

CONNECTIONS

QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER OF
FRIENDS FOR YOUTH'S MENTORING INSTITUTE



REFLECTIONS on the Second Annual Summer Institute on Youth Mentoring

Becky Cooper, Executive Director, Friends for Youth, Inc., Guest Contributor

I am approaching my 30th year in the mentoring field and have not yet found words to adequately express the ways in which my life has been immeasurably enriched by my involvement. At the heart of the rewards I have received is seeing what the youth who I matched over 25 years ago have achieved. Knowing the immense transformative power of mentoring relationships, I have been privileged to be a part of the tremendous growth and development of mentoring. My most memorable mentoring career experiences include being part of a California State Committee on Quality Assurance Standards, attending a White House reception on mentoring hosted by First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton, and witnessing mentoring becoming recognized as an essential component in youth development.

This past summer, I added another career highlight to the list: I attended the second annual week-long Summer Institute on Youth Mentoring (SIYM). The SIYM was created by Tom Keller, Ph.D., the Duncan and Cindy Campbell Professor for Children, Youth, and Families with an Emphasis on Mentoring in the Portland State University Graduate School of Social Work (*see box at right for more information*).



Summer Institute on Youth Mentoring

Summer Institute on Youth Mentoring
<http://www.youthmentoring.ssw.pdx.edu>

"The organizing theme for the 2008 Summer Institute on Youth Mentoring was *Issues of Diversity in Youth Mentoring*. We had presentations addressing this topic from multiple perspectives that covered issues of program design, relationship development, and observed outcomes across populations defined by race/ethnicity, culture, gender, disability, and age. There were many interesting and informative discussions about the complexity of mentoring relationships and the inability to designate a particular model that will work universally. My attempt to draw a basic, cross-cutting theme during the week led me to this conclusion: **Mentors should be learners rather than teachers. In other words, mentors will be more effective at building a relationship and supporting a child when they begin with an attempt to really understand the individual child and the child's circumstances, culture, and heritage. They should enter the process like an open-minded traveler with many questions and a sense of adventure. A child is more likely to feel understood and valued when treated as the expert on his or her life, with something meaningful to share with a curious adult. This approach could help to bridge the various types of personal and social differences the mentor and child bring to the relationship."**

- Tom Keller, Ph.D., creator of the
Summer Institute on Youth Mentoring

SIYM IN BRIEF

The 2008 SIYM brought experienced mentoring professionals and leading researchers together to analyze and discuss the latest in both programming trends and research findings. This was one of the most intellectually stimulating and inspirational weeks I have spent in my entire life. At various times, I felt both affirmation of my experience and practice and challenges to my thinking and beliefs on best practices. At all times, I was in awe of the practitioners, researchers, and resource experts who attended and grace this field. I was impressed by the creativity of colleagues who are applying mentoring principles to their programming while fitting within the confines of their resources, program goals, youth needs,

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and environment. I was equally captivated by the researchers, who continually seek the input of mentoring professionals to design their studies to be of utmost value to program practitioners and, ultimately, to our youth.

CHRISTIAN

I had been struggling to find the time to reflect on my experience in the SIYM so that I could apply my learnings to our work at Friends for Youth. My colleagues at the Summer Institute all shared the concern that they would be returning to demanding work environments that are not always conducive to this kind of thoughtful learning process.

Numerous attempts to capture my SIYM impressions for this article were prevented from reaching fruition due to the constant intrusions of everyday life. I finally went to the office on a Sunday afternoon, started my computer, and settled in to fully engage in this pursuit. Two sentences later, the door buzzer rang! Who could possibly be stopping by on a Sunday afternoon? And why did it seem like writing this article was just not meant to be?

I opened the door to a teenager named Christian. He explained that he was just in the neighborhood and thought he would stop by and say hello to one of our staff members. One of the realities of being Friends for Youth's Executive Director is that I do not get a chance to know all of the youth and their mentors in our program, often settling for living vicariously through staff meeting updates on the successes of our friendship matches. I invited Christian in, explained that I was the only one there, and then sat down to see how I could be of assistance to him. He told me that he had been matched with a mentor named Stephanie in our program two years ago. He was referred by a local middle school shortly after arriving with his family from El Salvador. Now in high school, he and Stephanie were still meeting and had formed a close relationship together. Christian had clearly mastered the English language since arriving in this country and was thriving at school, with his family, and in his community. He was very interested in electronics and had come by to offer to hold an Electronics Workshop for our friendships. We chatted about setting that up, then moved on to a multitude of other topics. By the time Christian left (and reminded me that I needed to get back to work!), we had engaged in a delightful time sharing, learning, laughing, and solving the world's problems.

Christian provided me with the inspiration I needed to truly focus on what mentoring is all about and to articulate what the most important learning principles from the SIYM were. What follows is a brief description of what each researcher presented. I encourage you to consult their comprehensive body of work so that you can study the depth and breadth of the findings that can inform your mentoring practice.

TOM KELLER

Dr. Keller opened the Summer Institute with a review of the development of the mentoring field. Unlike most disciplines (where theory leads to research and evolves into practice), mentoring started many years ago with the theory that a caring adult can make a positive difference in the life of a struggling

youth. This theory led to the formation of Big Brothers and other mentoring programs that comprise the "mentoring field." Only recently has the research component come into play.

