Recruiting and Retaining Mentors

July 2009

Mentors can change the lives of young people. A review of the literature on mentoring[1] concluded the following:

- Overall, youth participating in mentoring relationships improved on some important educational measures.

- Mentoring shows promise in helping youth develop healthy and safe behaviors.

- Mentoring improves a number of social and behavioral outcomes, although the effects are sometimes indirect.

Recruiting enthusiastic and appropriate adults as mentors is an important component of a successful mentoring program. Although finding appropriate candidates can seem daunting—as can retaining these volunteers once they have been trained and matched and are faced with the reality of mentoring—this publication will offer guidance and suggestions on how programs can effectively recruit, select, and retain mentors.

Recruiting Mentors

Identifying Potential Mentors

Successful mentoring requires a good fit between a youth (the mentee) and a mentor. The right match can help build a positive and productive relationship. Recruiting people who are the most appropriate mentors for youth in a mentoring program can provide a head start to creating effective mentor-mentee matches. There are a number of factors that should be considered when beginning recruitment efforts:

- **Gender.** Research shows that mentors are more effective when working with ayoung person of the same sex. Although there is a wide range of social styles among men and women, men tend to be activity-focused and goal-oriented, while women tend to focus on interpersonal aspects of relationships and exploring emotions[2]. It is often easier for women mentors to build trust with female mentees. And boys may benefit from having a positive male role model in their lives.

- **Race and Ethnicity.** Matching mentees and mentors by race can be controversial. On one hand, pairing youth with mentors of the same or similar ethnicity can help build a strong relationship based on mutual understanding, cultural identity, life experiences, and language. Yet there can be advantages to exposing young people to the perspectives of mentors with different life experiences. Research reveals that, ultimately, the personal qualities of mentors are more

important than racial or ethnic similarities. However, it is important to pair mentees who have very limited English-language skills with mentors who speak the mentees' native language.

- **Age.** One experienced director of a mentoring program reports that programs seeking mentors underutilize both baby boomers and college students[3]. Baby boomers are reaching retirement age and often still want to be active and serve their community. College students are closer in age to mentees and may share their interests and "language." College students also tend to have more free time than working adults as well as a youthful idealism that can contribute both to their willingness to be mentors as well as a positive relationship with youth. Arranging with institutions of higher education to provide college credit for mentoring can help recruit and retain college students as mentors. High school students can make good mentors for younger children. However, it is important that high school students who serve as mentors receive proper support and supervision from adults.

- **Socioeconomic class.** Recruiting volunteers who share mentees' life experiences can help establish rapport in the mentoring relationship. Establishing this rapport may be more difficult if the mentors and mentees are from dramatically different socioeconomic backgrounds. At the same time, experience shows that volunteerism rises with socioeconomic strata and that people with economic and educational advantages can be good mentors.

- **Recovering addicts or people with a criminal record.** Recovering addicts and individuals with criminal records can provide realistic role models for at-risk youth. They may be able to build a relationship with youth based on similar life experiences. They can show the mentees that people can overcome adversity and turn their lives around. However, recruiting and screening recovering addicts or those with criminal records must be done carefully to ensure that mentors are not a danger to youth and will provide mentees with a positive role model. Protecting youth must be an absolute priority.

Reaching Potential Mentors

People are more inclined to volunteer as mentors for a program if it has a solid reputation and enthusiastic support from the community. New programs need to build visibility and support. Established programs need to examine how they are perceived by the community and how they can market themselves in ways that will help them recruit mentors. Programs can use a number of local resources to build community support and recruit mentors. The most obvious of these resources are the agencies and organizations involved in SS/HS partnerships. There are a number of strategies that (1) can help you recruit mentors from the organizations represented in your partnership, (2) can be used by your partners to help you recruit mentors, and (3) can be used to recruit mentors from outside your partnership. These strategies include the following:

- **Word-of-mouth.** People are most likely to volunteer when asked by someone they know. Use personal contacts–family, friends, and colleagues–to recruit mentors. Encourage existing mentors to recruit their family and friends. People are more likely to volunteer if a friend or family member vouches for a program. And, because people often associate with people similar to themselves, strategic use of word-of-mouth by volunteers, staff, or partners can help reach a specific demographic you are trying to recruit.

- **Marketing materials.** Posters, brochures, and flyers can be used in conjunction with many of the strategies discussed here. They can also be displayed or distributed in local businesses, community centers, libraries, and other places frequented by the types of people you want to recruit.

