

Youth Scan

Special Edition - Mentoring

March 2006

**From the National Youth Council
"Developing a Vibrant, Highly-Connected,
and Self-Sustaining Youth Sector, and Nurturing World-Ready Youth"**

Bringing you snippets of youth trends and issues compiled from diverse sources such as news reports, journals and press releases, Youth Scan aims to help you stay in touch with the constantly evolving youth scene.

All articles and titles listed below are available for browsing at NYC. Please enquire for details.

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Recommended Reading :

1. *The Heart of Mentoring: Ten Proven Principles for Developing People to Their Fullest Potential* by Robert Tamasy and David A. Stoddard
2. *The Elements of Mentoring* by W. Brad Johnson and Charles R. Ridley
3. *A Mentor's Companion* by Larry Ambrose
4. *The Mentor's Guide: Facilitating Effective Learning Relationships* by Lois J. Zachary
5. *Manual for Mentors* by Susan Weinberger/Mentor Consulting Group
6. *Guidebook to Mentoring* by Susan Weinberger/Mentor Consulting Group
7. *My Mentor & Me: The Elementary School Years* by Mentor Consulting Group

8. *My Mentor & Me: the High School Years* by Mentor Consulting Group

9. *My Mentor & Me: The Middle School Years* by Mentor Consulting Group

1. Foundations of Successful Youth Mentoring: A Guidebook for Programme Development

National Mentoring Centre, 2003

This guide identified five separate, yet inter-related, categories of programme components as crucial to programme success and stability. They are:

(a) Strong Agency Capacity

Successful programmes not only focus on the design and delivery of mentoring services, but also the overall support and stability of the agency and the coordinated involvement of key stakeholders. By systematically building a strong agency capacity, supported by written plans, policies, and procedures, your volunteers are more likely to have a shared understanding of the long-term direction of your programme. These are the components that help develop the organisational foundation that your programme can build on.

- Written mission statement and a programme development plan
- Strong knowledge of mentoring and youth development research
- Written policy and procedure manual
- Access to training and technical assistance services
- Diversity of youth and community being served is reflected in the programme
- Qualified and trained staff
- Evidence of agency support (from board or parent agency)
- Community awareness of the programme

(b) Proven Programme Design

These are the components that make up the structure of your day-to-day operations based on evidence-based best practices. By implementing these programme design components, you are ensuring that your programme is safe, and that you are creating quality, effective matches between volunteers and youth.

- Written recruitment plan with multiple strategies
- Initial orientation for prospective mentors and mentees
- Established mentor/mentee intake procedures
- Appropriate mentor screening procedures
- Pre-match training for all new mentors and mentees
- Established matching procedure
- Established procedure for monitoring matches
- Support, ongoing training, and recognition for volunteers
- Established match closure procedure
- Stable and appropriate number of matches with a high retention rate

(c) Effective Community Partnerships

For your programme to be successful, you will need to have effective, formal collaboration with partner organisations, as well as collaborate and network informally with other local youth service organisations in the community. By forming these types of partnerships, your programme can enhance both the quality and scope of the

mentoring services you provide, and gain increased visibility, credibility, and presence in the community.

(d) Sustainable Resource Development

One of the biggest factors in making your programme a long-term success is the creation and implementation of a resource development plan. Successful programmes plan properly for long-term financial stability and take advantage of all the resources at their disposal. The following programme components can help you have a thorough understanding of your current resources and clear direction for seeking varying types of support that can keep your programme going in the future.

- Established Resource Development Committee
- Assessment of Internal Resources
- Assessment of External Resources
- Written Resource Development Plan

(e) Useful Programme Evaluation

Conducting an evaluation is one of the most valuable things a programme can do. It can help refine and improve services while also providing key information and statistics that can be used in marketing and increasing funding for the programme. By conducting an evaluation, your programme will operate more efficiently, gain increased marketability, and produce more positive outcomes for youth. The essential evaluation components are:

- Design and implementation of a local programme evaluation
- Use of evaluation data for programme enhancement

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2. Natural Mentoring Relationships in Adolescent Health: Evidence from a National Study

David L. DuBois and Naida Silverthorn, March 2005

Natural mentoring relationships positively impact teens, but these relationships do not meet all the needs of at-risk youth, according to a study by University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC) researchers. The study appeared in the March issue of the American Journal of Public Health.

"Unlike mentors who are assigned by a programme, natural mentors come from different areas of the young person's own life such as their extended family, neighbors, teachers, coaches, religious leaders and employers," said David DuBois, lead author of the study and associate professor of community health sciences in the UIC School of Public Health.

