at college prior to program entry		
Freshman	8	25.7
Sophomore	7	22.6
Junior	6	19.4
Other/unknown	10	32.3
Type of college attended		
Public	8	25.7
Private	18	58.1
Both	2	6.5
Prefer not to answer	3	9.7

Themes From Qualitative Analysis

The 31 interviews produced sufficient information to generate rich themes and to reach a point where new patterns were no longer emerging—that is, saturation was achieved (Malterud et al., 2016; Morse, 2015b). Themes generated from the interviews are as follows: (a) NITEO Catalyzes Growth and Connection, (b) Coaching Builds Skills and Promotes Accountability, (c) Peer Mentors are Supportive and Role Models, and (d) Other Students in NITEO Impact the Experience. We follow each of the themes with direct quotes from the students to support and illustrate our interpretations (Morse, 2015b). Table 3 provides an overview of the themes.

Theme 1: The NITEO Experience Catalyzes Growth and Connection

NITEO Provided Structure, Routine, and Purpose

After leaving school because of a mental health crisis, many students described lacking productive activities to fill their days and feeling confused about how get their lives back on track.

Table 3
Overview of Themes and Their Descriptors

Theme and sub-theme
Theme 1: The NITEO program catalyzes growth and connection NITEO
1. Provided structure, routine, and purpose
2. Educated students about wellness, a necessary component of academic success
3. Staff provided a warm welcome and ambience
4. Builds a sense of community and social connectedness
5. Stimulated interpersonal and intrapersonal growth and build confidence
6. Helped to build academic resilience
7. Revealed the importance of seeking assistance
8. Combined academic and creative elements
Theme 2: Coaching builds skills and promotes accountability
1. Coaches build a working relationship
2. Coaches are skill teachers
3. Coaching provides structure and accountability
4. Coaches step out of traditional role when necessary
Theme 3: Peer mentors are supportive and role models
1. The value of shared experience
2. Peer mentors provide an additional source of support
3. Peer mentors are role models
Theme 4: Other students in NITEO impact the experience
1. The value of identifying with other students
2. Other students help combat the isolation and loneliness
3. Impact of other students

This reinforced the sense of failure, social disconnectedness, and lack of purpose that many NITEO students reported experiencing. One student recalled that NITEO “helped me realize that structure is really important” (P16). Another reflected that “having a place to go in the morning... gave me a sense of purpose, made me feel like I wasn’t just floundering around: I was actually working towards my goals” (P29). The routine of coming to NITEO each day helped students feel that they were moving forward.

NITEO Educated Students About Wellness, a Necessary Component of Academic Success

NITEO emphasizes a holistic view of mental and physical health and well-being, focusing on factors that can present (and mitigate) challenges to college success, such as substance use, relationship dynamics, and coping strategies. Students described exploring various dimensions of self-care and learning how to balance their wellness needs with academics demands. Students also described understanding the intertwined nature of well-being and education. “I remember taking away (from Wellness Seminar)... the importance of balancing self-care with school” one student shared (P22).

Another student appreciated learning about building healthy relationships with family, roommates, and romantic partners, all of which can play a critical role in the success of students:

Healthy Relationships is definitely my favorite class. ... It was nice to have a place where we could talk about how to have healthy relationships. ... To see what other people were going through and how they might go about ... addressing that issue. (P19)

NITEO Staff Provided a Warm Welcome and Ambience

Numerous students described the welcoming and friendly staff, which takes on particular significance given that many students

come to the program having experienced a loss of self-esteem and a sense of unworthiness because of their need to drop out of college:

Knowing that the people actually care about you, and they want you there because they actually genuinely care about you made it a bit easier to start showing up. (P07)

Students reported having staff who make the effort to welcome students, which undoubtedly sets the stage for all the work that follows:

[NITEO] really relies on how great the people that are working for it are. Like, [program director], [coach], everyone ... all the Peer Mentors, who they pick, they were all great. (P26)

