College Mentors for High School Students

> Mentoring programs are a prominent strategy in the United States for preventing negative outcomes and promoting resilience among at-risk youth. Although diverse in their design and implementation, mentoring programs share a common aim of providing young people with structured support from older or more experienced people, such as adult volunteers or students at higher grade levels. David DuBois

In recent years, a growing number of mentoring programs for younger students have developed. Many of these programs target youth from low-income backgrounds, first-generation students, and those who are deemed at-risk academically. A wide range of volunteer and paid mentors are involved (e.g., college students, professionals, members of affinity groups, employees from local businesses, retired people).

Programs differ in approach, goals, and intended outcomes. For example, some focus on a specific domain, such as academic achievement, while others broadly attend to whole-child development. Programs also differ in the types of activities and the settings in which activities occur.

> Based on their meta-analysis of 70 mentoring outcome studies, Raposa and colleagues (2019) state: "findings provide some support for the efficacy of mentoring interventions, while also emphasizing the need to remain realistic about the modest impact of these programs as currently implemented." This conclusion is supported by recent studies reporting the association between mentoring and positive outcomes for different groups of mentees and also for mentors. In general, research suggests that such outcomes are enhanced through mentor training and support, well implemented programs, and a mentee's development of a strong emotional bond with the mentor. Harmful outcomes have been reported due to factors such as sporadic contacts, poor bonding, and/or premature ending of the relationship.

The potential of mentoring programs has generated federal support. For example, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP), the largest federal funder of mentoring programs, awarded nearly $1 billion in grants in the fiscal years from 2008 to 2019. From 2017 and the first half of 2019, OJJDP-funded mentor programs recruited 95,000 new mentors and served more than 600,000 youth nationwide. OJJDP also funds the **National Mentoring Resource Center.**

An Example of a College-Based Mentor Program for Secondary Students

Our focus here is on highlighting one college-based mentoring project and the challenges it encountered. The *Higher Opportunity Program for Education (HOPE)* is "a student-initiated project founded by UCLA's Vietnamese Student Union (VSU) in 1999. [The project] is committed to outreaching to youths who face educational obstacles and exists to raise consciousness of and provide access to higher education through holistic empowerment. With the support of the Student Initiated Outreach Committee (SIOC) and the direction of VSU, HOPE strives to achieve its goals toward educational equity for all by providing students with academic tutoring services, mentoring and peer advising sessions, workshops on various topics, & educational field trips."

A Note About College Students and Mentor-Mentee Matches

A major concern for mentoring programs is matching mentors and mentees. Spencer (2006) proposes that four relational processes – authenticity, empathy, collaboration, and companionship – support successful mentoring relationships. Authenticity between mentors and mentees involves being open and honest with each other. Empathy involves relating to mentees with a deep awareness and understanding of their needs without being affected by one's biases and differences. Collaboration between mentors and mentees involves working together effectively by problem solving and compromising. Finally, a feeling of companionship develops when the relationship is deeply valued and the duo genuinely like each other.

The National Mentoring Resource Center suggests that mentor characteristics contributing to successful matches with young mentees include having a youth-centered focus, a high level of attunement and self-efficacy, and realistic expectations about the mentoring relationship and the impact the mentor can have. Successful mentors also are described as aware of personal biases; appropriately culturally competent; self-reflective about their own motivations, actions, and contributions to the mentoring relationship; and good at problem-solving and seeking out support when necessary.

In making a good match with diverse high school students, college students are seen as having the advantage of being closer in age and coming from comparable backgrounds. With specific respect to Project HOPE, many of the mentors are first-generation college students who come from low-income and immigrant households. They have experienced what it's like to navigate schooling while facing various obstacles, such as financial stress, family and work obligations, language and cultural barriers, lack of knowledge regarding higher education within the family, and inadequate student/learning supports. Being able to share their first-hand experiences with mentees helps to establish feelings of connection and also enhances feelings of hope about overcoming obstacles to succeeding at school and beyond.

