Innovations and New Directions for Youth Mentoring

The annual Summer Institute on Youth Mentoring at Portland State University brings together top mentoring researchers and experienced practitioners from around the world for an intensive week-long seminar presenting the latest developments in theory and research on youth mentoring.

The Institute is directed by Dr. Thomas Keller, Duncan & Cindy Campbell Professor for Children, Youth & Families with an Emphasis on Mentoring, School of Social Work, Portland State University.

We wish to thank our 2012 Partners:
- Big Brothers Big Sisters of America
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- National Mentoring Center at Education Northwest
- Friends for Youth Mentoring Institute
- Oregon Mentors

The 2012 Summer Institute was hosted by the PSU Center for Interdisciplinary Mentoring Research, with the support of the Oregon Community Foundation. Additional support for the Summer Symposium on Mentoring Research, a special community event, was provided by the Reser Family Foundation.

To many practitioners, policymakers, and researchers in the youth mentoring field, there has been a clear trend in recent years toward increasing the diversity of settings, populations, and services where mentoring relationships are applied. Once viewed as a stand-alone community-based prevention and intervention strategy, mentoring relationships are now being integrated into a wide variety of other services, from afterschool programs and youth camps to drug treatment programs and gang-violence initiatives. The power of mentoring is being harnessed to help address both personal and community-wide problems in a way that would have been uncommon a generation ago.

This expansion of the scope of mentoring is in alignment with new research, especially the recent meta-analysis by Dr. David DuBois and colleagues, demonstrating the broad effectiveness of mentoring relationships and their power to support youth across multiple domains. DuBois’ research indicates that mentoring can be used effectively across ages and program settings and in service of a wide variety of individual and community goals. It’s not just that mentoring can produce results; it’s noteworthy that it can be effective in so many ways and under such diverse circumstances—provided, of course—that programs follow core evidence-based program practices in delivering their services.

Yet this point is precisely where the youth mentoring field hits a bit of a road block: for many of these new “applications” of mentoring there is scant research into what makes these innovative mentoring programs effective. With the work of DuBois, Jean Rhodes, and other researchers, we now have a solid understanding of the components and practices that make most mentoring programs effective. But there is considerable need for additional research into the best practices and strategies of mentoring programs that operate on the “edges” of the field—mentoring in correctional and treatment facilities; programs with paid mentors; interventions where mentors are asked to deliver a curriculum, focus on specific tasks, or help support other services provided to their mentee. The innovations in our field have outpaced our understanding.

This critical need to take a closer look at what’s happening at the boundaries of youth mentoring set the theme of the 2012 Summer Institute on Youth Mentoring (SIYM), held July 23–27 at Portland State University. SIYM founder and PSU professor Tom Keller noted that he wanted the event to explore concepts of innovation and enhancement in youth mentoring. “There are interesting things happening around the edges of youth mentoring and I think the entire field can learn something from examining and under-

Video presentations by mentoring researchers participating in the 2012 Summer Institute can be found on the Web at: www.pdx.edu/youth-mentoring/
standing these programs. Examining new ideas is how any field evolves.”

The 2012 SIYM brought together eight Research Fellows and over 30 practitioners from around the country for a week of presentations, discussion, and information sharing on the topic of innovation in youth mentoring. Each of the Research Fellows brought data and insights into an interesting new facet of youth mentoring, while the practitioners contributed their experiences and knowledge of delivering mentoring across the spectrum of settings and program models.

The annual SIYM event is designed to be a dialogue between researchers and practitioners, in the hope that these two groups can learn from each other and help the entire field understand and apply new mentoring knowledge. Keller noted in his opening presentation that in a recent survey of mentoring program practitioners from around the country 85% expressed some desire to use more evidence-based decisionmaking in their work. “This can only happen,” Keller observed, “if there is a conversation happening between those conducting the research and those using it.”

This thirst for usable, understandable research is further heightened when we look at mentoring programs that are doing things in new and interesting ways. For all of the “buzz” in recent years about using paid mentors or building mentoring into multi-service program models, there is still a dearth of concrete knowledge about how these programs work best. “The field is still wrestling with some basic questions,” notes Keller. “What defines mentoring relationships? How do we describe mentoring? What roles should a mentor play? I think that we can start to answer these questions not just by looking at the typical mentoring programs we are all familiar with, but also by examining programs that are doing things differently and seeing what might be useful or applicable to the larger field.”

The research presented at the 2012 SIYM, and the conversations among participants, highlighted that although we have strong evidence of the power of mentoring, and the general program practices that best harness that power, there is still much to learn about the myriad ways mentoring concepts can be brought to bear on the challenges facing today’s youth. This article summarizes the research, dialogue, and ideas from this year’s SIYM as a way of disseminating this knowledge.

Fellows for the 2012 Summer Institute on Youth Mentoring

Thomas Keller, Ph.D. - Duncan and Cindy Campbell Professor for Children, Youth, and Families with an Emphasis on Mentoring in the School of Social Work at Portland State University. Professor Keller is Director of the Summer Institute on Youth Mentoring and is also the director of the PSU Center for Interdisciplinary Mentoring Research. He studies the development and influence of mentoring relationships in school and community settings and the role of parent involvement in mentoring interventions. Prior to earning his Ph.D., he worked for several years with a Big Brothers Big Sisters affiliate in Seattle as a caseworker, supervisor, and program director.

Sandra Christenson, Ph.D. - Professor of Educational Psychology at the University of Minnesota. Professor Christenson and her colleagues developed the Check & Connect program, in which mentors systematically monitor performance indicators for students at risk of disengaging from school and provide individualized support in problem solving, skill building, and fostering positive family-school relationships. Check & Connect has been extensively evaluated, with over 15 years of research and a designation as an evidence-based intervention for school retention by the U.S. Department of Education.

Mark Eddy, Ph.D. - Director of Research for Partners for Our Children in the School of Social Work at the University of Washington. Previously, Dr. Eddy was a Senior Scientist with the Oregon Social Learning Center, where he conducted numerous studies of interventions for parents and children. Dr. Eddy is the Principal Investigator of an NIH-funded randomized trial of the Friends of the Children program, which provides paid professional mentors for youth at risk for problems from kindergarten through high school.

Gabriel Kuperminc, Ph.D. - Professor and Chair of Community Psychology at Georgia State University. Professor Kuperminc studies the processes of resilience and positive youth development, and he has expertise on group mentoring as well as the role of mentoring within multi-component programs. Since 1999, he has evaluated the effectiveness of Cool Girls, Inc., a comprehensive youth development program that provides mentoring, tutoring, and life skills training to high risk, urban, preadolescent and early adolescent girls.

Davielle Lakind - Doctoral student in Clinical Psychology at the University of Illinois-Chicago working with the Research Group on Mental Health Services for Urban Children and Families in the Institute for Juvenile Research. Previously she worked as a professional mentor with Friends of the Children in New York City, and she has conducted research on the nature of the role of professional mentors.

Sarah Geenen, Ph.D. - Research Professor in the Regional Research Institute for Human Services at Portland State University. Dr. Geenen currently is conducting two federally-funded randomized trials on the effects of the My Life intervention for youth exiting the child welfare system and for youth in both foster care and special education. In the My Life program, youth have individual relationships with adult coaches and peer mentors (former foster youth) who support the development of self-determination.