NITEO Builds a Sense of Community and Social Connectedness

On a leave of absence, students reported feeling isolated and stigmatized, and they described how NITEO reintroduced them to a community. One student shared that NITEO fed “the part of you that needs some type of social interaction with your peers and the part of you that feels left out” (P26). Students described that all the staff contributed to this sense of belonging:

I think the community of it, of the peer mentors and the teachers and having a coach, was really helpful. ... [It was] the support network that I came away with feeling really grateful for. (P22)

NITEO Stimulated Interpersonal and Intrapersonal Growth and Built Confidence

One goal of the program is to encourage both interpersonal and intrapersonal growth to help students regain self-confidence, accept their mental health issues, and combat internalized stigma. One student reported, “NITEO helped me was because I was able to build a lot of confidence” (P04). A different student reflected that NITEO “pushed me out of my comfort zone. ... I feel like it helped me get to where I am” (P08). Students described how NITEO was critical to their success: “It was just a complete turning point in the game for me. It just pivoted me in the right direction” (P21). One student described that without NITEO, his skills, competencies, and future goal of returning to college would have been compromised:

Without NITEO I would have degenerated further, not got back up those basic skills. And perhaps, who knows, I would have never went [sic] back to school. (P11)

NITEO Helped to Build Academic Resilience

The program seeks to build academic resilience in a variety of classes including Writing Seminar and Academic Workshop by reintroducing difficult scholastic tasks in a supportive environment. Students reflected on the importance of building academic skills: “I needed to ... relearn basic classroom skills. ... So, I liked Writing Seminar,” one student shared (P11). Another reflected that the academic components of NITEO “helped me stay consistent with my work ethic” (P27).

Another student commented on the confidence she would rebuild in the program:

How NITEO helped me was because I was able to build a lot of confidence. ... I can’t speak enough about how great that was, getting

my confidence back in the classroom ... probably something I didn't have since middle school. (P04)

For students out of school for months, NITEO is designed to provide a "trial run" to reintroduce academics without the fear of negative consequences in college. One student shared:

It was really helpful also having the more academic [classes] ... because it was like we were trying to get back into doing schoolwork. ... I think had I just started taking classes again, it would have been a big shock ... after not doing anything for such a long time. (P20)

NITEO Revealed the Importance of Seeking Assistance

Students credited NITEO with underscoring the importance of seeking help both for their academic pursuits and overall well-being. For many students, a lack of organizational skills compounded their academic difficulties, but they shared that NITEO encouraged them to ask for assistance from professors, as reflected in this statement:

I don't think I would be able to do as well in school as I am ... without having gone to NITEO. It's definitely helped me organize my workload ... and not be scared to ask questions to professors. (P08)

One student recalled that NITEO "helped me see there's people who actively want to help you succeed ... even at (my current school)" (P11) and another student shared that her experience "made me look for similar roles models, support when I went back to (college), and I ended up getting a coach ... at Student Services" (P22). A different student said that she found a "fake NITEO coach" after returning to college "who's with the Office of Disabilities ... and wants to help me throughout the semester" (P17).

NITEO Combines Academic and Creative Elements

NITEO was deliberately designed to focus not only just on academic competencies and interpersonal connections but also on creativity and fun to nourish other critical aspects of the collegiate experience. Open Studio is a class where students could informally engage in creative activities and socialize. This quote exemplifies how students perceive the class:

I'm a very creative person, so I loved when we sang together and acted in an improv. And there is a self-portrait project we did. And I had a lot of fun with that. (P15)

For some students, this informal atmosphere provided not only an opportunity to be creative but to foster connections: "[Open Studio] was a looser schedule and easier to reflect and talk with people. ... And I realized it was a good space to get to know people and share my own experiences, share my interests" (P28).

Theme 2: Coaching Builds Skills and Promotes Accountability

Coaching is an integral component of NITEO that occurs weekly throughout the semester. These meetings are designed to help students explore and set goals for their return to school or to work. Coaching builds life skills and holds students accountable through several mechanisms.

