

John Boccacino:

Hello and welcome back to the Cues Conversations Podcast. I'm John Boccacino, Senior Internal Communications Specialist at Syracuse University.

Sophia Moore:

Having a program like Welles Link was so instrumental to my confidence and development as a young adult in college. There's this deep sense of camaraderie that I think we were able to form as a peer group and also that I formed with my peer leader. So yeah, I really loved, I think, the Welles Link model of having that immediate small group of support as well as having the larger program of people that you can talk to every week. I truly am so glad that I was able to make those connections, literally the first week I was here.

Josh Ortega:

The Welles Link Program also pairs you with an academic consultant, along with your mentor, and they help you establish overarching goals for the semester for the year. They help you in areas where you're struggling in your classes, help point out where you can improve, and then they also help you identify your strengths. And I think with my academic consultant, she's been such a great help to me in my young career so far. I couldn't think of a more personable, direct relationship that you'd be able to have. That's just something that Welles Link is able to provide. That was definitely a game changer.

John Boccacino:

So we are here on the Cues Conversations Podcast, talking about an innovative and transformative program that really changes the lives of our students here at Syracuse University. It's the Welles Link Leadership Program. It's a fantastic academic excellence and leadership program for first year students, people who are minorities, people of color, people who are looking to advance their educations here at Syracuse University. It has changed lives. This is the 19th year, believe it or not, we've had the Welles Link leadership program here on campus and we are thrilled to welcome on two bright students to talk about the impact that Welles Link has had on their academic careers here at Syracuse. They are Josh Ortega and Sophia Moore. We welcome both of you onto the podcast. And Sophia, let's start with you. Give us your elevator speech. Tell us a little bit about yourself, where you're from and how you discovered the Welles Link Program.

Sophia Moore:

Absolutely. Thank you so much for inviting me on John. I'm really excited to talk about Welles Link. It's been such a formative part of my experience at SU and I truly couldn't imagine my college experience without it. But I'm Sophia Moore. I'm a sophomore studying television, radio, film and sociology. Originally from Los Angeles, California. And I found out about Welles Link through my email and it was a random blast email that was sent by Huey, who's the ... Well, he does so much, but he is first and foremost director of the Welles Link Program. And so the email was like, "Join Welles Link. It's this program for first year students and it'll give you a sense of community and leadership," and it was specifically targeted towards first year students of color. And I was like, "Okay, that sounds like something that I could be into, something that I think would be really important to my college experience."

And so I filled out the application and just crossed my fingers. And when I got invited to the first meeting, I went and was able to, right off the bat, meet so many incredible people who I'm still in touch

with a lot of them, in my second year of school. And just the experience from there was incredible. And the chance to really get to know more people was really important to me last year and this year, and I think for the rest of my college experience.

John Boccacino:

It's such a competitive program. I'm sure there's so many talented applicants that want to get in and become a Welles Link scholar and become part of the program. And Josh Ortega is our second guest of the student variety here on the podcast. Josh, same question for you. Tell our audience a little bit about yourself, where you're from, your major, and then how you discovered Welles Link.

Josh Ortega:

Yeah, of course. And again, thank you also John for having me on this podcast. Similar to Sophia, well, I'll get into my spiel first, but I'm Josh Ortega, a sophomore from Chicago. I'm in the Whitman School of Management studying Finance and Business Analytics. But similar to Sophia, I'm just on my email the first couple days of freshman year and I see emails from Huey, and knowing that that's the time to really be open to new experiences, trying new things, I figured it really couldn't hurt at all. I see this email for this leadership program for students of color and I had went to PWI for high school as well, so I knew coming here it would be a similar experience and why not go ahead and start meeting students of color from the jump?

So being able to have that opportunity, being able to connect with students that are like-minded but also look like me, that have similar experiences, was also definitely a huge motivating reason to have joined the program. And once I did, it was really nice to just be able to meet other students of color and just be able to bond over similar experiences.

John Boccacino:

I think one of the things, not to speak for either of you, but I think there's definitely some differences when it comes to higher education, if you come from a family of people who have gone to school before and gone to university before or if you're first generation, and the same thing goes for people of color when it comes to the experiences. It's a different collegiate experience just based on that, based on what you go through, your shared experiences with your professors, your faculty and your fellow students. What did Welles Link do to help ease your transition into higher education, into being a college student? How did you guys go through the shared experiences together?