George Noblit, Ph.D. - Joseph R. Neikirk Distinguished Professor of Sociology of Education in the School of Education at University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill. Professor Noblit has studied A+arts-enhanced schools, charter schools, and prison education for young offenders. He currently is investigating how the Blue Ribbon Mentor-Advocate program builds the social networks of students and enhances their social mobility through mentoring, advocacy, enrichment, and leadership training.

Sarah Schwartz - Doctoral candidate in Clinical Psychology at University of Massachusetts-Boston. She has published studies investigating factors that influence the impact of school-based mentoring, including the relationship histories of students and the duration of mentoring relationships. She is completing her dissertation on the National Guard Youth ChalleNGe Program, in which youth select an adult they know to serve as a mentor during and after participation in a residential training program.
One of the most compelling innovations in the mentoring field over the last decade has been the rise of professional mentoring programs, where mentors are formal, paid staff members and work with a “caseload” of youth. Perhaps the leading proponent of this approach is **Friends of the Children (FOTC)**, a Portland, Oregon-based organization that has expanded to five other sites, working with children who attend public schools in impoverished neighborhoods in the urban cores of Boston, New York, and Seattle, as well as with children in several rural communities in the Pacific Northwest. In the FOTC model, a paid mentor works full-time with up to eight students, spending about 16 hours per month working with each. FOTC has a thorough selection process involving both observation of students and the collection of impressions from teachers and school staff to identify the kindergartners who have the greatest need for support. The program then faithfully serves these children through high school graduation. In many ways, Friends of the Children is pushing the concept of mentoring to its time- and resource-intensive limits. And with good reason: they feel this is the level of intervention these children need.

**MARK EDDY**

Dr. Mark Eddy, a noted researcher from the University of Washington, is leading a multi-site randomized controlled trial study of FOTC, which ideally will follow a cohort of students through the 12 years of the program and beyond. The study began in 2007, and has been funded by a consortium of public agencies and private foundations, including the National Institutes of Health, the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation, and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. At SIYM, Eddy presented not only the study design and early first-year results, but also led a rich discussion with participants about how to understand a model like FOTC’s in relation to other mentoring programs.

During Eddy’s presentations, SIYM participants compared how their programs operate to the Friends model in the areas of:

- Youth participant identification and intake (FOTC specifically targets the most high-need students in each of the classrooms they visit)
- The role and time commitment of the mentors (FOTC mentors use their four hours a week to focus on a variety of academic, developmental, and life skills goals, to meet with parents and teachers, and to connect the youth and their family to other services)
- The skills of the mentors (68% of Friends have a social service background, 88% are college graduates)
• The longevity of the matches (students may have several Friends over their 12 years in the program, but many matches last for over six years)

• The activities mentors and youth engage in (Friends focus considerably on academic, problem solving, and life skills, as well as building the relationship bond)

• The outcomes of the program (given the length of the program, the program has excellent graduation rates, and 95% of the graduates avoid teen pregnancy, in spite of the fact that 60% were born to teen parents themselves)

This comparison highlighted several reasons why FOTC chooses to pay their mentors: the level of commitment and the match duration, the time-intensive work with the students and parents, the need for mentors with specific skills, the considerable needs of the youth they specifically recruit to the program. Most of the programs attending SIYM served at least some youth who fit this profile, but few were approaching it in the targeted, holistic way that FOTC is attempting. As one attendee noted, it’s hard to imagine a mentoring program putting more resources and time into supporting a child than FOTC does.

Eddy shared the details of the FOTC study design: four chapters are participating with a total of 278 children across 21 schools. Children are assessed every six months, with the study broadly focusing on proximal outcomes such as positive socio-emotional development, improved problem solving and goal-setting, increased academic engagement, and the development of healthy lifestyle behaviors. The study is still in the initial stages, but clearly will produce meaningful data about the program’s impact.

After only a year in the program, the FOTC outcomes and those of the control group of children look pretty similar, with little in the way of statistically significant difference in the core proximal goals, something Eddy expects to change over time as the children age (they average only 6.5 years of age now) and the effects of the program accumulate. But the early data show that youth are receiving considerable service hours (an average of almost 13 hours per month in-person mentoring time) and that parent satisfaction with the program is at almost 90% (expressed as recommending the program to other parents). There is also some early indication that children who were most aggressive or dealing with sadness or anxiety when entering the program had the largest gains in the first year of the program. Children who had over 200 contact hours with their mentor in the first year also had better outcomes, perhaps suggesting that there is a threshold for this model to make its strongest impact, at least in the first year.

Clearly the work FOTC is doing is robust and well-designed, but what is a typical mentoring program to take from their efforts or from the findings coming from Eddy’s work? Most mentoring programs will not seek out these youth in this way or provide nearly the mentoring time, consistency, or organizational resources (the FOTC model costs around $12,000 per child, depending on the city).

In many ways, this question is about external validity—how applicable a piece of research (or a program practice) is outside its original context. Eddy helped the group explore this question by asking, “On what level of evidence does your program make decisions?” It sounds like a simple question, but it’s one that many program staff members spend little time thinking about. Most participants noted that they tend to make decisions in their program based on their past history and experience running the program, with some use of external research, case studies, and peer learning. But many agreed that their programs do not approach this as a formal or conscious process. Eddy noted that a key goal of the FOTC study is not only to examine evidence of program impacts but also to gain understanding into how the program leads to any observed impacts. How useful that information is to other programs depends on how well those programs understand their own models and theories of change, and how closely they pay attention to the details of the program being studied.

This deep look comparing the Friends of the Children model to that of SIYM participants’ programs—combined with the discussion of how all our programs make decisions on how to best serve our youth—set the stage for the rest of the week, as participants tried to capture the ideas and concepts they could take back home and integrate into their programs.
Davielle Lakind

As in One of the most interesting discussions at SIYM revolved around the comparison of Friends of the Children’s paid mentors with the work of the participants’ mostly volunteer mentors. Leading this discussion was Davielle Lakind, a doctoral student at the University of Illinois-Chicago and a former FOTC mentor. Her qualitative research has focused on the experiences of FOTC’s paid mentors, examining how they perceive their role and the factors that they think make them successful in their work.

Lakind began with a discussion about the pros and cons of paid mentors. On one hand, paid mentors can bring considerable time commitment and consistency to a youth, something that we strive for in volunteer mentoring programs. They also can provide greater advocacy and access to resources and may bring specific skills to the table. But they also may be distrusted by youth, who often see them as just another person who is “paid to care.” And certainly the introduction of a professional role to the program raises the expectations of parents, funders, partners, and the youth themselves, putting pressure on the mentor that can influence the development of the relationship.

Her recent research focused on interviews with nine FOTC mentors who had been with the organization for an average of 40 months. In their estimation, there were several factors that contributed to their success in the role:

- **The focus on mentor retention.** Most felt that the fact that Friends asks for a three-year minimum commitment from new hires was critical. This commitment helped make the mentors more engaged and gave families reassurance that this individual would be there for the long haul. (For example, the average length of employment at the Portland office is over seven years, bringing considerable stability to their mentoring relationships.) Several mentors noted that it was the third year when the students really began to open up in their relationships.

- **The overall program model.** In addition to that time commitment, Friends provides other enrichment opportunities and support to the children and families they serve. “We provide a community beyond just the mentor,” noted Lakind.

