

Female Undergraduate Professional Development Needs and the CNY Women's Network

Emilie Oestreicher, Lucy Weiner, Sofia Santamaria, and Caroline Babb

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Melissa Richards

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Abstract

This study examined the professional development needs of female undergraduate students at Syracuse University and explored how the CNY Women's Network, a Central New York professional women's organization, might align with and benefit those needs. Using a mixed-methods approach, researchers collected data through a non-probability convenience sample survey (N = 69) and a focus group of six undergraduate participants. Because neither sample was randomly drawn, findings are descriptive of participants in this study only and cannot be generalized to the broader student population. Four patterns emerged consistently across both phases: participants expressed acute need for internship support and practical career readiness skills; professional network strength was the lowest-scoring measure in the survey; mentorship interest was high, with a strong preference for one-on-one formats; and despite 94.2% of participants having no prior awareness of the CNY Women's Network, nearly half expressed interest in a student chapter after reading a program description. These patterns suggest that low awareness, rather than low interest, is the primary barrier to student engagement, and that the organization is well-positioned to address a genuine gap in professional development support should future research confirm these findings in a more representative sample.

Problem Definition and Research Question

CNY Women's Network is committed to connecting and empowering women professionals across Central New York by spotlighting local leaders, strengthening the entrepreneurial environment and creating spaces for ambitious women to thrive. However, as the organization looks to expand its impact, it remains unclear how its programming and membership offerings can strategically engage female undergraduate college students as an

emerging audience. Without a clear understanding of students' professional development needs and interest in localized women-centered networks, CNY Women's Network may miss an opportunity to build an early pipeline of future members and leaders while further advancing its regional mission. We are exploring the possibility of establishing a Syracuse University student chapter to be mentored by members of the CNY Women's Network using the research question "What professional development needs do female students at Syracuse University have, and how could the CNY Women's Network align with and benefit their needs?"

Secondary Research Summary

Professional networking and mentorship are two of the most well-documented factors shaping women's early career outcomes, yet undergraduate women consistently lack structured access to both. Three studies contextualize the findings of our study: undergraduate students' gaps in professional networking skills, models of effective mentoring, and the role of female-to-female mentorship in women's career development.

Professional Networking and Undergraduate Students

Most undergraduate students recognize the value of professional networking but lack the confidence and skills to engage in it without structured support. Badoer et al. (2021) found that prior to any curriculum-based instruction, none of the first-year students in their study had a LinkedIn profile, and students across all year levels reported low confidence in professional networking. Following in-class activities, confidence increased up to 50% in some cohorts, leading researchers to conclude that universities play a critical role in embedding professional networking skills into coursework from the earliest stages of undergraduate study. This pattern is consistent with findings from the present study, in which professional network strength was the

lowest-scoring survey measure ($M = 3.26$, $SD = 0.93$) and focus group participants described available networking opportunities as overwhelming without adequate preparation. In other words, low network strength seems to reflect a lack of structured guidance rather than a lack of interest.

Models of Mentoring

The format and communication style of a mentoring relationship significantly shape its effectiveness. Buell (2004) identified four models of mentoring through a qualitative study of communication faculty and graduate students: the Cloning Model, defined by control and hierarchy; the Nurturing Model, defined by fostering independent development; the Friendship Model, defined by reciprocity and mutual engagement; and the Apprenticeship Model, defined by a focus on skill-building. Participants in Buell's (2004) study most valued the Nurturing and Friendship models because these formats center the mentee's individual goals and create space for the mentee's voice. Similarly, in our study, survey respondents rated one-on-one mentoring as one of the top three formats and focus group participants expressed a desire for mentors who share their specific career goals.

Female-to-Female Mentorship and Career Development

Research on female-to-female mentorship points to both its value and its limitations. Walts (2011) conducted a qualitative phenomenological study with 33 professional women and found that all participants held positive perceptions of female-to-female mentorship for career progression. They cited networking, personal motivation, and education and training as central themes. However, researchers also identified company expectations as the most frequently cited barrier to career advancement, surfacing in 49.51% of participants' responses, and introduced it as a limiting factor distinct from mentorship quality itself. Participants described workplaces that

imposed gendered role expectations, constraining the degree to which mentors could effectively prepare mentees for advancement regardless of the quality of the mentoring relationship. For undergraduate women preparing to enter those same environments, a mentorship program that offers honest guidance from professional women with firsthand experience navigating these barriers provides a form of preparation that collegiate career resources are unlikely to provide.