The Coaches Build a Working Relationship

Students remarked that a warm, nonjudgmental, and genuine relationship was necessary for them to establish trust and to do the hard work needed to move ahead with their educational or other goals. This student described the bond felt with their coach, and its value:

I was a huge fan of the coaching. I really like that type of bond that you share with somebody, and they also are really helpful. And it was like outside of the emotional aspect, and it was more just for the academics, which I never had before. (P16)

Another key aspect was that the coaches take a holistic approach to building their relationships with students, making a point to get to know them in many ways, and not just their academic difficulties. This genuine interest in the student as a person was reported to strengthen the bond the students feel and build the foundation for the coaching, as stated here:

It felt like [my coach] was on my team and not because she was being paid to do it and not just because I was assigned to her. It felt like she really got to know me as a person and was helping me do what was best for me. (P29)

The Coach Is a Skill Teacher

One of the unique features of NITEO coaching is the centrality of skill teaching. Students described the value that skills development had for them and reported being empowered to learn skills to improve their academic performance. They also described the hands-on, pragmatic approach to breaking down needed skills, teaching and modeling them, the value of which is noted by this student:

It was just really good one-on-one development, focusing on my skills, what I need to do. One big thing for me was time management. So, creating a calendar. Just getting out a whiteboard, creating a calendar of things I needed to do, and just helping me put everything in perspective. (P14)

Coaching Provides Structure and Accountability

Students commented that the structured process of coaching and the accountability it afforded them was a key contributor to their success. Students reported that coaching helped them stay organized and focused on their goal attainment and provided the structure to get their work done. One student shared that "it was helpful to have someone keeping me on track with college deadlines especially" (P22). And as stated by another student:

There was definitely a lot of accountability with [my coach] working on college apps because I'm a really bad procrastinator. I would put things off until the last minute and she would text me and be like, "Hey, you need to do this because it's due in like two days" and I'd be like, "Yeah, you're right." (P19)

Coaches Step Out of a Traditional Role When Necessary

Students described how the coaches stepped out of their traditional role to help facilitate insight, reevaluate goals, and, when needed, serve as a mental health interventionist. One student described how his coach provided insight about their mental health situation:

[My coach] I think literally saved my life because I was in a bad place, experiencing things that were not really there. You know and just like really out of it. ... Anyways, fortunately, [my coach] called my parents, like "take him home. He needs to go to hospital." (P21)

In addition, students described the coaches as being mindful that educational goals cannot be considered in isolation and that returning to school intersects with goals in other life domains, as stated by this student:

When I said I want to go back to school, [the coach] was like, "Why?" and then wanted to know what my goals were ... life goals, my NITEO goals, all of that. And so I thought about it and I answered. (P08)

Theme 3: Peer Mentors Are Understanding and Role Models

NITEO uses graduates of their program to act as peer mentors who assist in classes, activities, and in general, support students. We were interested in learning student's perspectives about the PMs' role in NITEO.

The Value of Shared Experience

Students commented that shared experiences between students and PMs can be very potent. In part because of their similarity in age, mental health struggles, and overall life circumstances, students described the ability to identify and feel understood by PMs; this in turn promoted connection and engagement of students, as stated here:

It helped to have somebody like a peer, close in age, that could really empathize with what you're going through. ... They know what to expect and can candidly answer any questions that we had. [PMs] were super open with everything and made us feel welcome here. (P14)

Students reported that the similarity in age of the PMs was a significant factor in being able to relate to them. One student recalled that "they were approachable. I think that was the most helpful thing. ... The PMs were definitely closer in age to us, so, it was easier to talk to them than it was to a coach" (P19).