- **Their status as employees.** Several of Lakind’s interview subjects noted that the fact that they were employees helped with their level of commitment and increased their engagement with the work. Because this was a formal job, they were able to persevere through difficult times that a volunteer mentor may have walked away form.

- **The level of organizational support.** FOTC provides considerable ongoing training and professional development for their mentors. But beyond just new skills and professional growth, these mentors talked about the camaraderie with their coworkers and the very personal support system they had built over the years of doing their work. In addition to this emotional support, several noted that the sharing of tips and strategies among mentors also helped improve the quality of mentoring.

Clearly, paid mentoring brings many strengths and SIYM participants had a lively discussion about how their volunteer programs can borrow bits and pieces from this world (finding ways for mentors to share tips and strategies with each other, for example).

But Lakind’s research also examined the challenges that come with a paid mentor role:

- **Boundaries.** The paid nature of the role means a deeper commitment, but that can also lead to over-involvement and taking on too much.

- **Workload.** Although FOTC mentors clearly loved their work, it was also obvious that the position is very demanding and time-intensive. These mentors are not doing it “on the side”—this work and these families become a huge part of their lives.
• The skills needed to succeed. As one mentor noted, “You need to be an expert in everything. I think it’s great we are given that autonomy… because all kids’ needs are different.” But the number of things a FOTC mentor must be prepared to address can be stressful. They don’t have the option of saying that some of a child’s issues are beyond their concern.

Ultimately, FOTC mentors felt that the program structure and their level of commitment—combined with personal qualities such as compassion, trustworthiness, and flexibility—positioned them to make more of an impact in the lives of high-risk youth than volunteer mentors. They get more involved with each child, provide more intensive support, and at a deep level act, as Mark Eddy put it, “as a witness to a life.”

Obviously not every program can provide what FOTC does, nor should they. But Lakind closed with some general thoughts about her paid mentor findings that can also be applied to volunteer programs:

• Top-down and horizontal support structures strengthen professional mentors’ self-efficacy
• Durational and communal elements strengthen professional mentors’ sense of program-level efficacy
• Boundaries are difficult to define for professional mentors and a lack of clearly defined boundaries contributes to stress

One can see that in spite of the clear differences between paid and volunteer mentors there is also a need for organizational, personal, and role-clarity support for all mentors.

BLUE RIBBON MENTOR-ADVOCATE PROGRAM

So how does a mentoring program that relies on volunteers (rather than paid mentors) improve the commitment of their mentors, increase match length, engage parents deeply, and maximize the impact they have on lives? How can one recreate some of the strengths of a model like Friends of the Children without turning volunteers into employees? Fortunately, the 2012 SIYM gave a shining example of one such program that has managed to provide incredible long-term impact while sticking with a volunteer-based model.

The Blue Ribbon Mentor-Advocate Program in Chapel Hill, NC was established in 1995 to help address the racial achievement gap—among the worst in the nation—in the local school district. The program, which is run by the district, does this by providing systemic advocacy, one-on-one mentoring, leadership development, and a host of other supports to students. Mentees are identified in the 4th grade and come from all across the academic spectrum, but in general the program targets low-income and first-generation students of color.

Parents play a big role in the program as well, attending parent-teacher conferences (with the mentor), engaging in other activities with the child and mentor (both at school and in the community), and participating in workshops and classes provided by the program’s Parent University.

At the center of this work is the mentor, who spends two hours a week with the student. Mentors are volunteers from the community, but the level of commitment Blue Ribbon asks for is considerable: A minimum of two years and 12 hours of initial training. “We are very up-front about the effort that goes into this,” says Coordinator Graig Meyer. “This is what it takes for our program to work; this is what we do.” Most of the program’s mentors are young professionals or empty-nesters.

The mentors provide emotional support and encouragement, help the student set goals and plan for college and careers, and facilitate their engagement with school and learning. But they are not asked to do tutoring: if a student drops below a B in a class, the program provides dedicated tutors and other academic support. This avoids the trap of many academic mentoring programs where mentors spend considerable time focusing on remedial learning or even test prep. Blue Ribbon mentors are free to focus on other things.
In addition to working closely with the student’s parents, the mentors also advocate for the youth in the school setting. They interact directly with teachers and other administrators. They help resolve conflicts and help bridge the gap between family and school. They take an active role in making sure that the young person has access to the other resources and support they need. Blue Ribbon provides training to their mentors in how to take on this advocacy role and effectively work for their mentee’s best interests. They ensure that each mentee has what he or she needs to succeed in the school.

This blend of mentoring, systemic advocacy, and parent involvement has produced some stunning results:

- 97% of the mentees have graduated with a diploma
- 100% of the program’s mentees have gone on to enroll in post-secondary education at some level
- 60% of their matches last from 4th grade through graduation; 90% last two years or more
- Over 95% of the mentors, mentees, and parents rate the program as “excellent” or “good”

These are results that any mentoring program would be envious of. Meyer credits several aspects of the program with these results:

- The careful intentionality with which they make matches. “Sometimes it takes up to a year to find the right mentor for a student,” notes Meyer. “And we only do matching twice a year because it is such an intensive process.” The results of that process, however, speak for themselves.
- The robust training that mentors receive. After an initial orientation, mentors go through a full-day training covering boundaries, establishing trust, working with parents, and effective advocacy. They also go on a tour of mentees’ neighborhoods and engage in frank discussions about the challenges they will face, not only in forming their mentoring relationships but also addressing the serious needs of the youth they serve.
- The suite of services they offer beyond mentoring. The Youth Leadership Institute provides a number of opportunities for youth to build skills and gain confidence, which helps not only at school but in making the most of their mentoring relationships. The program also provides a lot of career and higher education exposure, dedicated tutoring, and cultural enrichment. Parent involvement is also a critical piece. And at the end of all this hard work, the program makes scholarships available to any student who completes the program.

Meyer was joined at the SIYM by Dr. George Noblit, a University of North Carolina professor who is leading the ongoing evaluation of Blue Ribbon. Noblit’s two presentations at the event touched on another critical factor in the program’s success: tackling issues of race and class head on. As Noblit explained, Blue Ribbon is very explicit about the program’s core goal: social-economic mobility. As he put it, “If at the end of all this mentoring and programmatic effort the youth go on to have the same lives they would have otherwise, what is the point?”

One of the core things that Blue Ribbon tries to provide to mentees and families is “social capital,” defined as the access, membership, resources, and connections that allow members of a society to accumulate the form of capital most of us are familiar with—economic capital. So the program is very explicit about providing these students and families with access, resources, and opportunities they might not have otherwise. By providing this social capital, the hope is that they are laying the groundwork for upward social mobility.

But the notion of social capital, a theory developed by the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, has some issues. For one, it is viewed as something that only a dominant class can have or grant to others. In mentoring programs, especially those geared toward minorities, this can come across as mentors needing to “save” or “rescue” their mentees, or encouraging their mentees to assimilate or otherwise change their identity in order to gain access to the dominant class. This is sometimes crudely described as “white savior syndrome” and many a mentoring program has found itself unconsciously projecting this in their work.