Primary Research Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods approach combining qualitative and quantitative research to better understand the professional development needs of female undergraduate students at Syracuse University. Qualitative data was gathered through a focus group, which provided in-depth insight into students' experiences and unmet needs. Quantitative data was collected via a structured Google Forms survey featuring closed-ended, scaled, and open-ended questions to generate measurable data on trends such as interest in programming, perceived support levels, and willingness to engage with the CNY Women's Network. Open-ended survey responses were also qualitatively coded to identify recurring themes, with responses organized into categories based on common patterns and ideas. Together, both methods enabled statistical analysis alongside deeper contextual understanding of student perspectives.

The target population was female undergraduate students at Syracuse University, as they represent a key potential audience for the CNY Women's Network. Participants were recruited through existing student networks and organizations, resulting in a non-probability convenience sampling method. The survey yielded 70 responses, providing a broader dataset across the target population, while the focus group included 6 participants and was limited to sophomore students due to the convenience of recruiting within our own class year. Although this narrowed the range

of perspectives within the qualitative portion, it allowed for easier coordination and stronger engagement during discussion. While convenience sampling limits generalizability, it was appropriate for this exploratory study aimed at identifying initial trends and perceptions within this specific population.

Data collection was conducted through both the focus group and the survey. During the focus group, detailed notes were taken and sessions were recorded to ensure that key participant behaviors, reactions, and discussion points were captured accurately. Once all survey responses were collected, the data was thoroughly analyzed and correlated with our original predictions and hypotheses. All findings were systematically organized in a shared Google Drive, prioritizing the most relevant and impactful data to streamline the next steps in the process. The compiled data then underwent a coding process to further categorize responses and extract key themes, strengthening the overall reliability and clarity of the findings.

The survey was structured to become increasingly specific as it progressed, ranging from broad questions such as "What is your major?" to more targeted items such as "How interested would you be in joining a Syracuse chapter or mentorship program with the CNY Women's Network?" It incorporated multiple-choice questions, Likert-scale items, and open-ended responses to capture both measurable trends and nuanced student perspectives. Likert scales allowed for standardized comparison of attitudes and interest levels across participants, while multiple-choice questions simplified coding and analysis through predefined options. Open-ended questions gave respondents the opportunity to elaborate on their experiences and provide feedback on how the program could best be structured. Question wording was carefully reviewed for clarity and neutrality to minimize bias, support validity, and ensure that all participants felt comfortable responding honestly.

All ethical standards were upheld throughout the research process. Participants were 18 or older and participated voluntarily. They were informed about the purpose of the study, the methodology used, and how the results would be used, which functioned as an informed consent statement. No personal identifying information was collected, and all responses were reported in aggregate form to protect confidentiality and anonymity. The survey was also designed to avoid sensitive or intrusive questions, and no deception was involved at any stage, ensuring transparency and ethical integrity throughout.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed a two-stage qualitative coding process alongside descriptive statistical analysis. In the first stage, open coding was applied, meaning each survey response was read carefully without prior assumptions, allowing themes to emerge organically from the data rather than being predetermined. Recurring patterns that surfaced during this stage included career uncertainty, difficulty finding internships, weak professional networks, desire for mentorship, and low prior awareness of the CNY Women's Network. Open coding was focused on getting all of those themes out on the table so they could be examined more closely in the next stage.

In the second stage, axial coding was used to examine the relationships between the themes identified through open coding. Where open coding focused on finding what themes exist in the data, axial coding focused on understanding how those themes relate to and connect with each other, asking questions such as why a theme exists, what causes it, what students are doing about it, and what they hope will happen as a result. For example, career uncertainty was found to connect directly to interest in one-on-one mentorship, as students who lacked professional direction expressed a stronger desire for personalized guidance. Axial coding also surfaced the

study's central finding: students perceive a meaningful gap between their current professional standing and where they need to be, and are actively seeking structured and meaningful support to help close that gap. Together, open and axial coding worked as a complementary pair, one to identify themes and one to make sense of how they fit together, allowing for a thorough and organized interpretation of student needs.