- **Local leaders.** Leaders of local government agencies, businesses, faith organizations, professional associations, business associations, fraternal organizations, and other groups can provide access to their organizations and their membership. Or they may want to be mentors themselves. Meet with these leaders to educate them about your program, as well as your need for mentors. If appropriate, bring along current mentors, mentees, or members of your partnership who can speak about the benefits of mentoring, not just for the mentees but also for the mentors and the community.

- **Community organizations.** Making presentations before community organizations can be an effective way of recruiting. Again, if at all possible, bring along mentors and mentees to offer testimonials about the effects and importance of mentoring. If a mentoring program is new, use information from similar programs to illustrate the benefits of mentoring.

- **The media.** The local print and electronic media can be used to generate support for your program and recruit mentors. Write press releases, op-ed pieces, and letters to the local newspaper that extol the benefits of mentoring, highlight successes, and promote your program. Try to convince a media outlet to become a sponsor for your program and help you recruit members from its readers, listeners, or viewers. Seek out a journalist who covers social service issues or has a passion for youth, to champion your program. Journalists are especially interested in first-person stories, so be certain to involve a mentor and mentee when talking to reporters. Target the media outlets that reach the demographic you are trying to recruit as mentors.

- **Information tables.** Take advantage of local events by setting up information tables at street fairs, health fairs, sporting events, festivals, farmers' markets, and road races, as well as locations with heavy foot traffic from people you want to recruit, such as malls, shopping centers, or busy downtown areas. Use food or small incentives, such as mugs, pens, or Frisbees with the name of the mentoring program on it, to attract attention to your booth. Try to find local businesses to donate or pay for these incentives in exchange for having their name associated with a good cause.

- **The mail.** Create a mail campaign to reach the specific people you want to recruit. This can be done through Email or postal mail. Regular mail can be expensive. Piggy-backing a mailing on one done by a business or group who reach the people you want to recruit can both reduce your cost and provide credibility for your appeal. Companies that mail packets of coupons to specific communities may be willing to include your materials in their mailings.

- **The Internet.** People expect every organization to have a presence on the Web. If your SS/HS program does not have a Web site, you may be able to find a volunteer from one of your partnering organizations (or even a student) who can build one. Ask partner and community organizations representing the types of people you want to recruit as mentors to link your "call for mentors" portion of your Web site to their Web sites. If your organization cannot afford a basic Web site, you can use community blogs. Remember that sexual predators use the Internet and that an electronic contact should only be the first stage in recruiting mentors. Never post photographs, names, or any identifying information about mentees or mentors on the Web.

- **Community events.** Sponsor a recruitment drive kick-off event. Ask community leaders, mentors, and mentees to talk about mentoring.

- **Newsletters.** Putting announcements or short articles about your program in the newsletters of community organizations, municipal or county agencies, faith organizations, or other groups can also be an inexpensive method to recruit mentors.

Strategies involving these resources should to be tailored to the characteristics of the people whom you want to recruit. Think about where and how to reach them. What do they read? Where do they shop, work, and recreate? What community organizations do they join? And who in the community might be able to influence their decision? If you want to attract male mentors, then use men in publicity material, at presentations, and in testimonials. The same advice applies to recruiting mentors of a specific race or ethnicity.

Helping Potential Mentors Understand At-Risk Youth

People may assume that any child in need of a mentor is "bad" or "troubled." This misperception can hamper recruiting efforts. Recruiting efforts can take steps to make the children who will be mentored and the mentoring process itself seem less intimidating and less problematic to potential recruits. Strategies include the following:

- **Avoid negative labeling.** Try to avoid referring to the youth as "at-risk" before lay audiences.

- **Focus on transformative mentoring.** Describe the mentor's role as teaching skills such as problem-solving, decision-making, accessing community resources, and providing productive modeling and positive experiences to which the child can refer when faced with decisions. The mentor should not be described as having responsibility for changing the child's life.

- **Agency support.** Emphasize the support that your SS/HS program will provide to mentors. This includes training and supervision. Be explicit about what kinds of support the program will provide, such as coordinating schedules and activities for mentors and mentees.

- **Offer a variety of mentoring options.** Offering a short-term mentoring commitment will allow recruits to decide whether mentoring is right for them. Group mentoring, in which several mentors and mentees work together, may be less intimidating than individual one-on-one mentoring (although group mentoring has its own dynamics and challenges).

- Remind potential recruits that mentoring is often a **rewarding experience for the mentors.** While it is important to be honest about the challenges of mentoring, it is also important to remind potential recruits that the reason so many adults are volunteer mentors is because it is often a very rewarding experience.

Recruiting Men, Mentors of Color, and People in Rural Areas

Mentoring programs have found that recruiting men, mentors from racial and ethnic minorities, and people in rural areas can be challenging. There are, however, strategies to help meet these challenges.

