Mentoring & Tutoring: Partnership in Learning

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Evaluation of a University-Based Mentoring Program: Mentors’ Perspectives on a Service-Learning Experience

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Researchers in the educational field have investigated how a caring adult can best provide mentoring support to youth placed at risk and what functions a mentoring program should serve to promote healthy mentoring relationships. However, the perspective of mentors rarely has been sought to elicit their evaluation of a mentoring program or recommendations for programmatic change. The purpose of this article was to investigate the views of university students serving as mentors in high-need high schools or community centers. We asked 49 students, primarily undergraduates across a range of liberal arts disciplines, who were participating in a university-based service-learning mentoring program for youth attending high-poverty high schools: (a) what activities they engaged in with mentees, (b) how they benefited from the mentoring program, and (c) how they perceived the program and what recommendations they had for change. Findings revealed specific suggestions that mentoring program coordinators can adopt to address mentors’ concerns and promote sustained, durable mentoring relationships for youth.

Keywords: high-poverty youth, university-based mentoring, mentor perspectives, service-learning

Since the mid-1980s, mentoring programs that address the healthy development of youth have increased exponentially both in the US and internationally (e.g., Colley, 2003; Evans, 2005; Fresko & Wertheim, 2006; Rhodes & DuBois, 2006) in part due to increasing global poverty rates (Chen & Ravallion, 2009). Youth from high-poverty backgrounds and those who face challenging home, school, or neighborhood environments seem particularly amenable to the potential benefits of mentoring (Diversi & Mecham, 2005; DuBois, Holloway, Valentine, & Cooper, 2002; Parsons, 2005). For example, mentoring youth placed at-risk is associated with decreased substance abuse,
teen pregnancy, violence toward others, and gang activity (Dappen & Isernhagen, 2006; Larson, 2006). Youth living in poverty are also reported to have greater confidence and improved academic performance at school, and stronger peer and family relationships as a result of mentoring (Jekielek, Moore, Hair, & Scarupa, 2002; Rhodes, 2002; Sipe, 2002). Although the practice of mentoring dates back to ancient Greece and has long been used in professional development and workplace relationships, the introduction of mentoring to address the needs of youth placed at risk is relatively new. Research over the past 15 years has addressed issues such as how a caring adult can best provide support to youth via a mentoring relationship and what functions a mentoring program should serve to promote healthy mentoring relationships (Spencer, 2007; Wandersman et al., 2006).

Although the effects of mentoring on youth have been studied considerably, limited research exists on what mentors expect from a mentoring relationship or what type of training or support they seek from a mentoring program (Cox, 2005; Evans, 2005; Schmidt, Marks, & Derrico, 2004). This research gap coincides with an internationally identified need to increase recruitment and retention of mentors (Parsons, 2005; Wandersman et al., 2006). Unfortunately, over half of mentoring relationships terminate early, with the majority averaging three months or less (Grossman & Rhodes, 2002; Karcher, Kuperminc, Portwood, Sipe, & Taylor, 2005).

Several researchers have asked mentors to identify challenges that may lead to the early termination of a mentoring relationship. For example, Spencer (2007) interviewed 20 mentors in the US whose relationships with their mentees ended prematurely before the one-year commitment required by a community-based mentoring program was achieved. Mentors identified unmet expectations, seemingly unmotivated mentees, cultural differences, time commitments, and inadequate support from program staff as the main reasons for relationship failures. Likewise, Evans (2005) surveyed 49 community-based mentors of youth from high-poverty backgrounds in the UK. Respondents identified unmet expectations, unclear goals for the relationship, and communication barriers as factors in the premature termination of mentoring relationships. To alleviate challenges that might lead to early relationship closures, respondents recommended mentor training, opportunities to reflect on mentoring experiences, and ongoing feedback and support.

**Mentoring Through Service-Learning**

The need for training, ongoing support, and opportunities to reflect reported by mentors participating in failed mentoring relationships may be addressed via university-based, service-learning mentoring programs. *Service-learning* is designed as a reciprocal relationship in which students address a community
need, increase their civic engagement, and foster their social awareness by reflecting on their service activity (Einfield & Collins, 2008; Schmidt et al., 2004). By providing service in the community and reflecting on their experiences in combination with academic study in class, students theoretically deepen their awareness of social issues and concern for social justice (Bordelon & Phillips, 2006). University students enrolled in a service-learning mentoring course are likely to be trained and receive ongoing support and supervision in class and at their off-campus sites, which may address concerns regarding lack of training and support reported by mentors in previous studies (e.g., Spencer, 2007). Because service learning may promote community involvement even after a course ends (Vogelgesang & Astin, 2000), long-term engagement in a mentoring relationship by service-learning students may be enhanced. Further, because university students are typically close in age to high school youth and not far temporally from their own adolescence, they may be natural mentors for at-risk youth.