Using data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, the researchers found that more than 70 percent of those in the study reported a mentoring relationship with an adult. These relationships lasted an average of nine years. Mentors, such as teachers, were often important figures in the day-to-day lives of youth, which may be a factor in promoting positive outcomes, according to the researchers.

The study found that having a natural mentor was associated with:

- a greater likelihood of completing high school, attending college, and working at least 10 hours per week;

- a decreased likelihood of being in a gang and having physically hurt someone in a fight in the past year, as well as a lower level of risk taking;
- higher levels of self-esteem and life satisfaction; and
- a greater level of physical activity, as well as regular use of birth control.

However, there was no evidence that natural mentors have an impact on other outcomes, including binge drinking, drug use and smoking. The researchers noted that mentors may not have the ability to provide a high level of monitoring -- an important factor in preventing substance abuse -- when they have only periodic contact with teens. Mentors may also inadvertently model negative behaviors such as smoking or drinking. The study concluded that the benefits of having a mentor generally were not enough to outweigh the negative effects of different risk factors that many young people experience, such as poverty, unsafe neighbourhoods and troubled family relationships. "Our findings highlight the positive difference that a mentoring relationship can make in the life of a young person", DuBois said. "But they also tell us that we need to look at these relationships as only one part of the answer to the enormously challenging issue of how to ensure the health and success of our nation's young people." DuBois suggested that structured programmes and services for youth and natural mentoring should be woven together to make each more effective.

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3. School Based Mentoring

Public/Private Ventures, December 2004

School-based mentoring programs have become increasingly popular. Approximately 30 percent of mentoring programs are located in schools -- and such programmes are continuing to expand at an unprecedented rate.

Each programme is different, but most involve weekly, school-based meetings in which mentors and mentees engage in a range of academic and non-academic activities. Here, some of the advantages and disadvantages of school-based mentoring and the implications it has on the youth-serving sector are explored.

Advantages of school-based mentoring

(a) Reduced Cost

School-based programmes tend to be about half as costly per youth, even when adding the value of in-kind school contributions.

(b) Logistics

School-based programmes are able to capitalise on the knowledge, referrals, supervision, and support of the many adults who are already in the school setting. This simplifies the programme staff's task of forming and monitoring relationships.

(c) Student Benefits

When mentors are integrated into school environments, they are better able to advocate on their mentees' behalf. For example, they can speak directly with the mentees' teachers and resolve problems before those problems escalate. The school setting also brings academic issues to centrestage and provides a natural context for mentors to delve into school and learning issues.

(d) Mentors

School-based mentoring programmes tend to attract volunteers who -- by virtue of their jobs, families, age, or other circumstances -- are less likely to volunteer in community-based programme. For instance, because the weekly meetings between mentors and mentees typically occur on school grounds, many safety concerns are allayed. This is particularly true for older adults and others who may be concerned about their physical safety.

(e) Mentees

In addition to reaching more students, school-based mentoring programmes often reach different youth than those typically served by community-based programmes. School-based enrollment procedures are less involved, and thus, the programmes tend to reach youth who might never have made it to a community-based program -- i.e., those whose parents lack the time, energy or inclination to involve their child in more intensive mentoring. This implies that school-based mentoring might, in some cases, be reaching higher-risk children and families.

Possible Disadvantages of School-based mentoring**(a) Duration**

A downside of school-based programmes is their link to the academic calendar. Most programmes suspend or even terminate relationships during vacation months. This is shortsighted, particularly since programme effects tend to accrue with time, and many behavioral problems and difficulties arise during unstructured hours.

Because school-based matches are linked to particular schools, relationships are often terminated when students make transitions from one school to another. Terminations during school transitions are particularly troubling in light of the difficulties involved in making transitions to unfamiliar school settings.

(b) Intensity

Characteristically, school-based mentors have less time with their mentees. Mentor-youth meetings tend to be shorter and, overall, school-based mentors spend about half as much time with youth as community-based mentors. As school-based mentors tend to focus on school progress, it often comes at the expense of the kinds of social activities that help to build close bonds between mentors and mentees. Adolescents' needs for comfort and disclosure cannot always be contained neatly within the parameters of a class schedule. In addition, there are limits to what some youth will reveal in a public cafeteria or elsewhere on the school premises.

(c) Context

More commonly, the school collaborates with a community agency to operate the programme. The school provides the access to the children and the local organisation provides the volunteers and the administrative structure for the programme. Under these circumstances, school-based mentoring often depends on the cooperation and collaboration of teachers, staff and administrators at the school. Although many benefits can be gained from this sort of partnership, gaining acceptance from the necessary gatekeepers (principals, school board, etc) can take considerable time and persistence.