Peer Mentors Provide an Additional Source of Support

Students appreciated the additional support provided by PMs. One shared "I feel like they were an additional support that I could just like talk to and converse with. I know (the PMs) went through the program" (P21). Another student said that the PMs were approachable and facilitated their interactions with NITEO instructors:

It was easier to talk to them than it was to a coach. Which is definitely my anxiety speaking. But yeah, it definitely made it easier to interact with people if I were to like reach out to a PM first. (P19)

Peer Mentors Are Role Models

Students described the value of PMs as role models, particularly those who considered mentoring as a possible next career step rather than returning immediately to school, as stated here by two students:

It made me think, you know, maybe I can be a Peer Mentor. ... So, it made me feel capable that I could be in your guys' shoes. (P02)

That there was a path that you guys were taking that I could take too. That really helped because I know that you guys struggled with college, and everyone there had their own reason they were struggling. (P01)

Theme 4: Other Students Impact the NITEO Experience

Since NITEO is a group experience, we wanted to inquire about each student's experiences of the other students in their cohort. We heard that other students had a significant impact on the experience in several, mostly beneficial ways.

The Value of Identifying With Other Students

Students talked about the value of being with others who were in similar circumstances, including having a mental health condition, having dropped out of college, being open about their struggles, and being able to share concerns with other students about their return to school. One student wondered: "How will things be when I return to campus?" and "What will friends say?" (P21). Another student shared about experiencing support and camaraderie:

The whole point of going to NITEO, at least in some ways, is being with people who are going through a similar thing that you are going through. ... So, it was good ... to connect with others, support each other through similar struggles. (P13)

Other Students Help Combat Isolation and Loneliness

Isolation and loneliness, frequent experiences for students who have dropped out and left a college community behind, were mentioned by many students. One NITEO graduate recalled feeling "left out and isolated from other people that you see on social media ... that are going out on weekends" and thinking "I'm not doing that at all. ... I don't even know if I want to do that. What's wrong with me?" He saw NITEO as a "group intervention" and reflected that "it wouldn't work out as well if it weren't for (the) other people in it" (P26). Another student shared that "the social aspect was really big" for her and noted the importance of having "people who were in the same circumstance" to spend time with (P22).

Impact of Other Students

Beyond the identification and camaraderie with other students, experiencing fun and friendship was mentioned as being important for many students:

Me and my roommate last year, we met through the program, and we ended up being super close, like she's one of my best friends. ... A really great thing about the program was I got to meet her, and a bunch of other people, and we always just had so much fun together. (P04)

It should be noted that not all experiences with other students were positive. The same student recalled that there was "a chunk of people who wanted to be there and get better. And then the other ... people like just were there because their therapist told them to" which got "pretty frustrating" (P22) and another NITEO graduate reported that their cohort was quiet and she "didn't really feel like the students connected so much" (P04).

Conclusions and Implications

Our inquiry affirmed the value of autonomy, competency, and social connections (Deci & Ryan, 2008) in fostering academic resilience among students with mental health conditions. NITEO provided structure and routine, helping students regain a sense of purpose, identity, and self-confidence. The unique role of the college coach, distinct from that of a therapist or academic advisor, emerged as an important component providing pragmatic, action-oriented academic guidance and support that was tailored to students' individual goals, and with the specific intention of enabling a successful return to college. Hosting the program on a university campus rather than in a clinical setting provided a normalizing environment, which we believe facilitated the transition back into the college student role. NITEO simulated a real academic setting, with warm and nonjudgmental staff which was reported to reduce students' apprehension about returning to academia. Though this was a qualitative inquiry, we did not observe any trends that would suggest that certain types of students (in terms of demographic or clinical characteristics) benefited more or less from the program. Peer mentoring was instrumental in providing added support and an atmosphere of relatability and shared experiences.

Students with mental health conditions who drop out of college face lower employment rates and earning potential (Cuijpers et al., 2021; Hernandez-Torrano et al., 2020; VanderLind, 2017), and there are unmet needs for services to assist them. NITEO fills gaps in the current support infrastructure by building the competencies that students need to be successful in their return to school (Campbell et al., 2022). Our findings emphasized the importance of instilling a sense of community (Sriram et al., 2020), which is vital in mitigating the isolation that many students report during a leave of absence.