Finally, college courses that incorporate mentoring of at-risk youth likely address in class the dynamics of social inequities and the effects of poverty on families and youth, helping mentors better understand their mentees’ backgrounds and cultural differences. For example, a mentor from a middle class or affluent background initially may be appalled by a low-income youth’s limited academic performance and feel tempted to blame poor grades or limited skills on laziness or disinterest. However, via class content and discussion combined with ongoing mentoring, a university mentor may become aware of the cumulative effect of poor nutrition, family mobility, inadequate instruction, and limited school resources on a mentee. A mentor may then begin to realize the differences in privilege and opportunities available to the youth and those typical of the mentor’s own life (Hughes, Welsh, Mayer, Bolay, & Southard, 2009). This expanded social awareness may prompt the mentor to challenge his or her own stereotypes about youth from high-poverty backgrounds, instead advocating for societal change and collective action (Dunlap, Scoggin, Green, & Devi, 2007; Fresko & Wertheim, 2006; McHatton, Thomas, & Lehman, 2006).

Despite the potential benefits of service-learning mentoring programs, few published studies examine the effects of university-based, service-learning mentoring programs for at-risk youth. These provide limited information on the content of the service-learning course or the mentoring process itself (e.g., DuBois & Neville, 1997; Schmidt et al., 2004). For example, DuBois and Neville (1997) examined the relation between characteristics of mentor-mentee relationships and mentors’ ratings of perceived benefits for youth. However, information on content of the service-learning course was not reported, nor was where or what mentoring activities occurred. Schmidt et al. (2004) reported that students in a university-based, service-learning course mentored low-income students in the community. Mentors and their mentees were expected to meet weekly; however, no information was provided on mentor training, the support received, or activities engaged in during mentoring interactions.
In order to address limitations in the literature base on service-learning mentoring programs and to learn more about what works to make a mentoring program effective, we sought the input of mentors themselves. Rarely has the perspective of mentors been sought to obtain their evaluation of a mentoring program or their recommendations for programmatic change (Cox, 2005; Rhodes & DuBois, 2006; Rockquemore & Schaffer, 2000). Further, limited information is provided in previous studies on what activities actually occurred during mentoring experiences or what benefits participants reported having gained from mentoring. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to ask students participating in a university-based service-learning youth mentoring program the following:

(a) what activities they engaged in with mentees,
(b) how they benefited from the mentoring program, and
(c) how they viewed the program and what recommendations they had for change.

Method

University-Based Service-Learning Course

The service-learning program in this study was an elective course titled “High-Poverty Youth: Improving Outcomes” taught at a private university in a large metropolitan city in southeastern US. The purpose of the course was to improve outcomes for youth attending high-poverty high schools through mentoring and to increase participating university students’ awareness of: (a) the effects of poverty on youth, and (b) economic disparities across neighborhoods, schools, races, and ethnicities.

Mentor Participants

All 49 students enrolled in the class during the first two semesters the class was offered consented to participate in the study (freshmen = 5, sophomores = 15, juniors = 7, seniors = 16, graduate students = 6). Most (42) were female (35 White, 4 Black, and 3 Hispanic), while 7 were male (5 Black and 2 White). The majority of students reported having prior community service experience, although none had previously mentored a youth.

Mentee Participants and Settings

Mentees in the program attended one of two comprehensive high schools in the local metropolitan school district of 75,000 students. Both schools served students from high-poverty neighborhoods (90% or greater free or reduced lunch eligibility). High School A had a graduation rate of 42% and enrolled
1267 students, of which 78% were Black, 19% White, and 3% other ethnicities. High School B had a graduation rate of 50% and an enrollment of 1407; 70% of students were Black, 23% White, 5% Hispanic, and 2% Asian. Both schools were identified as “needing improvement” based on No Child Left Behind (NCLB) dictates in response to low graduation rates and test scores. Eighty percent of residents in the students’ neighborhood were Black, 40% were unemployed, and 44% of families lived below the poverty level, typically in a household headed by a single female who was receiving or previously received public assistance (US Census Bureau, 2006).

**Mentoring Program**

The program combined many of the recommended practices found in the literature (e.g., ongoing support and training for mentors, frequent contact with mentees, formative program evaluation) (DuBois et al., 2002; Wandersman et al., 2002), as summarized below:

- During the 16-week-long semester, students met in class twice weekly and *mentored high school students once or twice per week for a minimum of 22 hours over the semester*. Thirty-three students (67%) mentored in their mentees’ high schools during school hours and 16 (33%) mentored in their mentees’ neighborhood community center after-school programs. Students were assigned to a high school or community center based on preferences and class scheduling. With parent permission, some students also spent additional time with mentees in the community (e.g., eating out, going to the mall, engaging in recreational or sports activities).

- Students were not matched with a designated mentee on-site; instead, they were expected to spend time for the first one to two weeks on-site to determine with whom they naturally bonded and to develop a mentoring relationship with that individual, as recommended by Cox (2005). Consequently, although most students mentored one mentee, some students mentored more than one.