Recruiting Men[4]

Some men may perceive mentoring to be "women's work." Mentoring may be more appealing to men if is masculinized. That can be done in a number of ways, including the following:

- Make men visible in the program, on publicity material, during presentations and recruitment drives, and at orientation and training sessions.

- Create a concrete picture of the mentoring relationship by tying it to activities such as basketball, fishing, chess, or working with computers, since men tend to be activity and goal-oriented in their relationships.

- Use language that appeals to men. Include words like "challenging," "satisfying," "results-oriented," and "hard work." Let them know they can "make a difference" in a person's life. Avoid terms like "nurturing" in favor of terms like "empowering."

- Recruit where men go. Make presentations at businesses with mostly male employees (such as police or fire departments); college fraternities; or meetings of social, fraternal, or service organizations (such as the Elks, Rotary, and Kiwanis). Set up information tables at sporting events or building supply stores.

- Ask men to become mentors. Don't wait for them to contact the agency. Phrasing the request as an invitation to "join" a cause can foster their sense of belonging and desire to be constructive.

- Offer a variety of mentoring options that match a range of personalities. Some men may be more comfortable meeting with youth in a group than one-on-one.

- Let men who are uncertain about becoming mentors shadow a successful mentormentee pairing or volunteer at mentoring-related events.

- Engage men quickly, while their interest is high. Once a man applies, screen and train him within a couple of weeks to ensure his interest does not wane.

Recruiting Mentors from Minority Communities[5]

Experience has shown that recruiting people (especially men) from minority ethnic or racial communities requires extra effort. Strategies that may help recruit mentors from these communities include the following:

- Develop connections to ethnic, religious, social, and professional organizations. They can help identify people in the community who might be willing to be mentors and lend their credibility to a program.

- Learn what has worked to recruit volunteers from the community by talking with local leaders and organizations (such as churches and the PTA).

- Create an advisory committee, including members who are leaders with respect and influence in the community from which you are trying to recruit mentors. Inviting elders is especially important to American Indians and other ethnic groups with a high respect for the authority of older people.

- Create a mentoring program reflective of the traditions, values, and beliefs of the culture of the mentees and mentors.

- Ensure that and marketing efforts are linguistically and culturally responsive. Hold meetings and presentations in familiar locations. Offer food and greet your potential recruits at the door to help build personal relationships.

- Collaborate with existing programs to gain entree into the community. Working with established organizations will help get buy in from community members.

- Acknowledge the racial and socioeconomic pressures that have created a shortage of minority mentors. Encourage and challenge people to support their communities. For instance, African American men have historically been marginalized, yet system involved boys need the help of committed, responsible African American adults from their community to help them.

- Use the media outlets that appeal to the particular group you are trying to attract. These may include ethnic or community newspapers and smaller radio stations playing a particular genre of music or broadcasting in the native language of the group from which you are trying to recruit.

Recruiting in Rural Areas

Rural areas pose special challenges for recruiting mentors. Distance and the lack of public transportation can complicate logistics. Some rural communities have cultural traditions of not interfering with other people's families, which can inhibit recruitment. Some strategies that can be helpful in rural communities include the following:

- Incorporate the local culture, values, and history into the recruiting effort 6.

- Be physically present in the community to provide information. Don't expect people to come to you. Go to popular coffee shops in the morning to talk with people over a cup of coffee[7].

- Help with transportation. Rural areas often lack public transportation. Providing gas money may be a key factor in recruiting mentors in low-income rural areas.

Retaining Mentors

Mentors who prematurely end a mentoring relationship may reinforce a youth's distrust of adults and adult institutions or damage a young person's self-esteem. Losing mentors, especially experienced mentors, reduces a program's capacity to serve youth because it requires time and resources to recruit, screen, and train new mentors. This publication offers guidance and suggestions on how programs can effectively recruit, select, and retain mentors. Strategies that can help your program retain mentors include the following:

- Selecting mentors who are right for the job

- Training mentors to be prepared for what can be a difficult relationship

- Appropriately matching mentors and mentees

- Supporting and supervising mentors

- Recognizing mentor's work

Selecting Mentors

The bridge between recruitment and retention is selection. A careful recruiting and screening process can help find people with personal characteristics that are a good fit for the youth in a mentoring program. This fit can help reduce mentor frustration with a sometimes demanding relationship and minimize mentor attrition.

Presenting an accurate portrayal of mentoring–including its rewards, frustrations, and obligations–can help deter people who may lack the disposition or patience necessary for the task. Recruiting mentors who share the language, culture, gender, and life experiences of the youth in your program can help create high-quality mentor-mentee matches and reduce tensions that can frustrate mentors.

