



Research to Practice

Series II: Academic Support

Paper No. 1

Mentoring and College Readiness: Research Evidence and Implications

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Comprehensive mentoring is one of The GEAR UP student and family services mandated by the Higher Education Opportunity Act (HEOA) and reported on annually in the Annual Performance Report (APR) to the U.S. Department of Education. As part of the Research to Practice Series, this paper summarizes research-based practices for implementing comprehensive mentoring.

Definition for Comprehensive Mentoring

According to the common service definitions developed by College and Career Readiness Evaluation Consortium (CCREC), comprehensive mentoring is defined in the following manner (p. 4).

Comprehensive mentoring services are provided when GEAR UP staff, teachers, or other school staff identifies students who would benefit from an ongoing supportive relationship with a trained, caring adult or older student, i.e., “mentor.” Mentors meet regularly with their assigned student(s). Meetings may be on or off campus and either during or outside of the school day. Typical issues addressed during mentoring meetings include academic, social, organization or life skill development. Per the 2008 HEOA, comprehensive mentoring must provide students with financial aid information, and encourage

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students to stay in school, enroll in rigorous and challenging coursework, apply for postsecondary education, and, if applicable, the GEAR UP scholarship.

Virtual comprehensive mentoring: Virtual comprehensive mentoring includes services that are provided via remote access through the internet or other means.

Mentoring Programs may include:

- *Traditional mentoring programs that match one youth and one adult.*
- *Group mentoring that links one adult with a small group of young people.*
- *Team mentoring that involves several adults working with small groups of young people, ideally with a ratio of no more than four youth to one adult.*
- *Peer mentoring that connects caring youth with other adolescents.*
- *E-mentoring that functions via email and the internet.*

Similar to other definitions for mentoring in the literature (Rhodes, 1994), this definition indicates that mentoring can occur in several different ways, including both face-face and virtual mentoring. The key element, however, appears to be a sustained personal relationship between a mentor and a mentee that is designed to help the mentee succeed in school by using the mentor's greater experience, influence, or achievement in a particular area (Jacobi, 1991).

How Might Mentoring Help Promote College-Readiness?

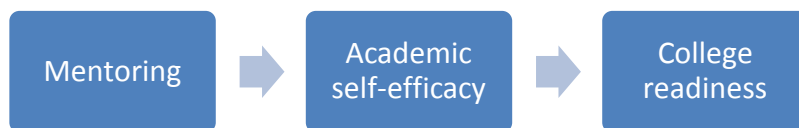
Students' academic achievement during high school is a strong predictor of college readiness as measured by college GPA and college retention (Robbins et al., 2004). Unfortunately, school-based mentoring during elementary and secondary education may not directly promote mentees' academic achievement (Wheeler, Keller, & Dubois, 2010). It is still possible, however, that mentoring prepares mentees for college through an indirect pathway. Effectively designed mentoring programs have been found to be beneficial in building mentees' self-reported academic competence, or academic self-efficacy, along with other desirable outcomes (including improved attitudes toward school, increasing school attendance, and promoting connectedness with peers and better family relationships)

The key element of mentoring is a sustained personal relationship between a mentor and a mentee that is designed to help the mentee succeed in school by using the mentor's greater experience, influence, or achievement in a particular area.

(DuBois, Holloway, Valentine, & Cooper, 2002; Eby, Allen, Evans, Ng, & Dubois, 2008; Wheeler, Keller, & Dubois, 2010).

Among the variables that may have an indirect effect on college readiness, academic self-efficacy may be particularly important. Academic self-efficacy has been found to be a strong predictor of college success (Richardson, Abraham, & Bond, 2012; Robbins et al., 2004). For example, Robbins et al. (2004) found that for students with similar high-school GPA, ACT scores, and social economic status, those with higher academic self-efficacy achieved a higher college GPA and were more likely to re-enroll the following semester than those with a lower academic self-efficacy. Therefore, mentoring could have an indirect effect on mentees' academic performance in college by building up mentees' academic self-efficacy (See *Figure 1*). Readers are also invited to read the *Research to Practice* paper on how increase adolescents' academic self-efficacy.

Figure 1 A Possible Pathway of Mentoring Increasing College-Readiness



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What are research-based recommendations for enhancing the effectiveness of mentoring?

Effective mentoring programs are designed with the understanding that a strong bond between the mentor and the mentee is essential for program success. To be effective, the mentor needs to develop a trusting relationship with the mentee (DuBois, Neville, Parra, & Pugh-Lilly, 2002). In addition, effective mentoring programs also include certain structural elements that are associated with successful mentoring approaches.

Build a Developmental Mentoring Relationship between the Mentor and Mentee

Mentoring programs typically have instrumental program goals. For example, Arizona GEAR UP III's primary goal is to enhance its students' college and career readiness. A mentor talking with his or her mentee exclusively about how to prepare for college or how to choose an ideal job may not effectively reach that goal. Along with a focus on the instrumental goals, the mentor also needs to build a developmental relationship with the mentee. A **developmental**

relationship is characterized by a relationship-building approach in which a mentor focuses on building a reliable connection with a mentee and by adjusting the expectations of the relationship according to the mentee's needs. Based on findings from the research on the Big Brother Big Sister Program (Morrow & Styles, 1995), mentors cultivate a developmental relationship by doing the following: a) being patient enough to earn trust from the mentee, b) spending more time listening to the mentee than expressing themselves, c) expressing compassion rather than judging the mentee when the mentee expresses upset feelings or opinions, d) considering the mentee's needs for entertainment when planning activities, and e) making decisions with rather than for the mentee.