- During class meetings, the instructor facilitated discussions on readings, videos, or speakers that addressed racial segregation, White privilege, poverty, unemployment, the working poor, high school dropout, and related topics.

- Participants were required to complete ongoing reflective journals and share their experiences in classroom discussions and focus groups. Students received ongoing support from the instructor in class, at their sites, and via e-mail.

- Mentoring activities, as identified in students’ journals, included befriending, tutoring, supporting, advising, assisting in the college access process, socializing in the community, e-mailing, phoning, and text-messaging.
Data Collection
At the end of the semester, mentors were asked to reflect in writing on their mentoring experiences and the mentoring program itself. Using an open-ended format, students responded to three questions:

(a) describe the activities you did with your mentee,
(b) evaluate the benefits to you, as mentor, and
(c) describe what you would keep or change about the program or do differently yourself.

The course instructor (the first author) explained to the students that the purpose of the activity was to summarize their weekly journal reflections throughout the semester and to provide input on the mentoring program and recommendations for improving it in the future. Since students were informed that their grades had already been decided for the class, they were aware that their grade in the class was not dependent upon their responses.

Data Analysis
The content-comparison method (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) was used to identify emergent categories across all 49 students’ responses, as follows. First, the third author and another researcher (who were not class instructors or involved in the mentoring program) independently categorized responses to each question into provisional categories based on similarity of meaning. Responses (generally lengthy paragraphs) could be sub-divided into more than one category. All responses were included (i.e., none were judged to be irrelevant or unimportant). Second, classifications of categories were then compared, contrasted, and revised. Based on agreement among researchers, definitions of categories and rules for inclusion were developed. This process resulted in a total of 17 categories of responses across questions. Third, responses were independently reassigned to the revised categories by the second author (not class instructor or involved in the mentoring program) and findings were compared until consensus among researchers was reached. At no time was the course instructor involved in data analysis.

Inter-rater Agreement
We calculated inter-rater agreement to determine percentage agreement of classification of responses to categories. The second and third authors independently classified responses per question, and compared results to determine agreement by dividing total number of agreements of classification by total number of agreements plus disagreements. Mean agreement was 95.5% for mentoring activities, 97.2% for benefits to mentors, and 93.3% for proposed changes.
Results
We asked 49 students who had participated for one semester in a university-based, service-learning mentoring program to reflect on their mentoring experiences and the mentoring program itself by responding in writing to three open-ended questions. We divided 507 responses into categories by question (i.e., your mentoring activities, benefits to you, changes to the mentoring program or yourself). The total number of responses obtained is listed per question and category (with percentage) as shown in Table 1. Findings are next discussed by question and category and illustrated by representative examples of individual students’ actual written responses.

Mentoring Activities
When asked to describe their mentoring activities with their mentees during the semester, students wrote a total of 182 comments that fell into three major categories: participating in social activities ($n = 91; 50\%$), providing academic support ($n = 45; 25\%$), and assisting with college preparation ($n = 41; 23\%$).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question and category</th>
<th>$f(%)$ of Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Mentoring activities</td>
<td>Total=182</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participating in social activities</td>
<td>91(50)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Providing academic support</td>
<td>45(25)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assisting with college preparation</td>
<td>41(23)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working with staff</td>
<td>3 (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviewing mentees</td>
<td>2 (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Benefits to mentors</td>
<td>Total=182</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gaining an understanding of the challenges of poverty</td>
<td>71(39)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enhancing character and professional development</td>
<td>50(27)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forming relationships</td>
<td>39(22)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appreciating own life experiences and reevaluating priorities</td>
<td>22(12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Changes to the mentoring program or self</td>
<td>Total=143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Altering personal approach to mentoring</td>
<td>41(29)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Revising the mentoring program</td>
<td>29(20)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assigning mentees and mentoring sites</td>
<td>28(20)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Establishing explicit goals for mentoring</td>
<td>15(10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improving mentoring sites</td>
<td>14(10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Requesting more support from mentoring sites and families</td>
<td>12 (8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No changes should be made</td>
<td>3(2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More credit hours should be given</td>
<td>1(1)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Grand Total = 507**

*Note.* Percentages were calculated per question and were rounded to the nearest whole number.
support \( (n = 45; 25\%) \), and assisting with college preparation \( (n = 41; 23\%) \). In addition, students reported working with staff \( (n = 3; 1\%) \) and interviewing mentees for a class project \( (n = 2; 1\%) \).

**Participating in social activities.** Students reported that one-half of their mentoring activities comprised engaging in social activities with their mentees. Social activities included talking with mentees and participating in community and recreational activities, as described below.