Potential mentors should be carefully screened to ensure that they do not present a danger to youth. In addition to safeguarding the youth in a program, a thorough screening process can help assess whether potential mentors have the qualities and qualifications suitable for a mentoring relationship. Screening can help a program evaluate the commitment, attitude, and fit of those applying for positions as mentors. This screening process should also provide potential mentors with an accurate picture of the complexities they may encounter working with youth. Programs that are honest about these challenges during the recruitment and selection process are less likely to lose mentors later as when they encounter some of the frustrations of mentoring.

A face-to-face interview is an essential part of the screening process. A careful interview can help both the program and the potential mentor understand whether he or she is right for the role. This interview can also help with appropriately matching mentors with youth (discussed below), since it can provide insights into the mentors' personality and culture. Some programs involve youth in the screening process. Youth can be quite
perceptive about which adults will make good mentors. Being interviewed by youth will provide some idea of how well the interviewee relates to youth. It also affords the potential mentor a small taste of what lies ahead should he or she choose to become a mentor.

Issues to cover in the screening interview include the following:

- Motivation: Find out why a person is interested in becoming a mentor and what he or she hopes to gain from the experience.

- Time Commitment: Be frank about the time commitment. Be explicit about the schedule. Ask if and how the potential mentor's schedule can accommodate this commitment and if he or she anticipates any problems that might prevent him or her meeting such a commitment.

- Substance Abuse and Criminal History: Ask interviewees to describe their experiences with alcohol or drug dependence or involvement in criminal activities (if any). These lines of questioning are designed to understand how their experiences might affect (positively or negatively) their ability to mentor. Do not substitute this discussion for a thorough safety screening and background check.

- Experience with Adolescents: Discuss interviewees' prior experience working with young people of the age served by your program. Describe the problems they may encounter.

- Differences: Ask potential mentors how they feel about working with youth of a different race, culture, gender, or sexual orientation. If mentoring will occur in places other than the school, ask if there are areas of town in which they feel unsafe or uncomfortable.

Contacting a potential mentor's personal references is an important part of the safety screening process. These discussions can also help determine whether the individual is suited to mentoring. The following are some useful questions that you can ask of personal references:

- How long have they known the potential mentor and in what capacity?

- Have they observed the potential mentor interact with youth the age of those in your program? How were these interactions?

- Do they think the potential mentor can build a long-term relationship with youth?

- Do they have any hesitations in recommending this person as a mentor?

Training Mentors

Effective and realistic training is critical to a successful mentoring pairing and to retaining mentors. The better prepared mentors are to meet the complex relationships they may enter in upon, the more likely they are to stay with the program when challenges arise.

Mentor training needs to provide realistic expectations about the difficulties mentors may face, as well as concrete guidance in meeting these difficulties. Training can help mentors avoid being overly judgmental of, for example, their mentees' appearance, language, past behavior, or sexual relationships, and to use their position as a role model to help mentees make better choices. This can help avoid creating an antagonistic and stressful relationship between the mentor and mentee that can contribute to mentors leaving the program. Training topics that can help prevent mentor "burn-out" include the following:

- Limit setting

- Anger management

- Conflict resolution

- Problem-solving

- Interactions with the youth's family and other service providers

- Stress reduction

Matching Mentors and Mentees

A high-quality match between a mentor and a mentee can produce better outcomes for the mentee and make the mentoring experience easier and more rewarding for the mentor, thus promoting mentor retention. There are two common methods of matching mentees and mentors:

- Natural Matching: Natural matching allows the mentor and youth to select each other, often in the context of group or team activities that provide an opportunity for adults and youth to get to know each other and allow natural affinities to develop between individuals. In addition to providing a "good fit" between mentor and mentee, natural matching encourages ownership of the relationship by both the mentor and youth.

- Assigned Matches: Staff can match mentors and mentees on the basis of the youth's needs, the mentor's temperament and skills, and other factors, such as shared interests, race and ethnicity, and gender. Assigned matches take advantage of staff knowledge and experience, allow youth who might be more challenging to be matched with more experienced (and patient) mentors, and eliminate some of the tentativeness and randomness that can result from natural matching.

Matching methods can be combined. For example, a single-gender or single- ethnic group activity could be created to allow natural matches between mentors and mentees of the same gender or ethnic group.