To ensure validity, three types were considered. Face validity was maintained by reviewing all questions to confirm they felt relevant and appropriate for college students and were genuinely connected to professional development, career support, mentorship, and interest in a women's network program. Content validity was upheld by ensuring the survey covered all important topic areas needed to fully answer the research questions, including career clarity, internship searching, networking needs, mentorship interest, event preferences, membership cost tolerance, and prior familiarity with the CNY Women's Network. Construct validity was supported by aligning individual questions with the broader concepts they were designed to measure. For example, asking students to rate on a scale of one to five how supported they feel in their professional development was designed to connect to the larger concept of whether students feel they have the resources and guidance needed to move forward in their careers.

While formal reliability testing methods such as test-retest reliability or split-half reliability were not employed in this study, reliability was still taken seriously throughout the data collection process. Every participant received the exact same Google Form survey, with all questions written in the same way, asking the same things, and appearing in the same order without any variation. No questions were reworded for certain groups, and no one was asked things in a different order based on their major, college, or any other factor. This consistency across all participants ensured that responses could be fairly compared to one another, reduced

the influence of outside factors on the results, and made the overall findings more trustworthy and credible.

Results

Comparative Analysis Across Colleges

Comparative analysis across colleges revealed notable differences in career preparedness. Students in the Whitman School of Management reported the highest levels of career direction clarity ($M \approx 4.0$), while students in the College of Arts and Sciences reported lower clarity ($M \approx 3.4$). Newhouse students demonstrated the highest demand for internship support ($M \approx 3.9$), suggesting a greater perceived need for institutional internship resources relative to their Whitman peers. Across all colleges, however, professional network strength was consistently low ($M \approx 3.1$ to 3.5) and mentorship interest was uniformly high, indicating a shared gap in networking resources regardless of college affiliation.

A frequency distribution analysis examined where students currently seek career advice. Family was the most commonly cited source across all colleges, with Newhouse students reporting the highest reliance (88.0%, $n = 22$), followed by Arts and Sciences (80.0%, $n = 20$) and Whitman (55.6%, $n = 5$). Online resources were consulted across all three colleges, ranging from 36.0% at Newhouse ($n = 9$) to 56.0% at Arts and Sciences ($n = 14$). Career center utilization was highest among Whitman students (55.6%, $n = 5$) relative to Newhouse (32.0%, $n = 8$) and Arts and Sciences (24.0%, $n = 6$). Whitman students also drew more evenly across formal and informal career resources, including friends and peers (55.6%), online resources (55.6%), and professors (33.3%), suggesting greater overall access to and engagement with career support structures. By contrast, students in Arts and Sciences and Newhouse relied more heavily on informal networks such as family and peers, which may reflect structural differences

in access to college-level career programming. Alumni remained the least utilized source across all colleges, with usage rates ranging from 22.2% to 28.0%, pointing to an underactivated resource that a structured mentorship program could directly address.

Interest in CNY Women's Network Chapter

Measures of central tendency were calculated to examine interest in joining a Syracuse student chapter or mentorship program with the CNY Women's Network across home colleges. Students in the Whitman School of Management expressed the highest interest ($M \approx 3.8$, Median = 4, Mode = 4), followed by Newhouse students ($M \approx 3.6$, Median = 4, Mode = 4). Students in the College of Arts and Sciences showed more moderate interest ($M \approx 3.2$, Median = 3, Mode = 3), indicating that business and communications students expressed the strongest enthusiasm for the program overall.

Measures of variability revealed differences in how consistent interest levels were across colleges. Arts and Sciences showed the greatest variability (Range = 4, $SD \approx 1.1$), suggesting a wider spread of opinions about the program among this group. Newhouse showed slightly less variability ($SD \approx 1.0$), while Whitman had the lowest variability (Range = 3, $SD \approx 0.9$), indicating more uniformly positive interest levels among business students.

Key Patterns

Because this study used a non-probability convenience sampling method, findings cannot be generalized to the broader population of female undergraduates at Syracuse University. The following patterns are descriptive of the participants in this study only and are framed accordingly.

Four patterns emerged consistently across both data collection phases. First, internship search support was the most prominent and consistently observed need, with 76.8% of

respondents ($n = 53$) identifying it as their top support priority, and resume and cover letter assistance ranking in the top three across majors (42.0%, $n = 29$). Focus group participants reinforced this finding, describing networking as feeling "pointless" without the foundational career readiness skills needed to act on it, suggesting that career preparedness, not access, is the core gap this sample perceives.