**Talking with mentees.** Mentors wrote 40 comments that indicated they engaged in talking socially with their mentees, including examples of “just hanging-out,” providing encouragement to their mentees, and discussing mentees’ personal issues and problems at school. For example, one mentor wrote, “Conversation time provided an opportunity to build our relationship.” Another mentor commented, “She enjoys telling me about her weekends and other activities that she participated in throughout the week. We spent most of the two hours talking about future plans and boys and gossiping about the different things that have gone on in school that week.”

Mentors also reported sharing their perspectives with their mentees on a variety of personal topics such as after-school jobs, what to wear and who to take to the school prom, girl- and boyfriend dilemmas, struggles at home with families, school violence, and frustrations at school with staff and classes. Examples of mentor comments included: “He asked for my advice about who he should take to prom,” “Every week he updates me on girl dramas that he has,” “The girls were always very forthcoming with information about the violence in their school,” and “The time we spent with the girls was a good time for them to vent about their frustrations with the less-than-ideal high schools they attend.”

**Participating in community activities.** A total of 31 comments described participating in activities in the community, such as meeting mentees’ families; taking mentees to college visits, sporting events, dinner, and shopping; and attending special events on behalf of the mentee. For example, one mentor discussed bringing her mentee to her college:

One day we took the girls to __ University so they could experience college life for a morning/afternoon and that was a lot of fun. I like taking them away from the center so we can have some alone time and get to know them better, but in addition, doing an activity they usually don’t have the opportunity to do is something I hope they enjoy.

Another mentor reported that she and her mentee “went prom dress shopping. What an amazing experience.” A third mentor wrote about her desire to
shape activities around her mentee’s interests: “She [mentee] talked about sports and basketball quite frequently, so I took her to the women’s basketball game and showed her around campus.”

**Participating in recreational activities.** Twenty mentor comments described participating in recreational activities, such as playing pool, jumping rope, and playing Bingo, as well as participating in sports, such as basketball and volleyball. One mentor wrote:

Basketball was my initial avenue into gaining the respect and approval of the youth. Basketball skill has become a status symbol at the center and in the environments like it. By shooting hoops with the boys, I went from being the “rich, little dork from [University] who helped with homework to a surprising friend who could play ball with the boys.”

**Providing academic support.** Mentors’ comments indicated that one-quarter of their activities involved providing academic support to their mentees. Mentors reported reading and writing with their mentees; helping with homework and classroom assignments; providing assistance in writing papers, completing senior projects, and preparing for standardized tests; helping complete graduation credit requirements; and setting general academic goals.

Mentors described their time with their mentees as follows: “We spent time in the library looking through books and searching the internet for all kinds of information” and “C___ and I have been working on improving her reading grade to help her overall goal of making the A honor roll this semester.” Other mentors wrote, “I have been helping out the teens with their homework more as they are becoming more comfortable asking for help,” and “I quickly developed rapport with my mentee and settled into a routine of assisting him with his Algebra II assignments.” Another mentor described what it was like to help her mentees given the limited available resources: “Over the course of the semester, I have helped my mentees work on their senior research papers. Since neither of them has access to library resources or word processors, every week we seem to start over on the research process.”

**Assisting with college preparation.** According to their comments, 23% of mentors’ activities comprised assisting with college preparation by sharing their college experiences and expertise with their mentees. Mentors reported sharing stories about college life, helping with college application and financial aid processes, assisting with college selection criteria, and preparing for the college entrance exams. For example, one mentor wrote, “We were able to field questions about concerns about the college experience on and off campus.” Another mentor wrote, “[my mentee] asks me about schoolwork that
I have, and is very intrigued by the fact that I work and study so much.” In
describing the college search process, one mentor commented, “I helped them
narrow their choices down and encouraged them to think about why they were
choosing the colleges they selected.”

Some mentors reported assisting their mentees with making specific plans
for studying for the ACT and applying to college. For instance, one mentor wrote,
“Together we came up with a basic timeline for re-taking the ACT, applying
for schools, and completing the FAFSA paperwork.” Another mentor reported,
“We spent a lot of time on ACT prep. I found a lot of stuff online for her like
practice tests, test tips, math worksheets, etc.” A third mentor commented:

We made sure that all three students had visited with the guidance counselor and
teachers about college plans so they can write their teacher recommendations in
the fall of the next year. We also set up a plan for them to save money this
summer for their application fees.

Working with staff and interviewing mentees. Three comments described
how mentors assisted staff, such as helping teachers plan class projects or find
college preparation resources for teachers and classes. Two comments related
to interviewing mentees for projects in mentors’ other college classes.

Benefits to Mentors
When asked to describe benefits they experienced throughout the semester,
mentors wrote a total of 182 comments, which were divided into four main
categories: gaining an understanding of the challenges of poverty ($n = 71;
39\%$); enhancing character and professional development ($n = 50; 27\%$);
forming relationships ($n = 39; 22\%$); and appreciating their own life experi-
ences and reevaluating priorities ($n = 22; 12\%$).