There are other theorists, such as UC-Santa Barbara professor Tara Yosso, who see many other forms of capital as being valuable to groups within a society. Her Community Cultural Wealth model identifies several other forms...
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of “capital,” including:

• Aspirational Capital: the resilient nature of people who hold on to their hopes and dreams

• Linguistic Capital: the skills attained through communication experiences in more than one language and/or style

• Familial Capital: the ways that families carry a sense of community history

• Navigational Capital: skills maneuvering through social institutions

• Resistant Capital: knowledge and skills fostered through oppositional behavior that challenges inequality

To Illustrate how these forms of capital play out in the work of Blue Ribbon, Noblit led SIYM participants through a fascinating exercise: coding transcripts of interviews with mentors, mentees, and parents as if we were ethnographers looking for signs of these various forms of capital. Participants noted when they thought a form of capital was being expressed and where that capital was coming from—the program, the mentee, or the family.

It was very illuminating to see just how many forms of capital the families served by Blue Ribbon brought to the work of the program. These families, rather than being in need of “saving,” offered a wealth of strengths and forms of capital that mentors can build on, rather than replace. The program trains mentors in understanding, recognizing, and appreciating these forms of capital, something that allows the program to work from a strengths-based perspective.

The program also spends time in training discussing what Noblit termed “racial code switching,” the idea that people of color often toggle between several states when engaging a dominant class institution, such as a school. They teach mentors that at any point in time, their mentees may be:

• Blending—giving up a racial identity to try and fit in

• Opposing—rejecting the dominant culture and self-segregating with their own culture

• Transcending—existing in both “worlds” at the same time

Noblit noted that transcending is very rare for most individuals and that the work of trying to be true to one’s self in two very different worlds can be exhausting. But the program, and their mentors, tries to meet students where they are at in the moment and provide support that will help move them towards a transcendent identity.

It was refreshing to hear a mentoring program address these issues of race and class so directly and with such purpose. They are providing their mentors with frameworks and ways of understanding that most mentoring programs do not. In fact, much of the discussion around the work of Blue Ribbon was how starkly their approach to race and class differed from most of the field. There was a feeling that too many mentoring programs either ignore race altogether in a naïve attempt to be “colorblind” or are simply unaware of the coded messages they put out about the work they do. As a nation, we do not discuss issues like class and social dominance nearly as much as we should. Here is a program that is not shying away from the difficult conversations about why their mentees need support and how to truly change a life and a community.

Most practitioners who learn about the work of Blue Ribbon focus on their advocacy component, but the real genius of the program may be in the overt ways they are trying to cut through the clutter of race, class, power, and mobility in their community.

SANDRA CHRISTENSON

Continuing the theme of innovative school-based mentoring, Dr. Sandra Christenson from the University of Minnesota reviewed her experience and research with the Check & Connect program. Check & Connect began in 1990 as a partnership between the Minneapolis Public Schools and a group of researchers, including Christenson, with some interesting ideas on how to increase engagement and academic achievement for middle school students
Check & Connect specifically targets students that are “disengaged” from their educational setting—they don't see the value in school, have trouble with motivation and feelings of academic self-efficacy, are behind their peers in terms of academic performance and credits toward graduation. The program is focused on reigniting a sense of engagement in students, specifically trying to increase active participation in academic and school activities and improve the student’s commitment to educational goals and learning.

The intervention has several components—academic monitoring, timely, personalized intervention, referral to other interventions and supports, and family/parent engagement—all tied together by the work of a mentor. The program’s mentors engage in two main activities:

• The “check”—Where the mentor and student review academic performance, behavior, attendance, and participation in school activities

• The “connect”—In which mentors deliver timely interventions, problem solve and set goals with the student, and connect the youth or family to other services that can fill a specific need

The mentors, however, are not volunteers. They are paid employees of the school or district and work with up to 40 students at a time. (In most instances, these are dedicated staff positions, although some districts are choosing to have existing school staff serve as the mentors, serving a much smaller caseload of students.) They meet with each student for about an hour a week to review academic progress and figure out ways to overcome barriers to academic success. “These mentors are the linchpin for the model and are often the one person in the student’s life who keeps education relevant and salient in the student’s mind,” notes Christenson. “They serve as an anchor point for students, their families, and school personnel. They help the families and students navigate all the requirements of school, all the while building a relationship with the student and showing an interest in their life.”

While one might assume that mentoring 40 students at any given time might lead to rather impersonal interactions and an “assembly line” approach, the work of Check & Connect mentors actually demonstrates a very youth-centered and highly impactful take on academic mentoring. The program provides a lot of coaching to the mentors, training them in specific strategies for engaging students and reinforcing the program’s philosophy and goals. The interactions with students emphasize several non-cognitive skills, such as self-awareness, self-management, and personal responsibility (especially making choices and accepting the consequences). As Christenson noted, “For some students, these social and emotional skills are deal-makers—or breakers—in terms of graduating and attaining their higher education or career goals.”

In their weekly interactions, Check & Connect mentors emphasize:

• **Honest, solution-oriented communication.** Explaining school policies and practices, explaining where the student is at academically, and designing interventions that will help the student set goals, problem solve and persist.

• **Taking the time to dialogue.** Talking openly about the student’s issues and concerns, both academic and personal.

• **Maintaining expectations for student performance.** The students receive a constant message that they can always be improving.

• **Respect.** These mentors place a high value on respecting the student and their family, while also demanding respect in return. This helps form the foundation for the work they do together.

In addition to these points of emphasis, Check & Connect mentors are trained to have many “tools” available to use with the student, depending on their needs. Examples of these strategies include:

• **Teaching problem solving and goal setting.** Mentors teach students to analyze past mistakes so that they can learn to make better choices. They also emphasize the importance of persistence and hard work in making and achieving goals.

• **Encouraging an optimistic mindset.** Some students simply need someone telling them that they can achieve. Mentors listen closely for expressions of resilience and hope from the students and try to reinforce the importance of believing that you can achieve, even if it’s not easy.

• **Challenging negative assumptions.** Many students feel like school is irrelevant to their lives or that their struggles are indicative of unchangeable personal shortcomings. Mentors teach students to see their strengths and embrace the challenge of learning.
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Connect is a mentoring program. There are a number of factors that indicate that Check & Connect closely mirrors other school-based mentoring efforts. Check & Connect, they first need to understand how not noted previously. If mentoring programs are to learn from discussion and disagreement about whether this highly-successful intervention “counts” as a mentoring program. How we define mentoring programs and mentoring relationships is an age-old debate, but it is worth exploring in detail because of the need for “external validity” noted previously. If mentoring programs are to learn from Check & Connect, they first need to understand how closely it mirrors other school-based mentoring efforts.

But is Check and Connect a mentoring program? Can we easily differentiate mentoring interventions from mentoring programs? Christenson herself posed this question to the SIYM participants and there was considerable discussion and disagreement about whether this highly-successful intervention “counts” as a mentoring program. How we define mentoring programs and mentoring relationships is an age-old debate, but it is worth exploring in detail because of the need for “external validity” noted previously. If mentoring programs are to learn from Check & Connect, they first need to understand how closely it mirrors other school-based mentoring efforts.