Implications

School-based mentoring programmes hold considerable promise. The school-based setting provides an invaluable infrastructure and school staff possess insights into youth's lives that can simplify the process of forming and monitoring relationships. At the same time, school-based mentoring has some disadvantages: setting constraints, a

strong focus on academics and the fact that it is linked to the academic calendar. These disadvantages may pose some barriers to establishing the same level of closeness between mentors and mentees as mentoring pairs enjoy in community-based mentoring programmes. Despite such challenges, school-based mentoring is a promising response to the infrastructure problems facing community-based programmes.

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4. Recruiting Mentors

Public/Private Venture, February 2001

Recruiting mentors is an ongoing challenge for almost all programmes. In most communities, there is increased competition for volunteers -- and especially for people who possess both the available time and the kinds of personal characteristics that are required of mentors. There are no easy solutions for the challenges of recruiting. However, a systematic recruitment plan, carefully developed and implemented, will increase the chances of success.

- (a) Identify characteristics of your programme that could positively or negatively affect your ability to recruit particular groups of mentors.
- (b) Identify the groups that are most likely to respond to your recruitment efforts, given the characteristics of your programme and the children or youth it serves.
- (c) Draw up a list of requirements and preferences for your mentors.
- (d) Think about what could motivate people to volunteer for your programme.
- (e) Write a mentor job description.
- (f) Create your recruitment message and materials.
- (g) Use a range of strategies to get out your message.
- (h) Forge linkages with organisations that can help you gain credibility with, and access to, the groups you are targeting for recruitment.

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5. Online Mentoring

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Online mentoring has taken off in recent years -- often as an adjunct to face-to-face meetings, but sometimes as the primary means of connecting caring adults with youth. Many online programmes are now in place, some of which are integrated into classrooms or after-school settings. Some focus on career or school outcomes, while others seek broader developmental goals.

Similarly, the format and duration of online programmes can vary widely. Whereas one programme might involve individual mentor/mentee matches that last for years, other programmes pair groups of mentors with entire classrooms for specific, time-limited activities. Depending on the type of mentoring programme, the mentors and mentees will have varying degrees of contact online.

This article aims help bring some perspective to online mentoring -- to explain what we currently know about the effectiveness, challenges and advantages of online mentoring.

Evaluation

From a study evaluating the effectiveness of online mentoring with youth, it was found that, though mentors made six-month commitments, only about half of the relationships lasted six or more months. This is cause for concern, as there is evidence that shorter-than-expected relationships can be detrimental.

Pre- and post-comparisons revealed that, over time, mentees reported:

- Receiving more emotional support from adults;
- Feeling more detached from school; and
- Expressing a greater willingness to consult with adults about college and jobs.

In interviews, mentors and mentees reported a range of benefits, including:

- Bolstering mentees' self-esteem, literacy and future orientation; and
- Bolstering mentors' sense of pride and understanding of young people.

Evidence from related fields provides grounds for cautious optimism about the potential of online mentoring.

Advantages of Online Mentoring

It appears that online mentoring offers important opportunities that are not afforded by exclusively face-to-face mentoring, while presenting several practical and ethical challenges.

(a) Access

By far, the biggest advantage of online mentoring is the freedom that it affords from the conventions of geography and time. By not constraining children and teens to pre-determined times to meet with their mentors each week, online mentoring can encourage the kinds of spontaneous disclosures that can build intimacy and trust in a relationship.

(b) An alternative mode of communicating

The Internet might be particularly appealing to youth who are too shy or withdrawn to reach out to the people around them. Youth who are less socially at ease, and have grown up with computers and the Internet, might feel more comfortable obtaining emotional support from the privacy of their computer terminal than in face-to-face interactions. One programme evaluation revealed many youth who preferred the semi-anonymous nature of e-mail, particularly in the beginning stages of the relationship.

(c) Decreased emphasis on demographics

An absence of social cues can sometimes be an advantage in relationship formation. People tend to form first impressions based on others' age, race, physical appearance, disabilities, etc. and these impressions can shape the rest of the relationship. By removing access to these superficial (but salient) characteristics, mentors and mentees can focus on other commonalities that might draw them together.

(d) Reduced costs

Because online mentoring requires no travel costs and fewer administrative amenities, it can connect volunteers and mentees at a fraction of the cost of face-to-face programs. Nonetheless, mentoring expert Judi Harris¹⁰ warns against underestimating the cost of online mentoring. Planning and promoting an online program, obtaining consultation, conducting evaluations, troubleshooting, etc., all cost money.

(e) Written record

There are many advantages to having a written record of the correspondence between mentors and mentees. These include providing a convenient way to supervise and monitor the relationship and creating a rich archive of data from which to conduct evaluations of mentoring process and outcome.