Gaining an understanding of the challenges of poverty. Almost 40\% of
benefits students reported to experience related to learning about the chal-
lenges of poverty by linking their coursework to mentoring. One mentor
described an increased awareness of the effects of poverty by writing that she
could now:

put a face to poverty, teen pregnancy, and the achievement gap…. In the future
when I see these issues on the news they won’t be a world away from
me…because I spent four months looking at these issues directly in the face of
a teenage girl.

Another mentor wrote, “___ High School has opened my eyes to an
environment I did not even know existed. A___ [her mentee] often sleeps on
the floor with little food in her stomach.” A third mentor remarked on the perseverance of the students she met in the face of the challenges of poverty: “Despite attending a failing school and having little parental support, these students have set admirable goals.”

Mentors reported that problems they were previously unaware of became apparent through their direct observations. For example, one mentor wrote, “S___ [her mentee] has opened my eyes to the terrible state that high-poverty schools like ___ High School are in, especially because of how far back students are in their studies.” Still another commented, “The resources and organization in the classrooms as well as guidance counselors and teachers are noticeably inferior in ____ High School.”

Mentors also reflected on the positive contributions of community centers and indicated a greater understanding of the challenges that such organizations face. For example, one student wrote that “Places like ___ Community Center are amazing because they are keeping the kids off the streets and pushing them to strive for better things in life.” Another mentor wrote “I began to understand some of the difficulties involved in organizing an after-school program.”

Comments indicated that mentors were able to connect their coursework and class discussion to their mentoring experiences. For example, one mentor wrote:

> Working with people who are around the same age as I am, but have led a completely different life, has reinforced everything we have learned through the readings. It is one thing to read about it, but getting to know the people who are affected by poverty has a lasting effect.

Another mentor commented, “Without exposure to the issues we talked about in class and seeing them first-hand in the public school system, I do not think a person could fully understand the emergency of these issues in our society.”

**Enhancing character and professional development.** Over one-quarter of comments indicated that mentors believed they had furthered their character and professional development. One mentor reported, “I gained in personal growth and maturity with the responsibility that came with serving as a mentor,” and another wrote, “This experience has been invaluable in that it has taught me patience, compassion, and humility.” One mentor reflected on her relationship with her mentee by writing, “I’ve learned to value the relationship of humans and the mere characteristics that define a person.” In addition, several comments described how being in a racial minority for the first time helped mentors to grow personally. For example, one student reflected, “I think it was a great experience for me to be in the minority, and it was healthy for me to feel self-consciousness and uncomfortable at times.”
Mentor comments specifically mentioned developing a heightened interest in teaching and volunteering. For example, one mentor wrote, “Before this opportunity, I had never entertained the idea of becoming a teacher, but now, more than ever, I have this overwhelming drive to make a difference in the lives of our youth.” Another mentor reported a heightened sense of purpose and direction regarding teaching:

The information I have gained from these young women will not only help me to become a better teacher to the high schoolers I hope to one day serve, but it has also helped me to develop a curriculum I hope to implement in a school in the future.

**Forming relationships.** Mentors reported in nearly one-quarter of their comments that a benefit they experienced was forming relationships and making a difference in the lives of others. Several mentors discussed the value of having someone who looked up to them. According to one mentor, “I also really enjoyed having the responsibility of being there for someone else. I found myself missing my weekly visit to M___ High School if for some reason I couldn’t go.” Another mentor wrote, “Through the mentoring project, I experienced the benefit of having someone really looking up to me. I felt very rewarded to be able to affect the life of someone who is so impressionable.” A third mentor wrote:

I’ve benefited through this relationship most, though, by realizing that I cannot change a person in one day…. But I can be there, I can show that I care through my presence and commitment to this relationship. This has been a humbling thing to learn as well as my most valuable benefit.

Mentors also specifically mentioned the value of forming friendships. One mentor commented on the unlikely nature of her friendship with her mentee:

I just think it is so wonderful that we have developed a relationship with three girls that we have little or nothing in common with on the surface. I think they have realized as well that even though it may seem like we have nothing in common, we actually enjoy spending time together. It has been a challenging experience because at first I was expecting something bigger from my mentoring relationship but when I took a closer look, I realized that we have developed a close relationship.

Still another reflected on how friendship was the most important aspect of her mentoring experience:

More important than any schoolwork, I have found a friendship with E___ that will continue to grow after this class is over. She has welcomed me into her home and I have gotten to know her family very well. She makes me laugh and her love for others and soft spirit has inspired me.
Appreciating own life experiences and reevaluating priorities. Twenty-two percent of comments suggested that spending time with mentees caused mentors to have a greater appreciation for their own lives and to reevaluate their priorities. One mentor wrote, “This experience made me very grateful and treasuring of the life I inherited through my parents’ help.” Another mentor revealed that:

Mentoring has really put things in perspective with how blessed I am. I have parents that support me through thick and thin. I have grown up with an excellent education and positive role models. I live in a safe environment and I always have food to eat and a bed to sleep in. I know that if I truly need money that I can call my parents and they will provide for me. For my senior prom, all I had to do was ask my parents for money and I didn’t think twice about my 150-dollar dress.