Sophia Moore:

For me growing up, I grew up in an area where most of my friends were people of color. I'm Mexican and LA is a huge area for Mexican people. So growing up, I definitely felt like I was seeing a lot of people who looked like me and I was friends with a lot of people who looked like me. And coming to upstate New York, I knew that that was going to be different. I wasn't going to assume that there weren't going to be any other people of color, but I knew that this was a PWI and that that was going to be a little bit of a challenge for me to navigate. So having a program like Welles Link was so instrumental to my confidence and development as a young adult in college, not necessarily because my ... So the way the Welles Link Program works is you get assigned, well, you get to choose a peer leader and then you get a small peer cohort.

So in my group, I think there were six or seven of us. And so in our little group, we hang out and we hang out with our peer leader and get to talk to them about the college experience. And for me, having that

immediate support group was less about, "Oh, these are other people of color who I can come share my grievances with." It was less that and more like these people understand a fundamental part of my identity. I don't have to explain that to them. We get it, we have that in common, so we can just go and be friends on every other level that you can be friends. And there's this deep sense of camaraderie that I think we were able to form as a peer group, and also that I formed with my peer leader that really was empowering and made me feel like I was recognized in a space where I don't know that I would've been recognized as quickly on the campus as a whole.

So yeah, I really loved, I think, the Welles Link model of having that immediate small group of support as well as having the larger program of people that you can talk to every week and see and meet with. But I truly am so glad that I was able to make those connections literally the first week I was here.

John Boccacino:

And Josh, how about for you? How did you find that transition from high school student to college? How was that facilitated and made easier by the Welles Link Program?

Josh Ortega:

Yeah, I mean I think definitely from the start they do a really good job of connecting you with your mentor and then from there, establishing a schedule where you and your mentor can meet, talk about your goals, talk about what's been going well for you at Syracuse, what you can improve on. I think that was done really well. And for me personally with my mentor, he and I were able to really bridge the gap between first year and second year student, or at least he was a second year student start of my freshman year. But it was also really nice because we just ended up having a lot in common and that professional surface level relationship turned into a really good friendship. And he is still one of my really good friends on campus here, and that's something I'm always really grateful for.

When I think back to when I first started, it's like I really just got handed one of my best friends. I got handed a really nice group of friends with other members of my cohort. One of them ended up transferring unfortunately, but I'm still in contact with him a good amount. He goes to Northwestern now. So we like to joke that he was able to really get a good start from where he was at, but we like to attribute that to Welles Link in that he was able to have that foundation for himself. And it really just gives us the opportunity to start networking from the start of school and also just to be able to meet all sorts of new people where maybe that opportunity wouldn't always be present to a student that may or may not have joined Welles Link.

John Boccacino:

When people hear the term mentor, it carries many different designations based on their experiences. And some people can have negative mentor experiences, some can have, like you mentioned Josh and Sophia, very life-affirming positive relationships. How did that process work? You get to choose your mentor, so what were you looking for in a mentor and how did you guys end up forming that bond that really has lasted throughout the program?

Josh Ortega:

I think when it comes to mentorship, what's really important is just candidacy and really being able to be open with someone that you're talking to. Obviously when you think of mentorship, it's someone instilling knowledge or advice onto someone that's usually younger than them, that doesn't have as much experience in the area of which they have interest in. But with mentorship through the Welles

Link Program, I think it's also really important to have someone that would be willing to be open on something that they didn't have success with or be open about things that they struggle with because both student and mentor in the program are students of color. And although you don't always implicitly talk about the struggles that come with that, there's sort of, like Sophia was saying, there's that understanding that the similar experiences are similar things we have gone through within our time in high school and middle school.

And I think that inherently comes with being a mentor in Welles Link. And to touch on my mentor again because he's just such a great guy, his name's Alejandro and I think from the start, he just was able to really give me a lot of advice and also just be so open to me coming here and me being part of his cohort and just really opened his arms to forming a relationship outside of Welles Link. Like, "Hey, if you need anything, if you want to hang out, if you want to go get food, I'm here. You have my number, just give me a call, send me a text." And I think that's another great thing too about mentorship, is just availability. Obviously schedules aren't always going to line up, but offering that time and making the effort to get to know the person is also huge.

John Boccacino:

And how about for you Sophia?

Sophia Moore:

I definitely have to agree with a lot of what Josh said. I think that having that experience with a mentor who understands you and has that really strong bond, that was something that was so important to me. And I remember when I was picking my mentor, they had us in this big banquet room, I think it was at the Sheraton, but I don't know. We were in this big banquet room and it was basically almost like a speed dating kind of thing where the mentors would come around to each table and they'd give you a minute or two of who they are, what they do, what they're interested in, and you could ask them a couple questions. So you got to meet all the possible mentors. And I remember when I met who would eventually become my mentor, Morgan, she sat down on the table and went through her laundry list of amazing things that she had done during her time at Syracuse.