Challenges for a College Mentoring Project as Reported by a HOPE Mentor

As part of her work with our Center, Isabella Chou shared her reflections on the challenges encountered as a HOPE mentor. She focused on the following topics: (1) connecting with schools, (2) school concerns about volunteers, (3) maintaining mentor-mentee boundaries, (4) recruiting and retaining mentors, and (5) retaining mentees. Her edited comments follow.

(1) *Connecting with schools.* Challenges arose around establishing and maintaining a collaboration between schools and the project. Project staff had met with and arrived at an agreement with a member of a high school's support staff in spring of the previous school year. However, when the project approached the school at the beginning of the school year, that staff member had left the district, and no one else at the school was interested. In another instance, the school district board would not allow participating mentees to attend some of the project's special events (e.g., a college tour, our end-of-year banquet). Lesson learned: it is essential to develop a written agreement and a strong working relationship at a school with an appropriate decision maker. Where this is the case, projects such as HOPE thrive.

(2) *School concerns about volunteers.* Schools must ensure volunteers are screened and supervised. While outreach programs under the Student-Initiated Outreach Center (SIOC) at UCLA require a TB test, fingerprinting, and a youth safety training, the project found that some school districts require their own fingerprinting and background checks. With respect to supervision, project volunteers quickly learned about "the rule of three," which states they cannot interact with a student one-on-one at any time in the absence of a school staff member (e.g., a teacher, student support staff).

(3) Maintaining mentor-mentee boundaries. Occasionally, the boundaries of mentor-mentee relationships are breached. Students ask about matters that challenge what mentors are asked not to discuss. Mentor training covers this. They are told to redirect the conversation to a different topic, and if this doesn't work, they explicitly say that they are not allowed to discuss such matters. This can produce problems in developing a positive mentor-mentee relationship. However, any breaching of boundaries has the consequence of ending the volunteer's participation in the project.

(4) Recruiting and retaining mentors. Because of concerns about what is involved in being a mentor, recruitment and retention of volunteers is a constant challenge. Participating in Project HOPE requires up to four to five hours for each site visit and calls for the ability to dialogue and establish a working relationship with the mentee. Many college students worry about being rejected by mentees (e.g., because of differences in background, personality, demographics, experiences, etc.). As the work proceeds, mentors and the volunteers staffing the program indicate feeling increasing levels of stress due to the workload and the challenges of working with school personnel. An ironic solution to these challenges is to build a large enough base of able volunteers so no one is overly stressed and overworked and ensure that they are effectively trained, guided, supported, and appreciated.

(5) Retaining mentees. When high school students volunteer to be mentored, they bring expectations to the meetings. If those expectations are not met, their motivation to continue wanes, and they disengage. Mentor and mentee self-evaluations focus on this concern, and when problems arise, changes are indicated. Instances also arise when mentees become overwhelmed by other responsibilities (e.g., school work, family and work obligations) that continuing to meet with a mentor becomes too much of an additional burden. Mentors work hard on enhancing engagement. In addition, the HOPE project uses **group activities** to enhance bonding and gives students prizes for attending a desired number of mentor meetings throughout the year.

> ### Mentor Continuing Education
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> After their initial training, subsequent sessions are needed to deepen understanding about **mentoring**, **holistic youth development**, how to enhance **working relationships,** address challenges, and learn more about promoting pathways and hope for the future. Many mentoring tools, program and training materials are available for mentors to enhance their capabilities. A comprehensive and reliable resource is the **National Mentoring Resource Center.**

Concluding Comments

Given that teachers can't do it alone, mentors and other volunteers are a valuable resource. But, the needs of students are multifaceted and interrelated and many students require more.

Teachers must establish regular in-classroom collaborative working relationships with other teachers, student support staff, and a variety of volunteers to enhance equity of opportunity for students to succeed at school and beyond. And schools must transform how they connect with homes and communities so they can work together in pursuing shared goals.

Particular attention must be paid to addressing barriers to learning and teaching comprehensively, cohesively, and equitably. This involves much more than tweaking current practices. The focus must be on **fundamentally transforming student/learning supports**.

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