Mentors also discussed how mentoring caused them to reevaluate their priorities. For example, one mentor wrote, “the mentoring program made me realize that I need to be there more for my little brother who is a junior in high school.”

Changes to the Mentoring Program or Self
When mentors were asked what aspects of the mentoring program or themselves they would change, their responses \((n = 143)\) encompassed six major categories. The greatest number of comments \((n = 41; 29\%)\) related to how mentors would alter their personal approach to mentoring. Mentors also had suggestions for revising the mentoring program \((n = 29; 20\%)\) and assigning mentees and mentoring sites \((n = 28; 20\%)\). In addition, mentors suggested more explicit goals for mentoring \((n = 15; 10\%)\), improvements in the mentoring sites \((n = 14; 10\%)\), and more support from mentoring sites and families \((n = 12; 8\%)\). Three comments indicated no need for change \((2\%)\) and one comment \((1\%)\) suggested additional college credit for the class.

Altering personal approach to mentoring. When mentors were asked what they would like to change about their mentoring experience, almost one-third of comments related to what mentors would have done differently themselves. Mentors discussed ways in which they could have changed their behavior such as spending more time with their mentees, developing a one-on-one mentoring relationship, and taking initiative to seek greater support.

For example, one mentor wrote, “I would have attended more after-school activities…. It is the time outside of our scheduled visits that we could have done some deeper bonding.” Another mentor wrote, “Adolescents are sometimes very different people in school than they are in the community and this [taking her mentee out] would be a great way to unveil the real personality of
the mentee and grow in the relationship.” Some mentors also voiced regret over the lack of time they were able to spend with their mentees beyond the 22 hours of required service work. One mentor stated, “I did not have enough time to become a solid mentor for my mentee,” and another said, “I should have taken a more ambitious approach with these students in the beginning in order to make the most of a short semester together.” Mentors stated that a variety of life situations got in the way of their intentions, such as car trouble, traveling sports schedules, mid-terms, and spring breaks. One student suggested his own culpability as he stated, “Some mornings I was not able to get out of bed to get there.”

Comments also indicated that some mentors wished they had established one-on-one relationships with their mentees. One mentor wrote, “I did not push the idea [of a one-on-one]… but, if I could have changed anything, I would have asked until I got one…. As I look back I think that I could have made a greater impact with one student.” Other mentors wished they had instituted greater structure throughout their mentoring experience through planning different activities and defining specific mentor roles with the mentoring site. For example, one mentor wrote, “I would have created more structure…. While hanging out and playing with the kids at the center was lots of fun, there were times when I felt that we were not being as productive as possible.” Another mentor regretted not better defining mentoring roles by going to the mentee site “to discuss what a mentor is and some of the things one would do with a mentor”.

Revising the mentoring program. Twenty percent of comments related to suggestions for changes to the mentoring program itself. One mentor suggested having organized group activities by stating that “a group bowling night…or a campus tour would be so exciting and encouraging to the mentee and to our relationships with them.” Still others suggested that the program be longer than one semester. For example, one mentor wrote, “This class needs to be two semesters rather than one. Relationship building is important, but it takes time for them to form.” One mentor suggested focusing on younger students by stating, “It would be helpful for the mentees to be juniors [vs. seniors] so that there is time to focus on preparing for exams and deadlines.”

Assigning mentees and mentoring sites. Twenty percent of comments related to mentee and mentoring sites assignments. Specifically, mentors suggested: (a) matching mentors and mentees based on shared interests, (b) assigning one-on-one mentoring with the same mentee throughout the semester, and (c) screening potential mentees to ensure they really want to have mentors. One mentor wrote:
I would change the format for matching students with mentors. If possible matching a mentor up with a student before the process begins would save a great deal of time and foster a relationship quicker.

Another mentor wrote, “When you walk into a room where four to six people want a mentor you feel compelled to choose at least two. It is hard to keep up with more than one person.”

Other comments suggested screening mentees to ensure that they understood the time commitment involved with having a mentor. One mentor wrote, “Before the mentoring begins I think someone should go to possible sites, explain the mentoring program and ask who would like a mentor.” Another mentor wrote, “I think that having mentees who would have signed a contract saying they WANT a mentor and are willing to show up each week would also be helpful.”

**Establishing explicit goals for mentoring.** Ten percent of comments related to recommendations for clearly communicating the goals and procedures of the mentoring program to mentors, mentees, and site staff. For example, one mentor described the difficulty that arose when mentees are not informed of the purpose of mentoring:

> I think the biggest challenge that we faced was the fact that our role at the center was not explained to the girls…. It was confusing to them and it took a few weeks to realize that we would be coming every week to spend time with them.