There are a number of factors that indicate that Check & Connect is a mentoring program:

- The underlying principles of the intervention mirror those of mentoring. The mentor uses a relationship with the student, over time, to help them change their attitudes and behaviors so that they might find more success in key area. The mentor also connects with the student's family and builds bridges between home and school.
- The program structure and the role of the coordinator. Check & Connect mentors meet with their students weekly, and make a two year commitment; Check & Connect is an 11 month intervention. A program coordinator supports the mentors in their work, provides training and resources, and manages additional program activities and events.
- The mentoring provides instrumental, developmental, and emotional support, but is not prescriptive. Mentors’ time with their students is split between focused attention on concerns and issues and general conversation about how things are going. The mentors don’t tell students what to do and they don’t follow a strict curriculum or set of instructions. Instead, they use problem solving techniques to address the student needs to enhance school performance.
- Mentors help build cognitive and relational skills. As noted above, Christenson talked extensively about the ways their mentors try to reframe the way students think about school and how they teach interpersonal and problem-solving skills. They help them grow as individuals, learn to set goals, and try to spark their interest in a lifetime of learning. One can see many facets of Jean Rhodes’ Pathways of Mentoring model in the work of Check & Connect mentors.
- The mentor provides direct support, but also serves as a conduit to other services. There is recognition that these mentors can’t be everything to a student (certainly not with 39 other students needing similar support). So the program rightly limits the mentor’s role, collaborates with school professionals, and instead refers students and families to additional services and interventions as needed.

But SIYM participants also noted a number of reasons why Check & Connect is not a mentoring program:

- The relationship does not have much structure outside of the “check” schedule. These matches don't have contact outside of those times and although mentors do help around personal and other non-academic issues, the focus is primarily on student engagement and school.
- The mentors are school or district employees. There were some SIYM participants who felt that mentoring, by definition, is a voluntary activity and that this level of compensation changes the relationship dynamic from mentoring to something else.
- The number of students served by each mentor. This level of caseload also prevents the deep bonding we typically associate with mentoring relationships.
- The similarity to academic coaching or other targeted one-on-one academic interventions. Several participants noted that Check & Connect sounds similar to the work done by guidance counselors, academic coaches, and others who work with students to help

Validating a student’s concerns, but not allowing those concerns to limit achievement. Students often have very valid criticisms of school life and their educational experience. Check & Connect mentors validate these concerns when appropriate, but also use that as a springboard for conversations about overcoming adversity and being creative in finding solutions.

The results of this approach to mentoring are exemplary. Christenson reviewed findings from six different evaluations of Check & Connect. Across these studies, Check & Connect has proven to decrease truancy, dropouts, and feelings of disengagement, while increasing attendance, academic credits and performance, school completion, student engagement, and classroom behavior. It has been proven to work with elementary students up through high school, in urban and rural settings, and with students who have varying levels of learning and behavioral disabilities, as well as students without disabilities. Driving home the point that Check & Connect simply “works” is the fact that it is listed as one of the model programs for dropout prevention in the Institute for Education Science’s What Works Clearinghouse.

The 2012 Summer Institute on Youth Mentoring - The 2012 Summer Institute on Youth Mentoring - The 2012 Summer Institute on Youth Mentoring - The 2012 Summer Institute on Youth Mentoring - The 2012 Summer Institute on Youth Mentoring
them find academic success. (Although Christenson did note that the two year commitment of weekly check-ins and the emphasis on home-school communication is usually not typical of many academic interventions.)

SIYM participants never reached consensus on whether Check & Connect was a mentoring program or a different intervention that happened to use some features similar to mentoring programs. But Mark Eddy made a salient point about these types of “in/out” arguments in the social and human service fields. He noted that there has been a similar debate in the world of psychotherapy related to working with parents and families. One camp believes that therapeutic interventions for parents should focus on the relationships between the family members; while others insist that these interventions should focus on building parent skills and teaching coping strategies. These two factions have been arguing about the direction of their field for decades, but Eddy noted that the tension started up when funding for these types of programs started to shrink, and that the two camps are essentially digging in their heels because of the scarcity of resources to do this kind of work with families. “The reality is that most good interventions for families cover both parent skills and relationship healing,” noted Eddy, “but as funders kept looking for ways to serve clients more quickly and cheaply, the ‘big tent’ feel of that field disappeared. It’s hard to be inclusive when practitioners are fighting for resources.”

This comment felt very telling for the mentoring field at this moment in time. We have spent the better part of two decades researching and codifying best practices in an effort to show the rigor and validity of youth mentoring as a prevention and intervention strategy. But in the process of “defining the field” mentoring has become a bit provincial. There is disagreement about using paid mentors, or mentors who only focus on one goal, or mentoring relationships that last a short duration. We debate about whether some programs should be included in the “big tent” or not—we have become a bit rigid in our thinking. Eddy is correct in noting that these arguments have really intensified as the stakes for youth mentoring have gone higher and as the investment of policymakers and funders has waned. If the mentoring field had the overall funding it needs to thrive, it’s entirely possible that the question of whether Check & Connect is truly a mentoring program would become moot. We would simply note that it is very successful and recognize it as part of the fabric of the larger mentoring universe.

GABE KUPERMINC

Another innovation-related topic that has gained traction in recent years has been the use of mentors in programs that offer many other services and supports. This so-called “integrated” or “blended” mentoring has flourished as policymakers and funders have tried to combine the power of mentoring with the goals and structures of other youth services. Luckily, 2012 SIYM participants were able to tap into the expertise of Gabe Kuperminc of Georgia State University, a leading expert on mentoring in combination with other services. In addition to researching several of these programs, Kuperminc authored a chapter on this subject for the 2005 Handbook of Youth Mentoring.

Starting off his first presentation, Kuperminc outlined just how much there is to be gained by combining mentoring and other youth services:

- It adds value to what the mentor can provide, promoting gains or development in areas the mentor may not address effectively
- It can help increase mentees’ access to or engagement in other services (which may be provided by the mentor or an external program/curriculum)
- The mentoring relationship can provide a place for mentees to practice or refine new skills or ways of thinking that result from the engagement with other services

Kuperminc feels that these blended mentoring programs tend to fall into two categories: those where the mentor is also delivering some other intervention (a mentor who also delivers a curriculum on choosing a career, for example) and those where the mentoring relation-
ship is one of many supports provided to the youth. Both of these models show potential for increasing positive outcomes for youth.

Unfortunately, the research on these types of programs is scarce and inconclusive. In putting together the chapter for the Handbook on Youth Mentoring, Kuperminc’s literature review found only 30 program evaluations with sufficient descriptions of the mentoring component for inclusion in his summary. There was evidence that all these programs were effective across a wide range of outcomes, but there was little hard evidence of the “value-added” of the mentoring component, specifically. Most of these evaluations focused on overall program effectiveness, but not a comparison of the program with and without mentoring in the mix. In two of the three studies he could find that addressed this, the versions of the programs with mentoring did not produce as strong of a result.

There was, however, some evidence that there were stronger effects when the mentoring relationship was the “primary vehicle” for delivering the other services. This indicates that these programs might be most successful when the mentor is the facilitator and conduit to other aspects of the program, not just one of many disconnected things provided to youth. He noted that in DuBois’ recent meta-analysis of mentoring programs, four of the seven programs highlighted as illustrative of high-quality mentoring fell into the “primary vehicle” category. So over time, we are gathering more evidence that this type of program is effective.

Kuperminc shared an excellent example of how integrated mentoring can work effectively by reviewing his research into the Cool Girls, Inc. program. Cool Girls is a weekly afterschool program in Atlanta serving girls in grades 3–8 (a separate high school version has also been developed). The girls participate in various academic support activities, as well as weekend workshops, field trips, and life skills classes. They are eligible to get a mentor after completing one year in the program.