Challenges

Although the vast majority of the information about online mentoring focuses on the positive aspects, this strategy does pose some key challenges.

(a) Miscommunication

Online communication is considered by some to be a "cold" or "emotionally spare" medium that cannot support close relationships. Indeed, because it does not permit for voice tone or non-verbal forms of communication (e.g., smiles, pauses, body language), there appear to be missed opportunities for forging closer ties.

(b) Lack of programme development

A recent, large-scale survey by researchers at the University of Texas (Virtual Volunteers Project) pointed to a lack of expertise, materials and training to support the development and maintenance of online volunteering efforts. Site coordinators especially (e.g., the teachers, who were working onsite with mentees) rarely had sufficient training.

(c) Site coordinators:

- Tended to have little experience working with people online and more training in how to use the software than in how to implement and evaluate online activities; and
- Had insufficient knowledge of the best practices that have been identified in traditional mentoring programmes.

The researchers observed that there seemed to be a sense when programmes were launched that, as long as all mentors and [mentees] had computer and Internet access, positive and sustained mentoring relationships would naturally evolve.

(d) Issues of privacy, confidentiality and safety

E-mail and other forms of online mentoring create written records, which may inhibit mentors or mentees from making authentic disclosures. In many business cultures, where lawsuits and subpoenas are all too likely, adults are discouraged from making even benign statements that could be misinterpreted in the court of law.

Similarly, they might be less willing to self-disclose a mistake that they might have made in life (an important strategy for building trust with youth) because it creates a written record.

Perhaps the worst fear that any organisation has is the recruitment of mentors who will exploit children. This risk is small, and programmes that recruit volunteers through careful, face-to-face contact greatly reduce those risks.

(e) Trading strong ties for weak ties

There is some evidence that exclusively online relationships can compete with, and ultimately supplant, closer ties.

A recent study demonstrated that e-mail-only relationships were characteristic of what sociologists call weak ties (i.e., less contact and a more narrow focus, more superficial and easily broken bonds) as contrasted with strong ties (those characterized by frequent contact across many life areas, deep affection and mutual obligation). Strong ties are associated with better social and psychological outcomes. However, ongoing e-mail exchanges can eventually lead to stronger ties.

(f) Slower Progression

There is some evidence that online relationships are slower to progress than face-to-face relationships. This is because, in face-to-face relationships, individuals are able to draw on a wealth of information (e.g., race, age, physical appearance) to form impressions.

Perceived similarities can lead to positive first impressions and the perception of greater closeness, which forms the basis of subsequent encounters.

People are less inclined to make personal disclosures and share emotions over the Internet, tending to use e-mail for informational or more superficial communication, but then phoning or meeting others when they want to discuss something important.

(g) Additional skill and resource requirements

Online communication requires that both parties have access to a computer and the Internet. Computers and network breakdowns can prevent contact, reducing momentum in relationship building.

Particularly in low-income communities, there is less access to, and familiarity and comfort with, computers than in higher-income communities. This "digital divide," creates barriers to launching programs in neighborhoods or schools that need it most. Such youth depend on computer labs or other public settings that are often closed on nights, weekends and throughout the summer and holidays.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Whether online mentoring is used alone or as an adjunct to face-to-face meetings, one thing is certain—the building of a caring relationship is at the core of this endeavor. When programs are well-conceived, supported and structured, relationships stand a better chance of thriving. The following are recommendations for such to happen:

(a) Provide adequate training and support to site managers

Sustained site manager involvement (i.e., those adults who are onsite with the mentees) is a critical element to sustainable online mentoring programs, if not the primary element. Therefore, site managers need training in how to assess the progress of each relationship and how to help if a relationship is faltering.

(b) Training mentors and mentees in communicating effectively via e-mail

For mentees, this entails a willingness to write more than a few sentences. For adults, this could mean refraining from overwhelming their mentees with too much information. For both, it would mean being willing to correspond regularly and openly.

(c) Ongoing quality control

Programme coordinators need to establish a systematic method for checking in with the mentors to ensure that the e-mails are proceeding well; and provide ongoing information about the practices and policies of the programme (e.g., when/where to meet -- if the programme includes face-to-face contact -- and handling termination)

(d) Programme evaluation

There is an urgent need for empirically sound research and evaluations in this area. Researchers should:

-- Systematically compare programmes that vary in type, intensity, supervision, training, matching and length in order to provide a sound basis for decision-making in the field; and

-- Devise new ways to evaluate online mentoring programs because such programmes are often components of face-to-face mentoring and/or a broad array of services.

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