In contrast with a developmental relationship, a mentor eager to reach program goals without establishing a solid relationship with the mentee may form a **prescriptive relationship**. His or her expectations for the mentee tend to be fixed regardless of the mentee's changing needs. Research has found that developmental relationships last longer and are more satisfying than prescriptive relationships (Morrow & Styles, 1995).

Provide Programmatic Support for Mentoring

Research has indicated that certain mentoring program design and implementation features maximize programmatic impact on youth (MENTOR, 2009). These research-supported program features are: parental involvement, setting expectation of the relationship duration and contact frequency, providing ongoing support to the mentor and mentee, offering training to mentors, recommending or hosting activities for the mentor and mentee, as well as conducting program monitoring and supervision (DuBois et al., 2002; see *Figure 2*). Recommendations are also made about how to prevent mentor attrition and how to match mentors with mentees based on research findings.

Parental involvement. Research indicates that parental involvement can enhance the efficacy of mentoring programs (Rhodes, Grossman, & Resch, 2000; DuBois et al, 2002). Examples of practices that may improve parents' involvement include, but not limited to, requiring parents to complete a program application, asking parent permission for and commitment to a one-year relationship between their child and the mentor, inviting parents to orientations, conducting regular check-ins with parents when applicable, and providing mentors guidelines to deal with their relationship with mentees' parents.

A developmental relationship is characterized by a relationship-building approach in which a mentor focuses on building a reliable connection with a mentee and by adjusting the expectations of the relationship according to the mentee's needs.

Expectations for contact frequency and relationship duration.

Setting the expectations for contact frequency and length of relationship is beneficial for mentees (Rhodes & Lowe, 2008). Mentors and mentees should agree to commit are committed to a relationship with a minimum frequency of contact over a certain duration (MENTOR, 2009). Grossman & Rhodes (2002) found that mentoring relationships that last for at least one year lead to more positive program outcomes. Meanwhile, no closeness of the relationship can be developed without regular contact between the mentor and mentee.

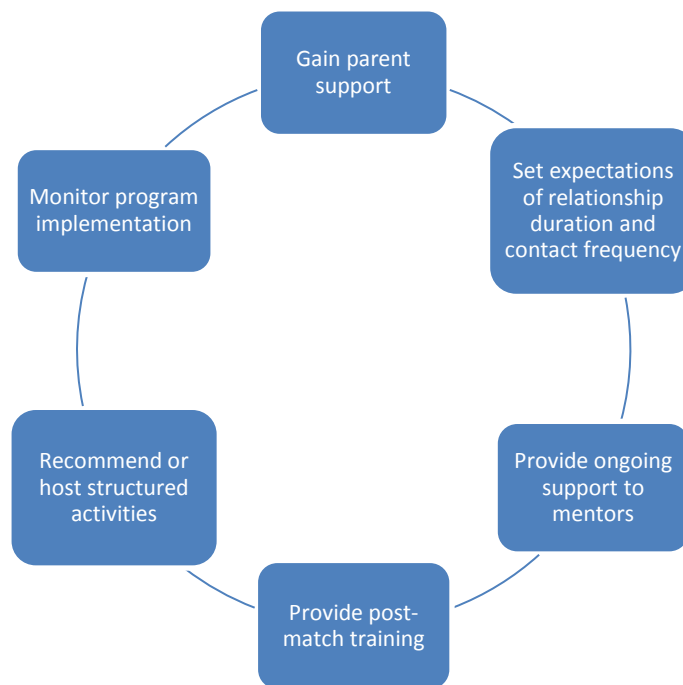
Ongoing support for mentors. Providing ongoing support for mentors is another key program feature that enhances program effectiveness (DuBois et al, 2002; Sipe, 1996). Ongoing mentor support can provide timely guidance for mentors and may be able to address future, unforeseen concerns and problems (MENTOR, 2009). This support can be in the form of periodic meetings between mentors and supervisors to discuss emerging issues.

Mentor training. Mentor training, especially post-match training, is another determinant of program success (DuBois et al, 2002; Sipe, 1996). When deciding what to include in training for mentors, consider the goals for mentoring. For example, if the goal is to improve academic performance, then it may make sense to include some training or support materials about tutoring. If the goal is to improve students' self-efficacy for postsecondary education, then provide training on how to give appropriate feedback on mentees' ability, on how help mentees attribute performance to their efforts rather than ability, and how to help mentees set goals and monitor their progress (Schunk, 1991). If mentor-mentee matches involve mentors and mentees with from different demographic backgrounds, it may be helpful to train mentors to be aware of cultural differences and how to avoid cultural misunderstanding (Sipe, 1996).