Second, nearly half of respondents (49.3%, $n = 34$) identified networking as a key area of needed support, and self-reported network strength was the lowest-scoring measure in the entire survey ($M = 3.26$, $SD = 0.93$). Focus group participants reinforced this pattern, noting that current Syracuse resources leave the burden of networking largely on individual students. One participant noted that while Whitman provides access to networking opportunities, the lack of structured guidance and preparation makes them feel "overwhelming" to take advantage of, suggesting that access alone does not address the gap participants described.

Third, mentorship interest was strong across the sample, particularly for one-on-one formats. Survey respondents rated mentor interest at $M = 3.57$ ($SD = 1.06$), with 56.5% ($n = 39$) scoring a 4 or 5, and one-on-one mentoring ranked among the top three preferred program offerings (58.0%, $n = 40$). Focus group participants added a nuance that the survey data alone could not have surfaced: several expressed that recent graduates would make more relatable mentors than those of their parents' generation, given how rapidly the professional landscape is changing.

Finally, despite 94.2% of survey respondents ($n = 65$) having never heard of the CNY Women's Network prior to taking the survey, 49.3% ($n = 34$) indicated interest in a student chapter after reading a program description ($M = 3.36$, $SD = 1.10$). Focus group participants responded positively once the concept was introduced as well, particularly around the appeal of a

women-centered space. One participant noted the value of "connections with women who have my career goals in mind," suggesting that the women-specific framing of the program may feel meaningfully different from general career resources to participants in this sample. Taken together, these patterns suggest that low awareness, rather than lack of interest, is the primary barrier this group presents, a finding with direct implications for how CNY Women's Network might approach outreach to a student audience, should further research confirm these patterns in a more representative sample.

Findings and Conclusions

After collecting and analyzing all survey responses from Syracuse University students, the findings of this study suggest a widespread need for professional development support on campus. Students appear genuinely interested in what a CNY Women's Network student chapter could offer them. The data was analyzed using both quantitative measures and a two-stage qualitative coding process, and together those methods told consistent results about where students are and what they may be looking for.

On the quantitative side, the average career clarity rating across all respondents landed around three out of five, suggesting that most students feel only somewhat sure about their professional direction. At the same time, many of those same students rated their need for internship support at a four or five, indicating that even when students are uncertain about their direction, they appear to recognize the need to move forward and may not yet have all the tools to do so. How supported students feel in their professional development overall also averaged around a three, which suggests that while some resources exist, they may not be fully meeting students where they are.

The qualitative coding process helped shed light on why. Through open coding, seven themes emerged from the responses: career uncertainty, internship and job search struggles, resume and cover letter gaps, lack of professional networking, a strong desire for mentorship, uncertainty around personal branding, and low awareness of the CNY Women's Network. These themes appeared consistently across students from different majors, colleges, and class years, which suggests this may not be an isolated issue but a broader, campus-wide one.

Axial coding then connected those themes and pointed toward a central pattern in the data: students appear to perceive a gap between where they are professionally and where they feel they need to be, and many seem to be looking for something structured and trustworthy to help them close it. Career uncertainty was associated with a desire for mentorship. Weak networks were linked to demand for networking events. Internship stress and resume anxiety frequently appeared together, which may reflect students' sense that those two challenges are closely related.

One of the more notable findings concerned the women-specific framing of the program. Students did not just express general interest in professional support; several specifically noted wanting connections with women who share their career goals and understand their experiences. This suggests the CNY Women's Network may offer something meaningfully different from a generic career resource, though further research would be needed to confirm that distinction.

In terms of what students indicated they would want from a chapter, networking events, speaker panels, and one-on-one mentoring were the most frequently requested offerings. Hybrid events were the preferred format, and most students indicated a willingness to pay between

twenty-five and fifty dollars annually for membership, particularly when they could clearly envision the benefits.

In conclusion, the data offer preliminary support for the idea of bringing a CNY Women's Network student chapter to Syracuse University. Awareness of the organization is currently low, but that may represent an opportunity. Interest increased notably among students who simply read a brief description of what the network does. The findings suggest students may be looking for mentorship, community, practical skills, and a network of women invested in each other's success. A well-structured and visible chapter could have the potential to become a meaningful professional development resource on this campus, though longitudinal or experimental research would be needed to establish stronger claims about impact.