Several limitations of this study merit discussion. First, our sample comprised students who engaged in the NITEO only, excluding the perspectives of students who left the program early or did not find it beneficial; this selection may have resulted in an overrepresentation of positive experiences. Second is the issue of the insider positionality of the researchers. While having an intimate familiarity with the program can offer depth and understanding, it can also introduce biases such as the possibility of the interviewer assuming greater understanding due to shared experiences. We instituted several measures to mitigate biases, including rigorous reflexive practices, team discussions, and consensus on coding to ensure the integrity of our findings (Morse, 2015b).

Additional limitations are similar to many qualitative studies, in that the generalizability of our findings is inherently limited; yet we believe they may be transferable to similar contexts. The focus on a singular program located in the northeastern United States may not represent other geographical or institutional contexts. It is possible that similar programs in other areas may not be as successful; the urban nature of NITEO provided helpful social and educational resources that may not be available in all locales. The interview guide was examined by experts in the field, but it was not formally pilot-tested. Our reliance on the retrospective views of participants introduced the potential for recall limitations; however, this approach also allowed for a longer term reflection on the experience of NITEO.

In terms of future directions for research, a deeper exploration into each of the themes we uncovered may yield more specialized strategies to support students and a comparative study of different college reentry programs could highlight best practices. Longitudinal follow-up of participants in such programs could reveal the long-term

impacts on persistence and retention in academic settings and whether certain components, like coaching after reentry, might be beneficial as a stand-alone intervention.

Our aim was to obtain a nuanced understanding of the views of students on their experiences of this program, which we hope provides insights that can be adapted to similar settings (Morse et al., 2001). Our study offers valuable insights for supporting students with mental health conditions in their academic endeavors and their future career success.

References

- Aburn, G. E., Gott, M., & Hoare, K. (2021). Experiences of an insider researcher—Interviewing your own colleagues. *Nurse Researcher*, 29(3), 22–28. <https://doi.org/10.7748/nr.2021.e1794>
- American College Health Association. (2022). *National college health assessment III: Undergraduate student reference group executive summary spring 2022*. https://portal.acha.org/documents/ncha/NCHA-III_SPRING_2022_UNDERGRAD_REFERENCE_GROUP_EXECUTIVE_SUMMARY.pdf
- Arria, A. M., Caldeira, K. M., Vincent, K. B., Winick, E. R., Baron, R. A., & O'Grady, K. E. (2013). Discontinuous college enrollment: Associations with substance use and mental health. *Psychiatric Services*, 64(2), 165–172. <https://doi.org/10.1176/appi.ps.201200106>
- Auerbach, R. P., Mortier, P., Bruffaerts, R., Alonso, J., Benjet, C., Cuijpers, P., Demyttenaere, K., Ebert, D. D., Green, J. G., Hasking, P., Murray, E., Nock, M. K., Pinder-Amaker, S., Sampson, N. A., Stein, D. J., Vilagut, G., Zaslavsky, A. M., Kessler, R. C., & the WHO World Mental Health-International College Student Project Collaborators. (2018). WHO World Mental Health Surveys international college student project: Prevalence and distribution of mental disorders. *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, 127(7), 623–638. <https://doi.org/10.1037/abn0000362>
- Bruffaerts, R., Mortier, P., Kiekens, G., Auerbach, R. P., Cuijpers, P., Demyttenaere, K., Green, J. G., Nock, M. K., & Kessler, R. C. (2018). Mental health problems in college freshmen: Prevalence and academic functioning. *Journal of Affective Disorders*, 225, 97–103. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jad.2017.07.044>
- Campbell, F., Blank, L., Cantrell, A., Baxter, S., Blackmore, C., Dixon, J., & Goyder, E. (2022). Factors that influence mental health of university and college students in the UK: A systematic review. *BMC Public Health*, 22(1), Article 1778. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-022-13943-x>
- Center for Practice Innovations. (2024). *On track: A network of coordinated specialty care (CSC) teams across New York State*. <https://www.ontracknyny.org>
- Center for Psychiatric Rehabilitation. (2024). *NITEO: Latin verb present active bloom or thrive, shine*. Boston University. <https://cpr.bu.edu/wellness-and-recovery-services/niteo/>
- Chavez, C. (2008). Conceptualizing from the inside: Advantages, complications, and demands on insider positionality. *The Qualitative Report*, 13(3), 474–494. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2008.1589>
- Cuijpers, P., Quero, S., Noma, H., Ciharova, M., Miguel, C., Karyotaki, E., Cipriani, A., Cristea, I. A., & Furukawa, T. A. (2021). Psychotherapies for depression: A network meta-analysis covering efficacy, acceptability and long-term outcomes of all main treatment types. *World Psychiatry*, 20(2), 283–293. <https://doi.org/10.1002/wps.20860>
- Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (2008). Self-determination theory: A macrotheory of human motivation, development, and health. *Canadian Psychology/Psychologie Canadienne*, 49(3), 182–185. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0012801>
- Doran, C. M., & Kinchin, I. (2017). A review of the economic impact of mental illness. *Australian Health Review*, 43(1), 43–48. <https://doi.org/10.1071/AH16115>
- Ebert, D. D., van Daele, T., Nordgreen, T., Karekla, M., Compare, A., Zarbo, C., Brugnera, A., Øverland, S., Trebbi, G., Jensen, K. L., Kaehlke, F., &