She was a senior last year, so she's since graduated, but we still keep in touch. But yeah, she went through all this amazing stuff that she had done and I was like, "Okay, she's my mentor." It clicked. It felt like she was the person who embodied what I wanted to be at the end of my college career and hopefully what I'm on track to become. And so I knew that if I was able to be her mentee then I'd get to have some of that wisdom. And she definitely was very generous with sharing all the knowledge and things that she had learned and discovered and been able to participate in throughout her time at SU. So I loved the opportunity to meet all of the possible mentors and then to know, "Okay, this is the one for me." And again, truly, she changed my life and changed the way that I was approaching school and the way that I think I'm going to approach school for the rest of my time in college. Yeah, Morgan is awesome.

John Boccacino:

It's really powerful to hear that dynamic of the mentor-mentee relationship and what it can do to spark. Obviously you both are high end achievers, you both are ambitious students, and those are the type of people that the Welles Link Programs take, the people that are going to change the world, the people that are going to make a difference in their community. If you had to think back on the countless conversations with your mentor, what's the best piece of advice that they provided to you that really helped with your, again, transition from high school student to a successful Syracuse student?

Sophia Moore:

I have a phrase that immediately comes to mind. I don't even remember what we were talking about. I think we were talking about Morgan's experience in Welles Link, and she told me the people that you meet in Welles Link, they will be the leaders of this campus and the leaders of your generation of people. So she said that to me pretty early on and I was like, "You know what? I think you're right." Because not only was she instilling the confidence in myself that I could be a leader of campus and the world or whatnot, but also, I and everybody else in the Welles Link Program has a unique opportunity of being surrounded by fellow leaders and fellow people who are innovating in their respective fields and really going the extra mile to do all that they can and succeed in every way that they can.

And I feel like I gain a lot of confidence and also knowledge and experience when I'm around other people who are driven like that. So once she said that to me, that really resonated and it's still something that I think about to this day. Just yeah, I am around a lot of people who are really successful and doing really cool things, and that is both inspiring to me and also a reminder that, oh yeah, I have the ability to be that person that Morgan saw me as and that being in Welles Link allows me to be, so,

Josh Ortega:

The biggest piece of advice I always like to think back to is my mentor just telling me that it's okay to be yourself. And I know that sounds a little simple or like, "Really? That's the thing you thought of?" But it always stuck with me because when I came here, through Welles Link and through just meeting other people and just trying to make the most out of the experience, I found that I had early on success. But I think when we would sit down at our meetings and just talk about what I was up to and all the people I was meeting, just the fact that at certain points I found that I was faking it to make it, at some points. And what he told me was, "That's great, obviously. You're having fun and you're meeting a lot of new people. You're doing well in your classes because of your ability to connect with people. But when you meet new people, never let that initial meeting and follow up and getting to know the person, never let that person overshadow who you want to be like you're trying to impress someone or you're trying to be someone that you're not."

Because I did find myself doing that, trying to fit in a little bit and to try and make headway here at Syracuse, be someone that's well known. And I realized that that obviously isn't as important. And my mentor really helped me understand that, keep my head on a swivel, keep myself grounded, but at the same time, be willing to be confident, be open to new experiences, open to meeting new people, but doing so in a way that's going to benefit me and not benefit someone else by trying to be someone else. So I always like to think back on that because as a sophomore, as we continue on with our career, we're still going to be meeting plenty of new people, that doesn't stop. And to always keep that in the back of my mind, it has been important even now, and it will be into the future.

John Boccacino:

Through the Welles Link Program, which again, if you're unfamiliar, it's a two semester program, there's academic, there's social, there's cultural, experiences and activities that help contribute to the holistic development of these rising student leaders here at Syracuse University. And I want to go through some of the activities. I mean there's a range of scheduled activities, some orientation through a motivational dinner and the transition ceremony, which again is coming up on February 17th, the 19th annual Welles Link Transitions celebration for our graduates of the program. When you look back at it, Sophia, what are some of the takeaways that you got? How did the structured activities and events really fuel your development and your transformation?

Sophia Moore:

I definitely think some of the most valuable programming that we went through, both in the first year program and now in the second year program, is there's a lot of stuff pertaining to career development and finding internships, creating a resume, doing an elevator pitch so that when you inevitably need to go and find that internship, find that job, you'll be prepared. And for me, all of that programming that we did starting in our first year of college, was essential to the way that I've approached job opportunities since then. I feel like I have my elevator pitch down like, oh yeah, I know how to present myself when I'm meeting new people who could potentially get me connections and I know how to build that network.