In addition, mentors suggested that teachers should be better informed of the goals of the mentoring program. According to one mentor, “an orientation for teachers at sites and university students would also create a smoother transition into the classroom, establishing goals and expectations for both organizations.”

**Improving mentoring sites.** Ten percent of comments related to suggestions for improvements at mentoring sites. One mentor felt “disheartened by the performance of the [class] and the lack of instruction within the class.” Another mentor wrote, “I would change the structure of the classes…. Most of the time when I am in class, the students are left with nothing to do.” Regarding staff, one mentor commented, “I think that the employees should invest more time in the kids who are not doing as well in school and who show behavior problems.” Still another wrote, “I don’t feel that [the teacher] is a very effective instructor and she tends to ignore students’ needs in the classroom.”

**Requesting more support from mentoring sites and families.** In 8% of comments, mentors expressed wanting more support from mentoring sites and
mentees’ families. For example, one mentor wrote, “It did not seem like [the teacher] knew a lot about or cared a lot about our project, and thus we were left to our own devices in terms of partnering up with a student.” Another wrote that with more direction from the teacher, she “would have had a clearer idea of who needed help and who she should work with.” According to one mentor, having a stronger relationship with a school guidance counselor would have provided “more thorough insight as to the mentee’s area of greatest need.” Some mentors also recommended more contact with families. For example, one wrote that “by personally meeting the parent(s), I think they would be more interested in the program and more invested in their child’s activity.”

Discussion

We investigated the perspectives of students who had participated in a semester-long, university-based service-learning program in which they mentored youth attending high-poverty high schools. Students reported that over one-half of their mentoring activities involved socializing with mentees while the remaining activities consisted of providing academic support or assisting in the college access process. The greatest benefit mentors reported experiencing themselves was learning about the challenges of poverty, followed by character and professional development and forming relationships with mentees. When asked what they would change about the mentoring program or experience, the greatest number of comments related to how mentors would change their own behavior, followed by recommendations for changing the program itself, such as providing more structure and support. This study contributes to the mentoring literature in a number of important ways.

First, this study describes an innovative university-based youth program in which mentoring occurred in the youths’ actual high schools while school was in session or in community centers during afterschool programs. It is important to provide mentoring in the environments in which youth spend their time on a daily basis in order that university students experience to the greatest extent the reality of youths’ everyday lives (Dappen & Isernhagen, 2006). For example, university mentors reported increasing their understanding of how poverty affected their mentees because of their presence in mentees’ daily lives in their schools and community. Mentors were able to experience firsthand the effects of poverty, such as limited resources, expectations, and supports, as evidenced by their comments related to the economic disparities and challenges of low-income schools and communities.

However, most university-based youth mentoring programs occur on college campuses or in other locations away from students’ schools or neighborhood, such as a YMCA (DuBois et al., 2002). Therefore, mentors in these programs are not exposed to the daily challenges presented by poverty
conditions in their mentees’ environments. One of the greatest benefits for society resulting from service-learning mentoring programs such as the one investigated in this study may be that participants who previously had limited exposure to high-poverty environments become more aware of social inequities and injustices. Mentors’ comments suggested that they were learning that opportunities and resources in low-income schools and neighborhoods were drastically different from what many of them had experienced growing up and that they no longer accused youth and their families of being “unmotivated” or “lazy.” Rather, students generally realized that their mentees had the same long-term goals of college and careers that they themselves held, but that overwhelming obstacles, systemic biases, institutional discrimination, and environmental inequities obliterated the notion of “separate but equal” educational opportunities for high-poverty youth.

In addition, the service-learning mentoring program investigated in this study addressed in twice-weekly classes issues related to poverty and economic disparities across schools, communities, and cultures. Class discussion and readings provided information about the effects of racial segregation, resource inequities across neighborhoods and schools, health care disparities, White privilege, and related issues. Mentors reported that class content helped them understand the challenges caused by poverty that faced their mentees. A concurrent class typically is not a component of community-based mentoring programs, however, which may have contributed to mentors in prior studies failing to understand the challenges faced by youth (e.g., Morton, 2005; Rockquemore & Schaffer, 2000). Instead, mentors may blame youth for perceived shortcomings (e.g., poor hygiene or unhealthy eating habits) that actually relate to the limitations of their environments.

Second, although mentors in our study were not instructed or required to participate in specific activities, findings revealed that one-half of reported activities involved socializing, including conversing with mentees and engaging in recreational or community activities. High rates of social activities were reported even when mentoring occurred in high school settings alone. An obvious benefit to mentees who attend under-resourced high schools is mentor assistance with academics and college preparation, as reported in this study. Tutoring youth from high-poverty backgrounds and assisting them in improving their academic performance and college preparation are important endeavors for mentoring programs. At the same time, mentors enthusiastically indicated the value to them of socializing with their mentees, such as spending time talking, eating out, or recreating together.