- Baumeister, H. (2018). Internet- and mobile-based psychological interventions: Applications, efficacy, and potential for improving mental health. *European Psychologist*, 23(2), 167–187. <https://doi.org/10.1027/1016-9040/a000318>
- Ellison, M. L., Klodnick, V. V., Bond, G. R., Krzos, I. M., Kaiser, S. M., Fagan, M. A., & Davis, M. (2015). Adapting supported employment for emerging adults with serious mental health conditions. *The Journal of Behavioral Health Services & Research*, 42(2), 206–222. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11414-014-9445-4>
- Hartley, M. T. (2011). Examining the relationships between resilience, mental health, and academic persistence in undergraduate college students. *Journal of American College Health*, 59(7), 596–604. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07448481.2010.515632>
- Healthy Minds. (2024). *Healthy Minds Survey-2023–2024 Data Report*. https://healthymindsnetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/HMS_national_report_090924.pdf
- Hernández-Torrano, D., Ibrayeva, L., Sparks, J., Lim, N., Clementi, A., Almkhambetova, A., Nurtayev, Y., & Muratkyzy, A. (2020). Mental health and well-being of university students: A bibliometric mapping of the literature. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 11, Article 1226. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.01226>
- Hsieh, H. F., & Shannon, S. E. (2005). Three approaches to qualitative content analysis. *Qualitative Health Research*, 15(9), 1277–1288. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732305276687>
- Kahlke, R. M. (2014). Generic qualitative approaches: Pitfalls and benefits of methodological mixology. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 13(1), 37–52. <https://doi.org/10.1177/160940691401300119>
- Kane, J. M., Robinson, D. G., Schooler, N. R., Mueser, K. T., Penn, D. L., Rosenheck, R. A., Addington, J., Brunette, M. F., Correll, C. U., Estroff, S. E., Marcy, P., Robinson, J., Meyer-Kalos, P. S., Gottlieb, J. D., Glynn, S. M., Lynde, D. W., Pipes, R., Kurian, B. T., Miller, A. L., ... Heinssen, R. K. (2016). Comprehensive versus usual community care for first-episode psychosis: 2-year outcomes from the NIMH RAISE early treatment program. *The American Journal of Psychiatry*, 173(4), 362–372. <https://doi.org/10.1176/appi.ajp.2015.15050632>
- Killackey, E., Allott, K., Woodhead, G., Connor, S., Dragon, S., & Ring, J. (2017). Individual placement and support, supported education in young people with mental illness: An exploratory feasibility study. *Early Intervention in Psychiatry*, 11(6), 526–531. <https://doi.org/10.1111/eip.12344>
- Leavy, P. (Ed.). (2014). *The Oxford handbook of qualitative research*. Oxford University Press. (Chapter 6: Applied interpretive approaches). <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199811755.001.0001>
- Lipson, S. K., Zhou, S., Abelson, S., Heinze, J., Jirsa, M., Morigney, J., Patterson, A., Singh, M., & Eisenberg, D. (2022). Trends in college student mental health and help-seeking by race/ethnicity: Findings from the national healthy minds study, 2013–2021. *Journal of Affective Disorders*, 306, 138–147. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jad.2022.03.038>
- Luciano, A., & Meara, E. (2014). Employment status of people with mental illness: National survey data from 2009 and 2010. *Psychiatric Services*, 65(10), 1201–1209. <https://doi.org/10.1176/appi.ps.201300335>
- Lumivero. (2024). *NVivo qualitative analysis software*. <https://lumivero.com/products/nvivo/>