Structured activities. Structured activities for mentors and mentees may foster closer relationships (DuBois et al, 2002). This involves both program-hosted activities or providing mentors with lists of low-cost activities that meet the program needs. Rhodes and Lowe (2008) suggested that connecting mentoring programs with other youth settings such as athletic events may help mentors and mentees develop close relationships naturally.

Monitoring of program implementation. Program monitoring adds to program effectiveness (DuBois, Holloway, et al., 2002). Effective program monitoring may include supervising mentoring activities and program facilities, monthly and weekly check-ins with mentors and mentees, and tracking program activities. Also, tracking training implementation allows program to discover drawbacks in case of unsatisfying program outcomes and it allows for reflection about practices (Rhodes & Lowe, 2008).

Figure 2 Program Characteristics that Maximize Mentoring Effects



Given the limitation of program resources, it is recommended that programs give priority to the above six research-supported program characteristics. In addition, research indicated two strategies that may reduce program resources: allocating less time on mentor-mentee matching and preventing mentor attrition.

Matching mentors with mentees. Practitioners match mentor and mentees based on various factors such as gender, race, interest, family structure, personality, etc. However, research findings are mixed on the relationships between the use of matching criteria and improved mentor/mentee relationships and more positive program outcomes (P/PV, 2002). DuBois et al.'s (2002) analysis found no significant effect of matching on program outcomes. For example, same-race matches may not produce more program success than cross-race matches. Given these inconsistent findings, some programs may adopt the criteria that there are at least some

similarities between the mentor and mentee, regardless if it is based on common interests or special needs of the youth. To avoid such complexity, some other programs use a “natural” matching approach allowing prospective mentors and mentees form the relationship by their own during the activities organized by the program.

Preventing mentor attrition. Mentor attrition not only increases program supervisors’ workload, but also potentially causes frustration for mentees who are in a life stage when acceptance/rejection by others matters more than in any other life period. Reasons for premature closure vary from practical challenges (e.g., geographic distance or no access to internet) to frictions between the mentor and mentee (Grossman & Rhodes, 2002). To prevent mentor attrition, programs should carefully screen out applicants who have limited time and energy available for the mentee. To foster the mentor-mentee relationship during the initial stages of the relationship when the mentor-mentee bond is fragile, program staff may check-in more frequently than usual to address obstacles that impede relationship development. In this sense, previously mentioned program features, such as effective mentor training, ongoing support to the matches, providing structured activities, and gaining support from parents may all contribute to preventing the relationship from ending prematurely.

Recommendations for Research

Although existing research has found a broad range of academic and nonacademic positive outcomes of mentoring and theories have been developed to explain the mechanism that connects program features to outcomes, evidence is lacking that links the outcomes of school-based mentoring during secondary education to college-readiness indicators. This may be caused by the difficulties involved in tracking mentees from secondary schools to post-secondary stages. However, due to the prevalence of the mentoring component in various college preparatory programs, it would be worthwhile to test the effect of mentoring on college readiness, as well as identifying critical mentoring components that specifically address college-readiness. Understanding the relationship between program implementation and college- and career- readiness, which is the ultimate goal for these programs, can help programs efficiently leverage resources and discover avenues for program improvement.

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A Checklist for Implementing a Successful Mentoring Program

For mentors:

- ☐ Be patient enough to earn trust from your mentee.
- ☐ Spend more time listening than talking.
- ☐ Express compassion and never judge your mentee when he or she feels upset.
- ☐ Try to plan activities that both you and the mentee will enjoy.
- ☐ Make decisions with, rather than, for mentees.
- ☐ Please check here for the five ethical principles guiding the mentoring relationships (MENTOR, 2011) www.mentoring.org/downloads/mentoring_1335.pdf

For program practitioners:

- ☐ Screen out candidates who have limited time energy available for the mentee.
- ☐ Set expectations for contact frequency and relationship duration.
- ☐ Gain buy-ins from parents. You can do this by having them to fill out a program application that asks for their permission and commitment to a one-year/semester relationship between their child and the mentor, inviting parents to orientations, and/or conducting regular check-ins with parents.
- ☐ Provide ongoing support to mentors by regular check-ins with mentors and mentees, especially during the initial stages of the relationship.
- ☐ Provide after-match training tailored by program goals and mentors' needs.
- ☐ Host structured activities or offer a list of low-cost activities to mentors and mentees to foster their relationship development.
- ☐ Monitor program implementation regularly.
- ☐ To help mentees go to college, it would be beneficial to emphasize on promoting mentees' perceived scholastic efficacy.
- ☐ Matching mentors with mentees may be not as important as other tasks in terms of its effectiveness on mentoring program.
- ☐ Programs using e-mentoring shall be aware that there are limited evaluations examining the effectiveness of e-mentoring. E-Mentoring may add accessibility for mentors who have a busy schedule and are qualified in using the technology but may also bring challenges to mentors or mentees who don't have easy access to Internet. Also concerned was that some mentors feel uncomfortable writing emails to talk with mentees. In e-mentoring, writing communication skills may be more important than oral communication skills. Thus, the screening process shall evaluate mentors' writing communications.