



THE PRACTICE, QUALITY, AND COST OF MENTORING

Editor's note: The article which follows is excerpted from the introduction to *Contemporary Issues in Mentoring* (1999), edited by Jean Baldwin Grossman and published by Public/Private Ventures. Chapter references in this article refer to this book. The entire volume is available for downloading or order from www.ppv.org or call (215) 557-4400.

Today mentoring has the limelight, having been widely accepted as a valuable activity for youth. There is solid evidence that well-run mentoring programs can change youth's trajectories, reduce drug and alcohol use, and improve academic behaviors. But good press, good intentions and ear nest desire alone will not enable mentoring to reach its full potential. We still have barriers to overcome and operational questions to answer:

- What are the essential elements of an effective mentoring program?
- How do you know and document a quality mentoring program when you see it?
- What does mentoring cost?
- Where do we find volunteers?

Just because a program proclaims it does mentoring does not mean it is effective. In fact, many mentoring programs do not even create many long-lasting relationships, let alone change youth's lives. Big Brothers Big Sisters, Sponsor-A-Scholar, and other mentoring programs have been shown effective. These programs can and should be expanded. But many localities have started and will continue to start their own mentoring programs. Local adaptation is often necessary if the program is to meet adequately the needs of the community. In addition, policymakers, funders and local operators often prefer to invent new programs rather than operate or expand a proven program. Thus, given that programs across the country vary in content and structure, it is important for program designers to know what program practices are essential to promoting and preserving the desired levels of effectiveness.

Surveying the literature on mentoring, Sipe (Chapter 1) finds that the studies all agree on critical program practices. She discusses the three areas that are essential to the success of any mentoring program:

screening, orientation and training, and support and supervision. The screening process provides programs with an opportunity to select those adults most likely to be successful as mentors by looking for volunteers who can realistically keep their commitments and who understand the need to earn the trust of their young mentee. Orientation and training ensure that youth and mentors share a common understanding of the adult's role and help mentors develop realistic expectations of what they can accomplish. Ongoing support and supervision of the matches help the pairs negotiate the inevitable bumps in the relationship so that they have a chance to develop rather than dissolve prematurely.

Sipe found that programs incorporating the three key elements created solid relationships, which in turn, relative to other similar youth, improved mentee's attitudes toward school and their future, and often improved their behavior and performance as well, regardless of the programs' explicit goals (i.e., improvement in academic performance, decrease in drug use, or friendship). The studies also show that these types of programs decreased their participants' antisocial behaviors, such as drug and alcohol use, relative to their peers. Mentoring programs missing one or more of the three critical elements had more difficulty establishing good relationships in large numbers and did not produce the positive effects of mentoring. Sipe also provides information of what it takes to be an effective mentor. Mentors need to be a steady and involved presence in the lives of the youth with whom they work; they need to respect the youth's views and desires; they need to become acquainted, but not overly involved, with the parent(s); and they need to seek and use advice and support from program staff. Echoing these results, Grossman and Johnson (Chapter 2) find more positive effects among pairs who interacted more frequently, in which the mentors sought the input of the youth, and in which the mentor did not take punitive approaches with the youth. Grossman and Johnson's study also reinforced the finding that durability and persistence of the relationship are important. Their results confirmed that the longer matches lasted, the more effects mentoring had; but matches that ended in less than three months harmed youth.

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How can local program staff determine for themselves (for programmatic reasons) and document for others (funders in particular) that they are effective? Local mentoring programs need measures and accountability techniques by which they can convincingly demonstrate that their programs produce positive effects. Without these measures, sustainable funding and program refinement becomes very difficult.

Grossman and Johnson discuss and provide three types of measures that mentoring programs can use to assess their own effectiveness: changes in participant outcomes, measures of effective relationships, and descriptions of participant characteristics. Directly measuring change in specific outcomes is what many think of as the only way to demonstrate program effectiveness. However, youth behaviors and attitudes change over time as a result of maturation, not just program effectiveness. In order to interpret changes in outcomes correctly, operators need to have examples of typical changes against which they can compare the changes they measure. Grossman and Johnson provide examples of these typical changes. In addition, the chapter provides program operators with other techniques with which to evaluate their programs, in particular, benchmarks of programmatic quality—which is often easier to measure—yet are empirically linked to impacts on academic behavior, initiation of drug and alcohol use, and self-esteem. These benchmarks include length of relationship, frequency of contact, and various measures of the quality of the relationship (as perceived by the youth and program staff).

How much does mentoring cost? While it appears to be relatively inexpensive for a social policy intervention, it is not free. Yet little is known about the cost of mentoring and how this relates to program features, such as overall size or whether group or one-on-one mentoring is offered. This crucial gap in knowledge seriously impedes discussions about expanding quality mentoring. Fountain and Arbretton's chapter on the cost of mentoring (Chapter 3) examines the cost of 52 mentoring programs and finds that the median cost of a one-on-one program is just over \$1,000 per year per youth, while the

median annual cost of a group program is just over \$400 per youth. They also find that costs per youth do not decrease with the size of the program but are relatively constant.

The cost figures are premised on receiving a large amount of volunteer time (from mentors). To enhance our understanding about how many adults mentor youth, who the mentors and their youth are, and why the volunteers got involved, The Commonwealth Fund commissioned a nationally representative survey of American adults. The chapter by McLearn, Colasanto, Schoen and Yellowitz Shapiro (Chapter 4) reports that approximately 6 percent of adults (about 12 million) mentor youth ages 10 to 18, most of them informally (outside of programs). Mentors tend to be somewhat more educated, to have somewhat more income, and to be more likely to have been mentored themselves as youth than are non-mentors. The youth who are mentored (both through programs and informally) come from all socioeconomic situations, but many of them are experiencing trouble. The last chapter in this volume (Chapter 5) highlights issues currently being faced by four exemplary programs. The common issues confronting these mentoring programs are maintenance or expansion of their programs, funding, recruitment of volunteers, and a system for continuing assessment of results, which is vital to success in attracting money and mentors. Chapter 5 describes what it is like to be involved with mentoring programs from the perspective of the youth, the mentors and the staff. It reflects the real world needs of programs for the type of information presented in this volume.

Mentoring has much going for it. It is simple and makes sense. It relies primarily on volunteers and thus is relatively inexpensive. And by drawing on individuals' best motives—to provide a helping hand to a child—and making links between people, it makes citizens more civilly concerned and engaged. But, as this volume points out, the full potential of mentoring will not be reached effortlessly. We need to be vigilant about providing adequate infrastructure and training in mentoring programs if they are to be an effective vehicle for voluntarism.