And I think that all of those opportunities to both practice your personal skills, but also create a network of young professionals and also meet guest speakers who are successful in whatever their careers are and meet people who are really important on this campus, all of that stuff in combination has been so helpful to me as I shape the vision of where I want to go with my career and how I want to use my college experience to build a good foundation to get a job and all that important stuff that happens once you graduate. So yeah, definitely the career development programming has been so essential to my development as a young professional.

Josh Ortega:

Yeah, I think to touch on that, the career development has been such a great utilization within this program. They had campus recruiters come on several times to come talk to us about the importance of having a resume prepared, utilizing tools like [inaudible 00:21:19] in order to get that resume into the place where it needs to be. But also just the way in which they spoke to us was really kind, really sincere. They really wanted to help us and that's something that you can always appreciate because they were in our shoes at a certain point in time. And to see them taking the time now out of their day to come and talk to us and to help build up the future leaders of the next generation, is always really cool.

John Boccacino:

I want you to take me back and I'll start with you Josh, with this question. Can you tangibly point to something where you look at yourself now versus where you were before you started school and a tangible benefit, a tangible impact, that Welles Link has had in helping you reach and realize your potential?

Josh Ortega:

Yeah, absolutely. I think definitely I would just touch back on the mentor-mentee relationship within Welles Link. I think with my mentor, he was really great in helping me organize my schedule and also put away time to do homework, put away time to study, go ask my professors for help going to office hours. That was really critical. But also I'd like to touch on our academic consultants that we have. The Welles Link Program also pairs you with an academic consultant along with your mentor and that person you meet with anywhere from two to four to a few times a semester. And there, they help you establish overarching goals for the semester, for the year. They help you in areas where you're struggling in your classes, help point out where you can improve, and then they also help you identify your strength. And I think with my academic consultant, it's been a really great relationship.

We've gotten to know each other, we're super friendly, but she's been such a great help to me and my young career so far. I couldn't think of a more personable direct relationship that you'd be able to have. That's just something that Welles Link is able to provide that I can't really place anywhere else. It's a

great connection to have because again, you're building your network, but also you have someone there that's going to be able to help support you and help walk you through your goals. And I think that was definitely a game changer.

Sophia Moore:

When I think back to life pre-college, I really thought I was set on exactly what I wanted to do, exactly what I wanted to study, exactly what I wanted to be. I thought I had everything figured out with that overconfident high school mindset and coming to college and just realizing, oh my gosh. Not only physically coming from one coast to the other, but just being at such a large university, I had a moment where my worldview shifted because all of a sudden, I was around all these new people from all over the country and the world, and I realized, "Okay, everything I thought I knew is not what I want or what is beneficial to me." And so I had a little bit of a moment where I was like, "Am I built for this? Am I going to get through college? Am I going to be okay?"

Everything that I was relying on knowing was dissolving because the world is obviously so much bigger than you think it is in high school. And so after I expressed that to Morgan, she really was a great help in telling me that you don't need to have everything figured out right now. You don't need to have everything figured out when you graduate. It's just important to pursue the opportunities that are interesting to you and that are going to give you space to be yourself and follow what it is that you're passionate about. And hearing that from someone who had been through most of her college career was really soothing because I think for a lot of first year students, obviously the transition from high school to college is very overwhelming because you're just around all these new people and things.

And I think especially being a student of color at a PWI, there's a whole added element to that. But hearing from Morgan, nobody's telling me that I have to make any decisions that are big or life changing, right in this moment. It's more just about focusing on, "Okay, who do I want to be? Where do I want to go?" And she always told me that with no judgment. I so appreciate that she understood the feeling of overwhelm and needing to do things to change and grow and however messy that change in growth is, she always supported my decisions to pursue new things. So looking back now pre-high school, I definitely think my mindset has shifted for the better because I feel like I'm so much more free to pursue what I want to be pursuing. And again, having that person who believes in you and has that vote of confidence in you every time, that's invaluable. That is so affirming to my identity and knowing that someone's there for me.

John Boccacino:

I want to talk about if either of you wants to comment on your experiences with this great program, this subset program called the Leadership Capital Series.

Sophia Moore:

I definitely feel like a lot of the skills that I've been able to use as I get further along in my college career, have come from things that I've learned or talked about or workshopped through the Leadership Capital series. And definitely that series was really important to letting me meet new people and people who are at different positions within the university. Welles Link would do a great job of inviting all kinds of really cool professionals working at different offices around campus. And I remember there was one leadership capital event where they brought back students who went abroad for example, and that was like, "Okay, cool, these people did it. I want to do it now too." And so I have plans to go abroad next fall. I definitely was able to broaden my mind even further through the Leadership Capital series because I was able to directly engage with really cool people who have done a lot of really interesting things.