- Malterud, K., Siersma, V. D., & Guassora, A. D. (2016). Sample size in qualitative interview studies: Guided by information power. *Qualitative Health Research*, 26(13), 1753–1760. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732315617444>
- McDaid, D., Park, A. L., & Wahlbeck, K. (2019). The economic case for the prevention of mental illness. *Annual Review of Public Health*, 40(1), 373–389. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-publhealth-040617-013629>
- Merriam, S. B., & Tisdell, E. J. (2015). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation*. Wiley.
- Moghim, E., Stephenson, C., Gutierrez, G., Jagayat, J., Layzell, G., Patel, C., McCart, A., Gibney, C., Langstaff, C., Ayonrinde, O., Khalid-Khan, S., Milev, R., Snelgrove-Clarke, E., Soares, C., Omrani, M., & Alavi, N. (2023). Mental health challenges, treatment experiences, and care needs of post-secondary students: A cross-sectional mixed-methods study. *BMC Public Health*, 23(1), Article 655. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-023-15452-x>
- Morse, J. M. (2015a). Critical analysis of strategies for determining rigor in qualitative inquiry. *Qualitative Health Research*, 25(9), 1212–1222. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732315588501>
- Morse, J. M. (2015b). “Data were saturated ...” *Qualitative Health Research*, 25(5), 587–588. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732315576699>
- Morse, J. M., Swanson, J., & Kuzel, A. (2001). *The nature of qualitative evidence*. Sage Publications. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781412986236>
- Rogers, E. S., Joly-Lowdermilk, C., Rothpletz-Puglia, P., & Braverman, D. (2023). NITEO: An innovative mental health and education program designed to reengage students with mental health conditions in college. *Journal of American College Health*, 1–11. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07448481.2023.2252924>
- Seabury, S. A., Axeen, S., Pauley, G., Tysinger, B., Schlosser, D., Hernandez, J. B., Heun-Johnson, H., Zhao, H., & Goldman, D. P. (2019). Measuring the lifetime costs of serious mental illness and the mitigating effects of educational attainment. *Health Affairs*, 38(4), 652–659. <https://doi.org/10.1377/hlthaff.2018.05246>
- Sommer, M., Ness, O., & Borg, M. (2018). Helpful support to promote participation in school and work: Subjective experiences of people with mental health problems—A literature review. *Social Work in Mental Health*, 16(3), 346–366. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15332985.2017.1395778>
- Sriram, R., Cheate, J., Weintraub, S. D., Haynes, C., Murray, J. L., & Marquart, C. P. (2020). The influence of academic, social, and deeper life interactions on students’ psychological sense of community. *Journal of College Student Development*, 61(5), 593–608. <https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.2020.0057>
- U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2023). *Education pays, 2022*. (Career Outlook) Retrieved October 20, 2023, from <https://www.bls.gov/careeroutlook/2023/data-on-display/education-pays.htm>
- VanderLind, R. (2017). Effects of mental health on student learning. *The Learning Assistance Review*, 22(2), 39–58.
- Worsley, J. D., Pennington, A., & Corcoran, R. (2022). Supporting mental health and wellbeing of university and college students: A systematic review of review-level evidence of interventions. *PLOS ONE*, 17(7), Article e0266725. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0266725>

Received July 9, 2024

Revision received February 14, 2025

Accepted February 23, 2025 ■