Recommendations for Additional Research

To build on the findings from this research, there are several areas that we could develop. First, expanding the sample size and broadening the participant pool beyond undergraduate students could be beneficial. Including graduate students, alumni, or women from other universities could offer us a more comprehensive understanding of potential interest in a mentorship program with the CNY Women's Network. Further research would also help us to better understand why many students do not fully utilize available career resources. Learning more about whether students feel the resources they have are accessible, inclusive, and tailored to their needs could give us better insights into how to perfectly craft the mentorship program. This would likely allow us to fully bridge the gap for students seeking extra support. If we had more time, we also could have done some trial runs with the program. This would have been done by scheduling events with a smaller subset of people and seeing which formats received the most positive feedback, so we could know what to prioritize going forward.

References

- Badoer, E., Hollings, Y., & Chester, A. (2021). Professional networking for undergraduate students: A scaffolded approach. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 45(2), 197-210. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2020.1744543>
- Buell, C. (2004). Models of mentoring in communication. *Communication Education*, 53(1), 56-73. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0363452032000135779>
- Walts, B. (2011). A qualitative study of the role of female to female mentorship on women's career development [Doctoral dissertation, University of Phoenix]. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses.

Appendix

Focus Group Questions

1. When you need career guidance, who do you turn to? What makes those sources feel valuable?
2. If you were designing your ideal mentor relationship from scratch, what would that look like?
3. How would you describe your relationship with networking right now? What do you think it would take for networking to feel genuinely useful rather than transactional or performative?
4. Looking back at the needs and experiences you described earlier in our conversation, where do you see this program fitting in and where do you see gaps?

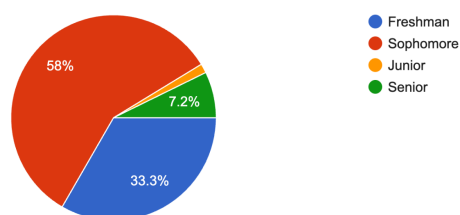
5. How would you describe what would need to be true about this program for it to feel meaningfully different from the career resources you already have access to at Syracuse?
6. How do you feel about a network specifically focused on women? What does that framing open up for you, and what, if anything, does it close off?
7. How would you describe your relationship with the career resources Syracuse offers?
What have you engaged with, and what has shaped whether or not you sought those

Survey Charts and Tables (via Google Forms)

Section 2: Background & Career Direction

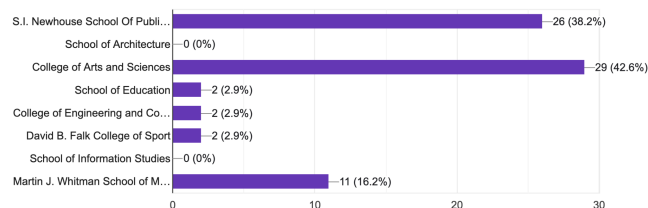
What year are you in school?

69 responses



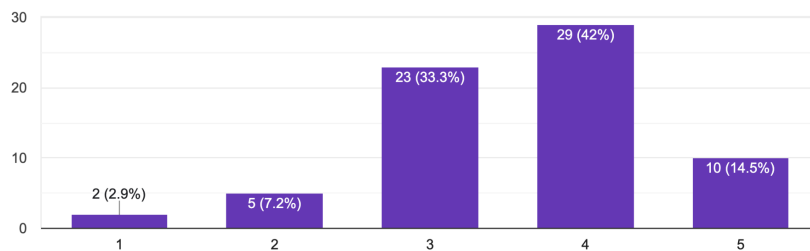
What is your home college(s)?

68 responses



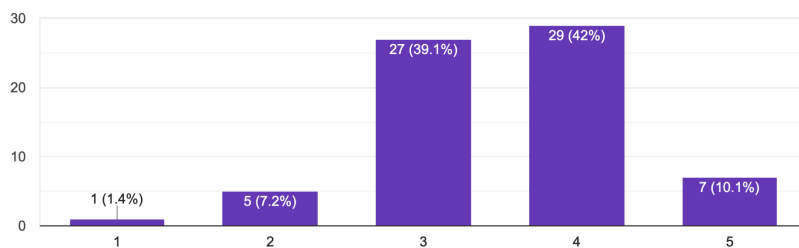
On a scale of 1–5, how clear do you feel about your career direction? (1=not clear, 5=very clear)