Supporting and Supervising Mentors

All mentors require proper supervision and support in order to

- make certain that both the youth and mentor are fulfilling their obligations to the process

- provide the best possible experience for the youth

- ensure that the youth remains safe

- create a positive experience for the mentors that will reinforce their commitment to the process and the program

Supervision

Supervision can contribute to mentor retention by revealing when mentors need support or guidance to make their job easier or more effective. Such support can be critical, not only to the effectiveness of the mentor-mentee relationship but also to the continued motivation and commitment of the mentor. Research reveals that, for the development of skills like mentoring, ongoing coaching and supervision are more important than initial training. Regular contact between mentors and program staff also helps mentor-mentee matches develop into satisfying relationships.

Supervisory staff should have the ability, training, and opportunity to recognize warning signs that a mentor may be thinking about terminating the relationship. In addition to asking basic questions about what the mentor and mentee have been doing, supervisors should ask if they need any help or advice, or if there are things the mentee does that make the mentor feel uncomfortable.

The difficulties of mentoring may hide the progress that is being made or the benefits the relationship has for the youth. Youth might not always thank mentors–or they may express their gratitude in ways mentors do not understand. Supervisors or other mentors can provide the reinforcement and kudos that may not come from the mentees.

Expecting mentors to maintain structured records and document their activities holds them accountable and helps them focus on their mentoring role. This accountability can help ensure that time spent together is used productively. Maintaining records can also reinforce mentors' motivation by helping them reflect on the relevance of their work and its effect on youth.

Peer Support

Mentors can benefit from working with their peers in teams or pairs and from having the opportunity to discuss their experiences with their peers. This can help mentors understand that challenges stem from the sometimes difficult nature of the job and not their personal inadequacies. Peers can turn to each other for guidance and support (including transportation, logistics, and identifying opportunities for activities).

Crisis Support

Mentors need to know whom they can turn to for immediate help during a crisis. Providing mentors with access to crisis guidance can help them through challenging situations that may ultimately strengthen their relationship with the youth. Mentors need to know whom to call and that this support is part of the program. They should not feel that asking for help is an imposition or an indication that they are failing.

Rewards and Recognition

Rewards and recognition can help maintain morale and retain mentors. They are most beneficial when given genuinely and sparingly. The following are some ways to recognize mentors' efforts:

- Recognize their efforts publicly. Highlight their work on a program's Web site or at presentations or public events.

- Recognize their efforts within the program. Start a specific "mentor of the month" program or highlight the skills and experiences of specific mentors in trainings and meetings.

- Thank mentors personally and in writing.

- Solicit their feedback on the program and encourage them to participate in planning.

- Enlist them in recruitment and public outreach. Mentors may enjoy providing testimonials about their experience while recruiting additional mentors or generating support and resources for the program.

Conclusion

Recruiting and training mentors takes time and effort. By carefully selecting mentors, matching them with appropriate youth, and providing them with training, support, supervision, and recognition, a program can increase its ability to retain mentors.

References:

1. Jekielek, S., Moore, K., and Hair, E. "Mentoring Programs and Youth Development: A Synthesis". Washington, DC: *Child Trends*, 2002

2. *Spanning the Gender Gap in Mentoring*, by Jean Rhodes at Mentoring.org: http://www.mentoring.org/program_staff/research_corner spanning_the_gender_gap_in_mentoring.php?pid=1

3. Jarjoura, R, personal communication, June, 2007

4. This list relies upon information contained in "Getting Deep on Male Recruitment: An Interview with Richard Rowe", *The National Mentoring Center Bulletin*, July 2004; "Recruiting Male Volunteers", by Stephanie Blackman, *Corporation for National Service*, 1999; "Putting the Men Back in Mentoring" by Michael Garringer, *The National Mentoring Center Bulletin*, July 2004; "Spanning the Gender Gap", by Jean Rhodes at Mentoring.org, http://www.mentoring.org/program_staff/research_corner

spanning_the_gender_gap_in_mentoring.php?pid=1; "Recruiting Black and Latino Male Mentors", online forum 2/2/05, http://216.218.253.99 WebX?230@93.Kf4XaQWKhLP.15@.ee7c05f.

5. This list relies upon information from "Mentoring Resource Center Case Study Series", *The Mentoring Resource Center*, 2005, p.3; "Getting Deep on Male Recruitment: An Interview with Richard Rowe", *The National Mentoring Center Bulletin*, July 2004, p.11; "Latino Outreach Programs: Why They Need to Be Different", by Beverly Hobbs, *Journal of Extension*, August 2004; Recruiting Black and Latino Male Mentors, online forum 2/2/05, http://216.218.253.99/WebX?230@93.Kf4XaQWKhLP.15@.ee7c05f.

6. "Mentoring Resource Center Case Study Series", *The Mentoring Resource Center*, 2005, p. 6.

7. Online forum on recruiting 1/31/05, 5/10/06.