This connection between research and practice has been instrumental to the growth of mentoring and to the establishment of best practices in programming. Research has consistently pointed to the importance of the relationship development process in mentoring. Within this relationship-building framework lie a myriad of intricacies and the complex interaction of factors such as youth development stages, family, age, gender, race, ethnicity, culture, society, economic class, and environment. To further explore these intricacies, Dr. Keller chose the theme of this year's SIYM: diversity.

JEAN GROSSMAN

Jean Grossman, Ph.D., is a Lecturer and Research Associate at Princeton University. She played a lead role in the seminal Public/Private Ventures mentoring study in 1995. Dr. Grossman discussed her research on the diversity of mentoring impacts on children as they relate to both their own differences and differences in mentor characteristics.

Past research has focused on "developmental" and "prescriptive" relationships. Dr. Grossman and her colleagues recently explored four new categorizations: Conditionally Supportive, Active, Low Key, and Unconditionally Supportive. In general, a Conditionally Supportive approach fared best, and Unconditionally Supportive fared worst. Other factors from Dr. Grossman's research that led to the most positive outcomes include

- *A mix of emotional support with high expectations*
- *Providing opportunities for fun & new activities*
- *Problem-solving & communication about difficult issues*
- *High levels of program oversight*
- *Mentors who continue in longer matches*
- *Mentors who set boundaries & are the least permissive*
- *Mentors with backgrounds in the helping professions &/or who have a "productive" interaction style*
- *Adult mentors rather than peer mentors*

BERNADETTE SANCHEZ

Bernadette Sanchez, Ph.D., is an Associate Professor in the Department of Psychology at DePaul University. Dr. Sanchez discussed the roles of race, ethnicity, and culture in youth mentoring. She started her presentation by giving each of the participants name tags indicating whether or not they were mentors or youth and male or female and providing other information, such as race, ethnicity, and culture. Without speaking, participants were asked to wander around the room and match themselves up with someone. I highly recommend this exercise as a way to help mentoring staff understand the vast scope of feelings that emerge in the initial stages of relationship-building.

Research has been divided in its findings regarding whether or not same-race mentoring is as effective as cross-race mentoring. There are arguments for both viewpoints. "Same-race

mentors can help ethnic minority youth cope with racist attitudes of larger society.” On the other hand, “cross-race mentors’ skills, experiences, interests, and openness to culture” can be more important factors than race. Many, but not all, of the studies showing positive effects in mentoring are found based on cross-race relationships.

Dr. Sanchez also discussed natural mentoring relationships in communities of color. Latino and African American youth often identify relatives as natural mentors; Caucasian youth identify both relatives and non-relatives, and most youth have natural mentors of similar race, ethnicity, and class. The presence of natural mentors in a child’s life is correlated with higher academic outcomes. If programs strive to create mentor-rich environments, starting by training mentors to view themselves as connectors to other mentors, then they may not feel as if they are “be all, end all” to the youth they serve. Likewise, mentees can be trained to find other mentors in their lives.

BELLE LIANG

Belle Liang, Ph.D., is an Associate Professor of Counseling and Developmental Psychology at Boston College. Dr. Liang’s presentation focused on what the needs of youth from a mentor are at different stages of development. “At each stage, youth confront new freedoms and roles that mentors may help them negotiate.” To do this effectively, it is important to know what youth at different developmental stages desire from their mentors, in terms of characteristics and functions. Dr. Liang reminded us of the importance of the critical, yet all too often neglected, practice of asking our youth what they want and need in a mentor. (It reminded me how discouraging it is to think about how much youth service planning takes place without input from children and youth.) Key questions to ask youth include

- *What is a mentor?*
- *Who in your life do you consider to be a mentor?*
- *What kinds of activities do you do together?*
- *In what significant life events of yours do they participate?*

Dr. Liang studied groups of youth in early, middle, and late adolescence. While detailing several shifts in mentor needs from stage to stage, there were also some universal mentoring characteristics that ran across all groups:

- *Play is the most important setting for learning lessons in life*
- *Mentors’ belief in youth allows them to believe in themselves*
- *Trust, fun, & role modeling are key relationship elements in all groups*

MICHAEL KARCHER

Michael Karcher, Ph.D., is an Associate Professor in the College of Education and Human Development at University of Texas-San Antonio. Dr. Karcher shared his findings on ethnically similar and different matches from the Study of Mentoring in the Learning Environment (SMILE). Dr. Karcher began his presentation with a quote from Developmental Psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner. When asked about the key ingredients of successful youth

development, Dr. Bronfenbrenner replied, “Someone’s got to be crazy about the kid.” With that underlying precept, Dr. Karcher explored what mentors are doing and why and which youth benefit the most from a mentor in a school-based setting. Key principles highlighted by Dr. Karcher’s research include the following:

- *“The importance for youth in ethnically homogenous & disenfranchised communities to have a mentor who can bridge family & non-family worlds.”*
- *“Mentees don’t care what you know until they know that you care” - matches that began as friendship-focused, conveyed value & worth, & then shifted to academic-based were strongest.*
- *Mentees need to feel empathy, praise, & attention from their mentors and that they matter to & are valued by their mentors.*

Dr. Karcher also discussed the Cross Age Peer Mentoring (CAMP) program and the issue of whether teen mentors are more or less effective than adults. While adults were found, in general, to be more effective, differences in impact were reduced when a strong program structure was in place that included the following elements:

- *Youth-driven curriculum with mentor involvement*
- *Staff provides high levels of mentor support & monitoring*
- *Ongoing training in place for mentors that emphasizes building mentees’ self-worth*
- *Developmental & instrumental activities in conjunction with youth ownership of the activities*
- *Parent involvement*
- *The promotion of connectedness – to self, others, & society*
- *Developmental goals*

The ability of staff to ensure that the preceding structure exists and to provide effective services depends on the working environment that is set up by the organization. Vital working conditions include

- *Staff is aware of agency mission & have clarity of goals.*
- *There is cooperation & teamwork in the workgroup.*
- *There is freedom & latitude for judgments based on informed intuition in jobs.*
- *Staff stays informed & interactions with leadership are open.*
- *There is a reasonable, achievable workload for staff.*
- *Mentors are provided the resources, space, training, supervision, and access to parents that they need.*

LAURIE POWERS

Laurie Powers, Ph.D., is Associate Dean for Research in the School of Social Work and Director of the Regional Research Institute for Human Services at Portland State University. Dr. Powers is one of the foremost authorities on promoting self-determination among persons with diverse abilities and fostering the successful transition from youth to adulthood. It was extremely meaningful to have Dr. Powers and her body of research included in the group of mentoring research fellows, considering that there is a dearth of programs and

research – less than 20 studies – dealing with disability diversity in youth mentoring. There has been no research done on youth with disabilities in community mentoring programs.

About 54 million (19%) of Americans have disabilities. Their life outcomes are distressing: 70% unemployed, 67% not graduating from high school, and 70% living in poverty. Mentoring is an effective strategy to combat these outcomes and “to enhance community participation, academic success, successful transition to adult life, and, most importantly, self-determination.”

Dr. Powers cited several elements as critical to an effective mentoring program for youth with disabilities; some of them include the following:

- *Have fun*
- *Emphasize strengths & positive experiences*
- *Connect youth with their goals & dreams*
- *Engage in youth-selected activities*
- *Make connections with key adults in the youth's life & introduce youth to other supportive adults*
- *Focus on relationship & skill development*
- *Provide training & support for mentors*

MY PERSPECTIVE

I hope this gives you an idea of the incredible knowledge that was shared by researchers with mentoring professionals. Of course, this was only one dimension to the SIYM, as theory, research, and practice were all brought together throughout the week with the goal of improving services for youth in formal mentoring programs. I returned to Friends for Youth with a plethora of specific ideas to improve our programming. I was also struck by the common threads that linked each of the presentations with previous research. These are truly basic principles that need to be cemented into the foundation of all mentoring programming. They seem obvious, yet are too often overlooked. I was reminded of these principles this morning, with the extraordinarily opportune visit from Christian, the Friends for Youth mentee. I was filled with hope for other young people that they all might experience the transformative power of human relationships.



Summer Institute on Youth Mentoring

BASIC PRINCIPLES

IT'S ABOUT THE YOUTH!

- *Ask youth what they need.*
- *Involve youth in activity selection.*
- *Appreciate the youth's role in the relationship.*
- *Seek youth input in program planning.*
- *Help connect youth to their goals and dreams.*
- *Respect & respond to each child's differences.*

IT'S ABOUT A CARING RELATIONSHIP!

- *“Someone's got to be crazy about the kid.”*
- *“Mentees don't care what you know until they know that you care.”*
- *Mentors' belief in youth allows them to believe in themselves.*
- *Mentees need to feel empathy, praise, & attention from their mentors.*
- *Mentees need to know that they matter & are valued by their mentors.*
- *Trust, fun, & role modeling are key relationship elements.*
- *Introduce youth to other supportive adults.*
- *Learning is in the relationship between people.*

IT'S ABOUT HAVING FUN!

- *Play is the most important setting for learning.*
- *Having fun is a key component of relationship building.*

IT'S ABOUT AN EFFECTIVE WORKING ENVIRONMENT!

- *Staff are properly trained & supported.*
- *Agencies promote connectedness to others.*
- *Mentors receive high levels of training, monitoring, & support.*
- *Curriculum & services are youth-driven.*
- *Mentoring's Elements of Effective Practice are in place.*

About the Contributor

Rebecca (Becky) S. Cooper has a B.A. in Psychology and an M.A. in Education from Stanford University. In 1979, she joined the newly-created Friends for Youth mentoring program and has served as its Executive Director since 1981. Since then, Becky has been an active advocate for mentoring. In 2004, she was named one of four “Mentoring Area Experts” in California by the Center for Applied Research Solutions (CARS) and recently served on MENTOR's National Working Group on Accreditation.

PROVIDING A FRAMEWORK



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