69 responses



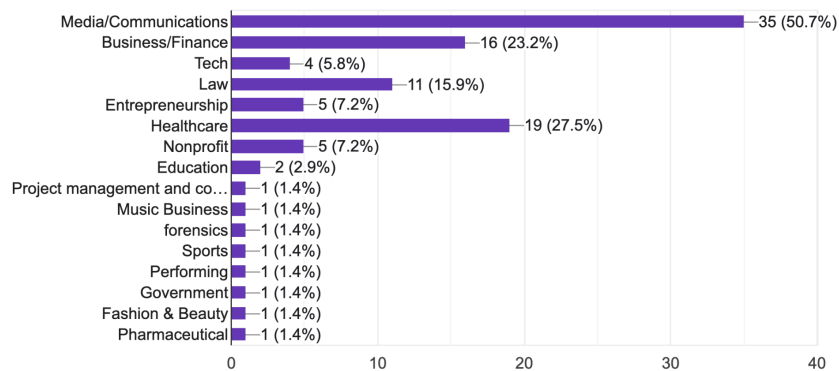
On a scale of 1–5, how confident do you feel about achieving your career goals? (1 = Not confident, 5 = Very confident)

69 responses



What industries are you most interested in? (select all that apply)

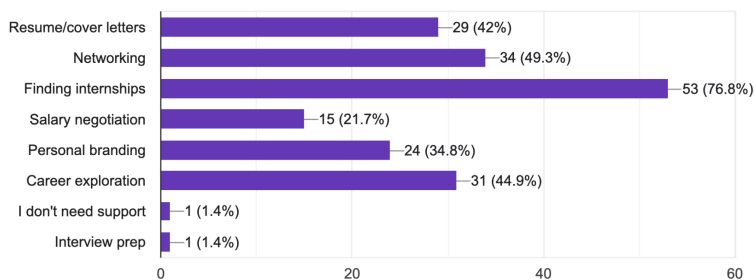
69 responses



Section 3: Professional Development, Support & Needs

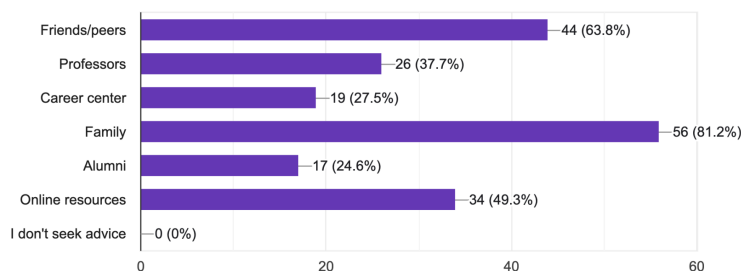
In which areas do you need the most support? (select up to 3)

69 responses



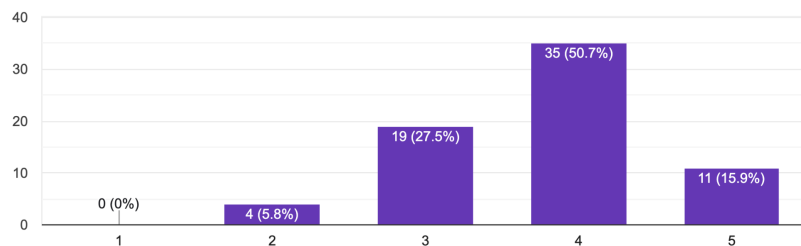
Where do you currently go for career advice? (select all that apply)

69 responses



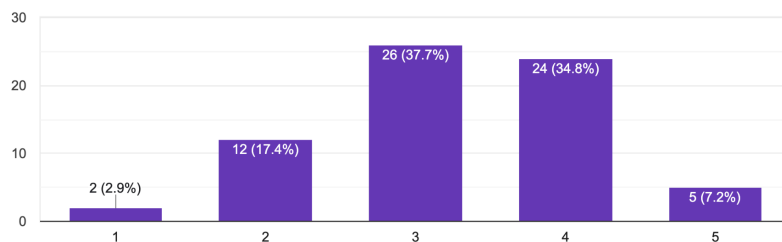
On a scale of 1–5, how supported do you feel in your professional development? (1 = Not supported, 5 = Very supported)

69 responses



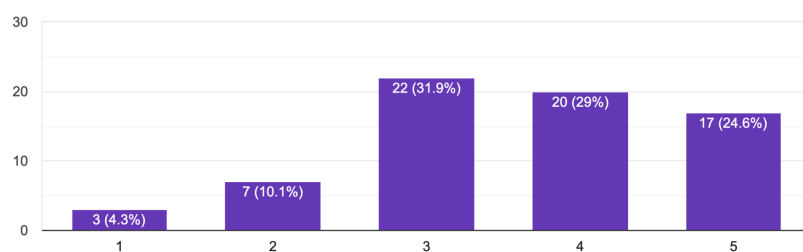
On a scale of 1–5, how strong is your professional network?