This finding is important in relation to the fact that many mentoring relationships terminate prematurely (Spencer, 2007). Therefore, it is important to know what initially motivates individuals to choose to mentor a youth, as well what maintains their involvement in a mentoring relationship. University mentors in this study reported frequently engaging in social activities with their mentees and experiencing personal benefits from their interactions with
their mentees. In order to promote mentoring relationships that maintain over time, it is critical that mentors are given the opportunity to experience rewards, especially in light of the number of failed mentoring relationships reported nationally (Kasprisin, Single, Single, Ferrier, & Muller, 2008). Our findings suggest that socializing and forming relationships are important to mentors and that support and opportunities to do so are critical to promoting the success of youth mentoring programs. As one mentor wrote, “I didn’t want her [my mentee] to think that she was just a class requirement; I wanted her to know that she is important to me and that I want to invest my time in her.” Our findings suggest that mentoring programs that exclusively emphasize academic tutoring may fail to promote long-term mentoring relationships unless opportunities to socialize and form friendships are provided. Therefore, we recommend that mentoring programs of any kind—community- or university-based—provide opportunities for socializing and friendship formation as valuable aspects of the mentoring relationship itself as well as a means to help maintain the relationship over time.

Third, this is the first published study we have found in which university students in a service-learning mentoring class were asked to evaluate the mentoring program and recommend changes. Interestingly, the most common recommendation cited (almost one-third of comments) was for mentors to change their own behavior. Mentors reported wishing they had spent more time with mentees, engaged in more activities, developed deeper one-to-one relationships, and clarified goals for their relationships. Mentors also provided recommendations for the program itself, such as having organized group activities, matching mentors and mentees, establishing clear goals for mentoring, and communicating goals to mentoring sites and staff. These findings are important because the high incidence of failed mentoring relationships suggests the difficulty of forming sustained connections between unrelated youth placed at risk and caring adults (Cox, 2005; Rhodes & DuBois, 2006). It is critical to allow mentors to evaluate the programs in which they are participating and incorporate their recommendations for providing the guidance and supports needed to maintain mentoring relationships. This study is important because mentors provided specific recommendations, such as establishing and communicating explicit mentoring goals, which could easily be adopted by mentoring programs.

Limitations and Future Research

Students’ responses were self-reported and direct observation of mentors and mentees was not provided. Further, because the perspective of mentees was not sought, the extent to which mentees experienced benefits is not known. Researchers should seek corroboration of mentors’ perspectives by observing mentors interacting with their mentees and by interviewing mentees to elicit their views on the quality of their mentoring relationships.
Lessons Learned and Implications for Practice
The university-based service-learning mentoring program in which mentors in this study participated is an ongoing course. Participants in this study were enrolled in the class during the first two semesters in which it was offered. Because the same instructor continued to teach the course, students’ recommendations were incorporated into subsequent semesters of the class. Changes made and implications for mentoring initiatives in general follow:

- In order to give mentors the time to develop close relationships with their mentees, students are now allowed to enroll in the class for a second, or even third, semester. Mentoring program staff should realize that forming a mentoring relationship takes both time and ongoing support, and should provide both accordingly.
- To promote relationship building, the instructor now matches mentors with mentees based on similar interests, career goals, goals for the mentoring relationship, and schedules, as indicated on interest forms completed by mentors and mentees. Although the benefits of matching are unclear (e.g., Cox, 2005), it may be that doing so helps mentors feel more comfortable when initially entering an unfamiliar environment such as a high-poverty school or community.
- Organized group activities, such as college campus visits and eating out, are now scheduled in which all mentors and mentees participate. Group activities may help “break the ice” for some mentors who initially are ill-at-ease in one-to-one interactions with a mentee.
- Mentor program goals are now clearly articulated in a cover letter to participating sites and staff and an orientation is provided at the beginning of each semester. Staff visit class throughout the semester to articulate expectations and maintain ongoing communication with students and mentoring program staff. Communication is critical in establishing and maintaining common goals across mentors and mentees, school and community personnel, and mentoring program staff in any mentoring program.
- Mentors and mentees both complete contracts prior to mentoring stating their goals and commitment to the minimum of 22 hours mentoring per semester. Contracts are re-evaluated at the end of the semester to see if goals and commitments have been met. Requiring mentors and mentees to commit to expected mentoring time obligations and holding them accountable may help reduce the high rate of premature terminations of mentoring relationships reported across existing mentoring programs.

The practices described correspond to those found empirically to be effective across mentoring programs (DuBois et al., 2002). Although designed specifically for a university-based service-learning program, they can be adapted and incorporated into a variety of mentoring programs in school or
community. Introducing such practices into current mentoring programs holds promise for addressing the needs identified by mentors of youth placed at-risk and is likely to promote more sustained, durable mentoring relationships that have reciprocal benefits for both mentor and mentee.

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