Cool Girls produces some outstanding results for all participants: gains in behavioral conduct, scholastic competence, decisionmaking, hope for the future, and physical activity. But the girls with mentors also showed statistically significant gains in social acceptance, body image, and school grades. They were also less likely to expect to use drugs in the future. Clearly the mentoring component is adding value above and beyond what the general program is providing.

Results like this have meaningful implications for mentoring programs. There is mounting evidence that mentors can help boost the outcomes of youth serving programs of all types, not only increasing the amount of impact in targeted areas, but also producing impacts in areas that are secondary to the overall program goals. This echoes the finding from the DuBois meta-analysis that mentors often produce gains in multiple areas, even in areas that are not the program’s primary focus. So if we integrate mentors into a drug prevention program or a career exploration program, we may see gains in areas beyond just reduced drug use and increased career interest. And certainly policymakers have shown substantial interest in building mentoring into other youth services, looking for a spark that can improve program outcomes without adding significant expense or radically altering a program model.

But there are also challenges in blended mentoring. Kuperminc offered these cautions for programs blending mentors with other components:

- Balancing breadth and depth is challenging. Trying to pack too many working parts, including a mentor, into an intervention can strain program resources and reduce effectiveness.
- Getting lost in the shuffle. It can be a challenge to make sure that all of the parts of a multi-component program work together. Mentors need to be integrated into, and knowledgeable of, all the other components. Creating this synergy is labor intensive and asks a lot of staff and volunteers.
- Timing and sequencing of matches. When do youth get their mentor in relation to the other components? Mentoring can be an early “hook” for parents and youth, but it can also take time and attention away from other critical program components. Waiting to make matches can allow for more time to get to know youth, resulting in better pairings and stronger
matches. But does that timing fit with the delivery of other services? And what happens when some of these matches (inevitably) fail? How does that impact participation in, or benefits from, all the other program components?

- Ensuring buy-in. Mentors can undercut program goals unless they are fully on board with what the program is doing. They may want to support youth in ways that are incompatible with the rest of the program or they may not like the way mentoring is structured within the program.

Kuperminc encouraged programs to avoid adding a mentoring component when the overall program is not having success. This type of blended mentoring needs to be carefully planned, implemented, and studied if these challenges are to be addressed.

In addition to this look at blended mentoring, Kuperminc also shared his research into group mentoring, noting that one-on-one mentoring is not for everyone and that some youth may benefit more from engaging mentors with their peers in a group setting.

A 2005 Public/Private Ventures report on group mentoring noted several advantages and strengths that group mentoring offers:

- It is prevalent. Half of the adult mentors in a 2005 MENTOR survey reported working with groups of youth.
- It is used frequently in schools and other youth settings. Boys and Girls Clubs are just one example of a group mentoring setting.
- It is attractive to different adult mentors. It may be appealing to mentors who don't have the time, motivation, or comfort level for one-on-one mentoring.
- It is attractive to different youth. Some may find it easier to be engaged in the context of peers.
- It can be less expensive. This obviously depends on the model and program activities, but these programs can often serve more youth for less money.

Additionally, group mentoring programs can achieve different outcomes. While we mostly think of youth mentoring as this hierarchical relationship that provides guidance and role modeling, group mentoring programs offer several things that one-on-one mentoring struggles to provide:

- Horizontal (peer) relationships
- Opportunities for cooperation and reciprocity

Kuperminc noted that there is some limited evidence in the group mentoring literature for positive effects on school dropouts and academic performance, problem behavior and school engagement, and sexual knowledge and attitudes. But there is little in the way of practice documents, such as manuals or toolkits.

He also shared his own research into a group mentoring program at a high school in Georgia. In this program, youth are mentored (by graduate students) in groups of up to seven students. The groups are all same-sex and organized around shared interest. The mentors engage the students in planned topical discussions and predetermined activities, while also allowing time for fun and open conversation.

His research has found that the program improves peer relationship quality, feelings of interpersonal competence, and feelings of peer and mentor support. The mentors not only bond effectively with each student, but the group environment also produces improvements in peer relations and feelings of mutual support. As Kuperminc put
it, “The mentors get to impart wisdom, but the students get to practice and give meaning to this wisdom by their interactions.”

Unfortunately, the program also seemed to negatively impact the sense of school belonging—these students felt less “at home” at school, which was obviously not the intention of the program. Kuperminc speculated that this may be the result of these programs providing a lot of mutual support, something the students get less of at the school and that they notice more as a result of their time in the program. Further analysis of program records revealed that in many of the groups in which students showed declines in overall school belonging, racial concerns and discrimination were a common discussion theme. Kuperminc speculates that the youth felt comfortable enough in their groups to talk about these difficult issues, which is a positive sign of bonding and connectedness, but that the mentors may not have been prepared to deal with the issues in satisfying ways.

Overall, Kuperminc’s research highlighted that group mentoring programs may be able to offer a “synergistic” impact: the wisdom and guidance of a mentor, combined with opportunities to relate to peers and access even more personal support. But to get these benefits, group mentoring programs must overcome several challenges in how they design their program:

- **Overall structure.** What is the mentor-mentee ratio, the number of mentors per group, the allowable age differences, etc.?
- **Mentor recruitment and training.** Which volunteers are a good fit? How to teach facilitation skills?
- **Mentee selection and preparation.** Who participates and how does the program prepare them to get the most out of the experience?
- **Cultural competence and ethnic identity.** How can we assess cultural competence? What are the benefits or drawbacks of grouping by ethnicity?
- **Ongoing supervision, reflection, planning.** How can programs monitor group processes without disrupting them? How do we develop appropriate activities? How do we end these relationships or handle a sudden departure of a mentor?

It will be interesting to see if group mentoring models continue to grow in popularity. This may be an innovation that gains some permanence as policymakers and funders look for new ways to bring mentoring to youth who may not participate otherwise.

SARAH SCHWARTZ

Another multi-component mentoring program discussed at the 2012 SIYM was the National Guard Youth ChalleNGe program—which happens to be the second largest formal mentoring program in the United States (operating in 29 states) even though many practitioners remain unfamiliar with what ChalleNGe provides.

Discussing new research into the ChalleNGe program was Sarah Schwartz from the University of Massachusetts–Boston, whose work over the past several years has focused not only on the outcomes of the ChalleNGe program but also one of the interesting strategies they employ: youth-initiated mentoring matches. These matches begin with the youth themselves identifying a potential mentor from their community and formally asking them to take on the mentor role. In this way, the program is almost a hybrid of “natural” mentoring relationships and a formal program model. These youth-initiated matches start from a position of strength and the program uses them to kick-start the “value add” that the mentors provide in the context of the other aspects of the program.

ChallenNGe is a 17-month program for youth who have dropped out of school (many are also involved in the juvenile justice system or face myriad other issues in their communities). The program begins with a five-month residential phase—a highly-structured program that includes GED attainment and credits toward a diploma, life skills training, and leadership classes. The youth spend this time on a military base and the program is explicit about using the culture and structure of military life to instill discipline and other values in the youth. The youth then transition to a 12-month post-residential phase where they reenter their communities and build the next phase of their lives. It is this transition time where the work of ChalleNGe mentors is most critical.
Evaluations of the program (conducted by MDRC) have highlighted some outstanding success from this innovative model:

- After nine months, the youth had large effects for educational, vocational, behavioral, and health outcomes compared to youth who did not participate in the program. Even four months after the residential portion, ChalleNGe participants were showing considerable gains.