And it's just one of those moments where, again, my worldview was expanded because of that and because of the skills that I've picked up through Leadership Capital. I've been able to navigate through what can sometimes be murky waters of college. But I think Welles Link has a really good hand on the pulse of what students actually need to be successful and to grow during their time here.

Josh Ortega:

I think with the Leadership Capital Series, it's also just another great opportunity for students to come and engage with campus leaders, engage with really thought out and thorough topics. But there was one that I was thinking of from second semester of freshman year on DEI, and I think it was just a really well implemented session that day. It was a really great way to let the students know that there's always ways to learn about DEI and you never don't learn about it. There's always something new to pick up from that. And in an ever-changing world, we always need to be informed about DEI. And I remember that with that one particularly, we played this really big cahoot and everyone was in teams. We were getting into it. It was a lot of fun. So I think it was a really great way to make a sometimes hard topic to teach, just really easy and really a lot of fun for the students to engage with. So I think that's definitely a highlight of the Capital Leadership Series.

John Boccacino:

With you both now getting ready for the transition ceremony on February 17th, I'll start with you, Josh, with this question. What do you think you can bring to the table? Do you want to be a mentor moving forward? And if so, what can you offer to a future Welles Link Program participant?

Josh Ortega:

I think it's just really a cool dynamic to be the older person in that relationship, being able to instill the knowledge, advice, and all the things you've learned so far not only from my mentor, but just from day-to-day at Syracuse within Whitman. If I were to potentially have mentees that are within Whitman, that would be really cool to be able to give those specific insights and help them out with those classes. Also, I think what's really cool about being a mentor is just being able to ... In a way, like a little sibling. I think that's always really cool. I only have an older brother and I've always wanted to be an older sibling, so I think that sort of dynamic really creates that relationship where you can be older brother, older sister, younger brother, younger sister, and I think to have that opportunity through Welles Link, because that's already given the lot to me, I'd love to give back to the future Welles Link cohorts. I think it'd be really cool.

Sophia Moore:

Definitely have to agree with the older sibling, younger sibling dynamic. I am the older sister, so all my life I've loved to be a mentor to my younger sibling and whatever I have gone through in middle or high school and now college, I relay that information and I'm like, "Here's what I did and here's what you shouldn't do." But also I understand sometimes you have to make those mistakes yourself and really learn experientially what is or isn't the right thing to do. But yeah, I have plans to hopefully my senior year, be a mentor. Next year I won't be able to because I will be abroad in the fall, but senior year I'm crossing my fingers that that'll be when I get to give back to Welles Link, like Josh said, and just really impart any knowledge that I have gained over the last two years.

And then as I continue gaining knowledge, I really want to be sure to give that back to the first years who will be in our shoes or what were our shoes last year. I think also as a mentor, I'm looking forward to just making that connection with who will be again, that future generation of leaders on campus and

in the world. I love the idea of having that strong bond within Welles Link because the people who join the program truly are so spectacular. They're unlike any people that I've met anywhere else. There's just this unique ambition that Welles Link students possess that is so special to be around, and I would love to give them that same boost of confidence that was given to me last year because again, it's so invaluable,

John Boccacino:

It's infectious that want, that desire to give back and make your community, make your campus a better place. It's been a fantastic conversation getting to know more about two of our outstanding Welles Link Program participants in Sophia Moore and Joshua Ortega. They will be taking part in the 19th Annual Welles Link Transition Ceremony, which is taking place February 17th inside Hendrix Chapel, 4:00 to 6:00 PM There's a great keynote speaker named Marcus Bullock, who has a phenomenal and inspirational story to share with us as well. But right now, the time is focused on Sophia and Josh, their stories. I hope you've enjoyed hearing how they came out and really developed their leadership skills and became transformative figures on our campus. Sophia, I wish you nothing but the best of luck in your studies, and thank you for making the time today.

Sophia Moore:

Thank you so much for having me on, John. It's been so fun to talk about Welles Link.

John Boccacino:

And Josh, same thing to you. I've really enjoyed hearing your story, hearing your adjustments, and what lessons you've learned from this program, especially with your mentor-mentee relationship. Best of luck with your studies and keep up the good work.

Josh Ortega:

Appreciate it, John. Thank you so much. And again, yeah, just it was great talking about Welles Link and being on here on this podcast.

John Boccacino:

Thanks for checking out the latest installment of the Cues Conversations Podcast. My name is John Boccacino, signing off for the Cues Conversations Podcast.