69 responses



On a scale of 1–5, how much support do you need in your internship search? (1 = No support, 5 = A lot of support)

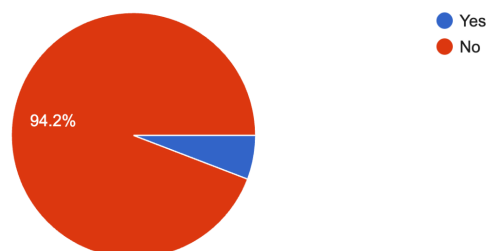
69 responses



Section 4: Interest in Programming & Engagement

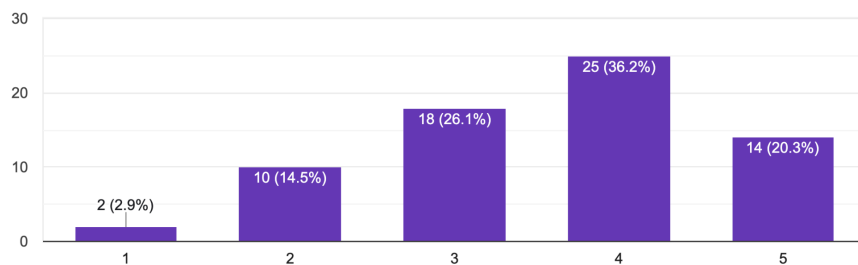
Before reading the description above, were you aware of the CNY Women's Network?

69 responses



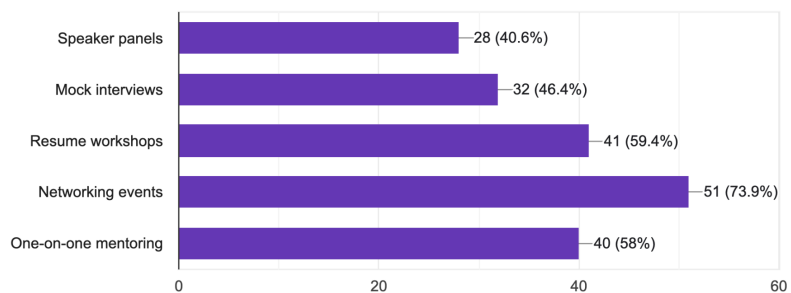
On a scale of 1–5, how interested are you in having a mentor? (1 = Not interested, 5 = Very interested)

69 responses



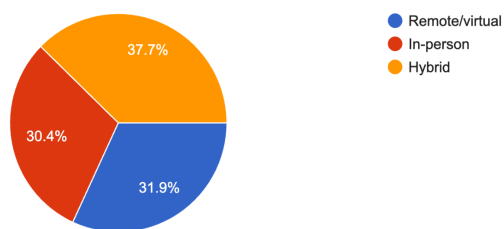
Which events would you attend? (select all that apply)

69 responses



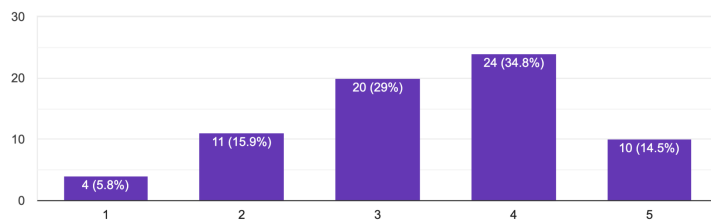
What event format do you prefer?

69 responses



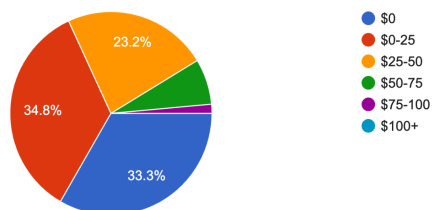
On a scale of 1–5, how interested would you be in joining a Syracuse student chapter/mentorship program with the CNY Women's Network? (1 = Not interested, 5 = Very interested)

69 responses



How much would you be willing to pay for membership per year?

69 responses



What would make this program valuable to you?

23 responses