- In one study, significant educational and vocational effects were observed a whopping 38 months after entering the program. These youth still had gains in these areas over three years after the core intervention—something any mentoring program would love to see in their outcomes.

In her most recent research, Schwartz has focused on the role that mentors play in this success and how these relationships formed and endured. In looking at these mentors and their relationships, she has uncovered some of the secrets behind the success of youth-initiated mentoring:

- 83% of the mentors were the same race or ethnicity as their mentee
- 26% lived in the same zip code
- 93% worked full time (but still found the time to mentor)
- 57% of the youth chose their mentor on their own
- 37% had the help of a parent in identifying a mentor
- Only 5% of the youth needed the program’s help in identifying a mentor
- 74% of the matches were still meeting after 21 months
- 56% were still meeting after 38 months

The longevity of these matches was correlated with improved outcomes: those who lasted 21 months were more likely to have graduated and be employed; after 38 months, the outcomes were better in every category they looked at except substance use. So not only did the program make an overall difference, the longevity of mentoring within the program also moderated outcomes for youth. Her research also found that the relationships where the youth chose their mentor tended to last longer, as did matches with the same racial or ethnic background.

So how did these mentors build these successful outcomes? Schwartz noted several specific ways:

- They helped youth get through the residential phase (many youth said they would have quit without their mentor telling them to stick it out)
- They helped with the transition back into the community
- They provided social and emotional support (mentees talked openly about how much they learned about themselves and relating to other people from their mentors)
- They provided advice and guidance
- They provided instrumental support (helping the youth connect to jobs, providing transportation to appointments, advocating for the youth in court, etc.)

In many ways, it was the youth-initiated aspect of these matches that allowed them to thrive from the beginning. Schwartz noted several strengths of youth-initiated mentoring:

- The ability to provide instrumental support. By building on an existing relationship, these mentors could provide transportation, resources, and other supports that many volunteers cannot or are not allowed to provide.
- The ability to be more “prescriptive” in working with the youth. A mentor who already has an established relationship has more authority and leeway to say “Here is what I think you should do…”
- A greater cultural sensitivity. These mentors, for the most part, had a lot in common with their mentees, often coming from the same neighborhood and cultural background.
- Teaching young people how to ask for support. By acquiring what Fabricio Balcazar called “help recruiting competencies,” the youth may gain confidence and skills that can help them ask for support in the future.
- Building on the internal social capital in communities. This resonated with the notions of various forms of “capital” that Noblit and the Blue Ribbon program had introduced to participants. These matches can build on those forms of capital in ways that an “outsider” mentor cannot.

Schwartz’ research also highlighted a few challenges of a youth-initiated approach to matching, such as the
difficulties screening and training these “nominees,” the potential increased pain and damage when these personally-asked mentors let the youth down, and the fact that these matches, at least in ChalleNGe, struggled to meet consistently.

But clearly youth-initiated matching is a strategy that other mentoring programs would be wise to explore. It may be a good fit for programs serving older youth (in fact, YouthBuild USA has also built this concept into their OJJDP-funded mentoring model serving 16–24 year olds) or where youth will be transitioning back into a community. It provides youth with some control and autonomy over how they ask for and receive mentoring, not only now, but throughout their life. And if done well, it can alleviate some of the volunteer recruitment burden that so many mentoring programs struggle with. Although further study is needed, this innovative approach could be an effective strategy for making strong, ready-to-go matches.

SARAH GEENEN

In addition to the ChalleNGe program, there were other examples at SIYM of mentoring efforts building on shared backgrounds between mentors and mentees. Portland State University researcher Sarah Geenen presented on two of her programs designed to improve the outcomes of youth leaving foster care. In both programs, the mentors are often individuals who have been through foster care themselves, and their shared experience with the programs’ participants is one of the keys to nurturing trust, creating a sense of community, and building strong mentoring relationships.

The My Life program provides mentoring and other services to enhance the self-determination of youth with disabilities in foster care. The program is designed to support youths’ transition planning and exit from the foster care system. “The focus of the program is really about self-directed action to achieve personally valued goals,” noted Geenen. “‘Nothing about me without me’ is the motto of the program.”

There are several elements to My Life, including:

- One-on-one mentoring with a coach
- Group mentoring with alumni and peers
- Coordinated transition planning
The work of the coaches ties everything together. Coaches are paid staff—both with and without a personal history in foster care (although many do have that background). They meet with youth once a week to provide transition planning support and to work on skills emphasized in the Take Charge curriculum. These sessions focus on self-determination, making good decisions, and life skills. The sessions are videotaped to ensure proper delivery of the curriculum and to identify areas of professional development or ongoing training for the coaches.

In addition to this weekly mentoring, the group mentoring sessions give youth a chance to learn from each other and provide peer support.

A recent evaluation of My Life compared the transition planning and other outcomes of My Life participants to youth participating in a traditional Independent Living Program (ILP). My Life Participants had significant improvements, compared to their peers, in self-determination, perceived quality of life, and transition planning, as well as notable improvements in educational outcomes, employment, and feelings of being prepared for adulthood. Two new studies, funded by the Institute for Education Sciences and the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, respectively, hope to build on these findings and solidify My Life as an effective program model.

Mary Welch, a current My Life mentor, spoke about how she goes about achieving these impressive results in the program. Welch was actually a former My Life participant, and noted that her experience in the program helps in her current role. She needed considerable help from her coach in achieving her goals, reflecting that the coach was especially helpful in her finding her first post-transition job: “It was like she was helping me take the training wheels off for being an adult.”

She also remembers the fear she felt around transition and how nervous she was about the eventual loss of her coach at the end of the program. She now uses these experiences in working with current foster youth, using strategic disclosure to build a rapport with students and let them know that they can make it through this difficult time—just as she has. She feels that in these programs, the hopes and fears of foster youth are so vivid that having a mentor with a similar background is a major asset. The advice may be the same, but it perhaps carries more weight because of the fact that the mentor has “been there.”

The other program discussed by Geenen was Better Futures, which is focused on helping foster youth with mental health conditions prepare for and participate in post-secondary education. In this model, youth entering their junior or senior years of high school interact with a coach briefly before attending a four day Summer Institute with their peers from around the state. The Institute brings these students to the PSU campus for panels, tours, activities, and workshops, all designed to expose them to college life and help them figure out specific aspects of their plan, such as finding housing, sorting out financial aid, and making progress on other goals that would allow them to attend college. Most of the students do not wind up attending PSU, but the skills they gain are valuable no matter where they eventually matriculate. After the Institute, they engage in at least seven more coaching sessions and have contact with program staff over the next nine months as they flesh out their plans.

In Better Futures, all of the mentors have experience in the foster care system and can talk with youth about the transition they face. The program provides access to workshops and content experts on all aspects of getting into college, but it is the mentors who provide the direct support and encouragement these students need.

An evaluation of Better Futures examined the results of this mentoring in comparison to a group of similar students who did not receive mentoring. Better Futures participants had significant gains in postsecondary planning and participation, self-determination, career engagement, mental health, quality of life, and perceptions of social support. It seems that these mentors were able to draw on their experiences and provide exactly what these students needed to make the most of all the other learning opportunities and supports the program provides. Here we
see an excellent example of what Kuperminc described as mentors being a “primary vehicle” for the rest of the program components. Through the development of a relationship, they help youth get more out of everything else the program offers.

Further illustrating this point was Adrienne Croskey, a Better Futures mentor. She discussed how she approaches working with students in foster care, drawing on her own experiences in the system. As with Welch, she also sees strategic disclosure of certain elements of her past as critical in her work. She also offered several tips for any mentor working with youth transitioning out of foster care or who have disabilities:

- Teach the youth themselves how to strategically disclose—for example there are scholarships and other types of services they may be eligible for, but there are times when it might not be advantageous to disclose their history and they could even be stigmatized because of it.

- Don’t judge—“Even if nothing overt is said, we can feel it.”

- Help them understand that they are capable, but remember some goals may take more time without the support most young adults have.

- Don’t talk over them or through them, even if they are withdrawn.

- Focus on capabilities first, outcomes second.

- Work on goal setting and self-advocacy skills.

- Work with these youth to find a balance between transition planning and treatment (mental health, etc.)—young adults exiting care need both.

These two programs offer excellent examples of one of the main themes that emerged from the 2012 SIYM: the use of mentoring in punctuated, focused, short-term ways to achieve highly specific goals. Although these mentors undoubtedly improve the lives the their mentees in myriad ways, the programs really have a singular focus that drives the mentoring conversations and activities, as well as the other supports placed around the relationship. The programs use mentors with a deep personal understanding of their mentee’s circumstances to quickly build trust and a sense of belonging in the program. They are targeted in a way that many programs—especially those focused broadly on “youth development” or the “whole child”—are not.

Yet it was interesting that there was little discussion as to whether these programs “counted” as mentoring programs, as there was with Check and Connect. Perhaps this was simply the result of Christenson broaching that question herself when presenting on Check and Connect. Maybe the academic focus of Check and Connect put SIYM participants more on guard about the definition of that program. Or maybe it was the personal bond that these foster care survivors shared in Geenen’s programs that made them feel more like true mentoring programs.

But looking at the three programs objectively, all of them:

- Were fairly short in duration
- Involved helping the youth work toward a specific goal
- Monitored progress made by the youth
- Made use of other supports
- Featured conversations that could be viewed more as “coaching” than open-ended mentoring
- Featured mentors who worked with a “caseload” of youth, not one-on-one

Yet for reasons that are unclear, there was vigorous debate about the “mentoring” in only one of these programs. With all of the programs discussed at the 2012 SIYM, we can see mentoring being used in focused, precise ways, using unique structures and support systems. Viewed as a whole, these programs seem to be using mentoring relationships as a means, not an end; a tool rather than a toolbox. And once again, we are left with the eternal question: How do we define mentoring and mentoring programs?
CONCLUSION

As with all Summer Institutes on Youth Mentoring, the researchers and practitioners in attendance were left with as many questions as answers at the end of five days of learning and debate. There was strong agreement among participants that the youth mentoring field is stronger when we all pay attention to the interesting and innovative things happening at the fringes of our field. Programs are using mentoring in new ways that challenge our notions of how mentoring works best and what mentoring can achieve.

Participants focused on many implications for this new research and these new program models:

- We need to assume that the field of youth mentoring is going to continue to diversify and that we will continue to see mentoring programs that are challenging our traditional assumptions about best practice. The recent meta-analysis by DuBois and colleagues highlights the tremendous diversity of mentoring, both in terms of program design and outcomes achieved for youth. We should embrace this diversity and always be curious about what we can learn from programs that are different than our own. As Mark Eddy noted, rejecting this diversity out of fear or competition only weakens what we provide the nation’s young people and prevents us from researching and growing our work effectively.

- We might want to think of this diversity as a continuum of mentoring (see image), similar to how the various bands of color in the visible spectrum merge together to create the world we see. In this way, the various “hues” of mentoring are all part of one spectrum, with no one color being more or less important than the others. A child may need to be at various points on this spectrum throughout their life—a school-based mentor to help them catch up in the classroom, a Little League coach who imparts values and confidence, a more purposeful formal mentor when they need to make a key transition or handle a crisis in their life. Youth may even need to be in multiple places on this spectrum at the same time. All of this diversity is good, provided that the programs a child interacts with along the way are of high quality.

- To make sense of this expanding diversity of programming, we will need a corresponding expansion of mentoring research and more events like SIYM to help practitioners make sense of this information. This will require strong allegiances among research-
ers, programs, and policymakers. The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention is leading the way in this regard with their Strategic Mentoring Enhancement Grants (and corresponding evaluations), but more is needed.

- We also need to accept that innovations will fail. We have to give mentoring programs the permission to try new ideas and bring innovation to the field without saddling them with evaluation results that label them as “ineffective” programs. We need to pay more attention to what is happening at the local level, where real innovation is happening. But we also need to be cautious about how we use new innovations for improving existing programs. As a field we are always better off refining and tweaking our existing models rather than changing our programs in dramatic ways to latch onto whatever the “flavor of the month” is in mentoring (such as the many mentoring programs that immediately started serving children of prisoners the second funding became available to do so in the late 2000s). We always need to be asking, as mark Eddy noted, “What is the evidence I should use to make decisions about my program?”

- To that point, Dr. Keller closed the event by noting that the programs highlighted at the 2012 SIYM had very defined populations and corresponding program goals. As such, they are more focused and purposeful than most mentoring programs promoting general youth development. When starting with such clear goals, mentoring is more like one tool among many for supporting youth. In fact, several of these programs didn’t even start out as mentoring programs—they adopted mentoring strategies to get the job done. We need to keep this in mind when determining what aspects of their practice and research we can integrate into our own programs.

The week of the Summer Institute concluded with Dr. Keller’s Summer Symposium on Youth Mentoring, a day-long event that is open to the public, featuring mini-presentations by the Research Fellows and other guest speakers. The audience reflected the diversity of programs we had studied all week. It was inspiring to see the hundreds of individuals interested in learning about innovations in mentoring, in seeing how they could bring fresh ideas to their work. It was a reminder that, in spite of all the evidence-based practice that defines youth mentoring, this field will likely never stop exploring new structures and pushing the possibilities of what mentoring can achieve. We will look back over time, again and again, realizing that the innovations of yesterday eventually turn in to the recognized best practices of tomorrow.

Summer Symposium on Mentoring Research

The Summer Institute capstone was a special, one-day community event: the Summer Symposium on Mentoring Research. Open to both SIYM attendees and the community at large, the Symposium featured a dozen presenters—including the 2012 SIYM Fellows—as well as other prominent researchers, clinicians, and practitioners. Each presenter offered a short, substantive talk about their best ideas related to innovative program practice in youth mentoring. This event, attended by over 180 mentoring and youth development professionals, students, and policymakers, allowed many of the best ideas from the Summer Institute to reach a larger audience, helping to disseminate best practices and spur further dialogue in the field.

With the gracious support of the Reser Family Foundation, presentations were video-captured and can be found on the Summer Institute Website.

Videos of presentation are online:
www.pdx.edu/youth-mentoring/
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