Mentoring

A Synthesis of Public/Private Ventures' Research, 1988-1995

A Summary of the Report

In 1988, when P/PV began to look into the functioning and effects of mentoring, it was enormously popular and totally mysterious. Many people felt intuitively that it was a good thing, insisted that it was easy and cheap to do, and predicted that millions of adults would turn up to mentor disadvantaged kids. In fact, nobody knew what mentoring actually could accomplish; few had given extensive time and consideration to how to do it; and nobody knew how many adults would be willing and able to mentor young people. As work on our research agenda moved ahead into the nineties, the widespread enthusiasm was tempered by experience, and the challenges of making a mentoring program work began to be taken seriously. Each of P/PV's 10 reports contributed to the growing sense that mentoring is more difficult than it had appeared, while at the same time giving evidence of how to do it well and make an important contribution to disadvantaged young people's lives.

The Research Agenda

P/PV's mentoring research initiatives have now produced reports on a variety of programs, including 15 Big Brothers Big Sisters agencies, six of Campus Compact's "Campus Partners in Learning" programs, four of Temple University's "Linking Lifetimes" programs, and two pilot programs developed by P/PV in the juvenile justice system. The program settings were variously schools, college campuses, the juvenile justice system and the community; the volunteer mentors were variously college students, senior citizens and working professionals; and the youth served were variously juvenile offenders, parenting adolescents, at-risk middle school youth and youth from single-parent homes—nearly all from low-income urban areas and with modest or no adult support at home or in the neighborhood.

All the programs we studied involved one-to-one relationships in which an adult volunteer and a youth meet frequently over a period of several months or years. The programs' goals are primarily to provide youth with support and friendship, rather than to seek behavior change. We did not study short-term or group mentoring programs, or those with behavior-changing goals.

The research methods we used comprised implementation analyses, relationship-formation studies, and a random-assignment impact study of the Big Brothers Big Sisters program.

During the course of the initiative, P/PV staff observed operations, reviewed records, and conducted interviews and focus groups in 27 programs; interviewed more than 150 program and management staff; administered questionnaires to more than 200 mentors and 300 youth participants; led about 30 focus groups with volunteers, youth, staff and parents; completed phone surveys with more than 1,000 youth and parents and 800 volunteers; and conducted more than 600 in-depth, semistructured face-to-face interviews with youth and mentors in 230 matches.

Cynthia L. Sipe, P/PV's senior analyst, has pulled together the data from the resulting research studies in a publication titled *Mentoring: A Synthesis of P/PV's Research, 1988-1995*, published in November ($7.50). The publication, made possible by support from The Commonwealth Fund, answers the five questions that have guided our research since 1988. It also includes a summary of each report and a bibliography drawn from the entire series.

The Questions and Answers

Q. Can participating in mentoring programs make important and observable changes in the attitudes and behaviors of at-risk youth?

A. Yes. But note that this answer concerns the 10- to-14-year-olds we studied in a highly structured program in which the adult-youth pairs had regular, frequent, four-hour meetings for at least a year.

Our conclusions about the effects of mentoring programs on participating youth are drawn solely from our rigorous impact study of Big Brothers Big Sisters, in fact the only random-assignment impact study ever done on a mentoring program.

It provides definitive evidence that youth can benefit from participation in a carefully structured mentoring program. Compared with their counterparts, who remained on agency waiting lists during the 18-month study, youth (both boys and girls and all races) who were matched with Big Brothers or Big Sisters:

- were 46 percent less likely to start using drugs, and 27 percent less likely to start drinking;
- were one-third less likely to hit someone;
- skipped half as many days of school, felt more competent about their ability to do well there and, in fact, got slightly higher grades; and
- reported more positive relationships with their peers and parents.

All this was the result of a program not focused on any of these specific outcomes. Big Brothers and Big Sisters are not trained in drug prevention, tutoring, antiviolence counseling or family therapy. They are expected "only" to become trusted friends.

Q. Are there specific practices that characterize effective mentoring relationships?

A. The key is the development of trust between two strangers of different ages and stations in life, a process that is largely determined by the mentor's initial approach.

Some volunteers view the relationship as an opportunity to reform their mentees, and focus immediately on this task: asking personal questions, giving advice, setting goals, suggesting behavior changes, deciding unilaterally on the pair's activities, expecting the youth to initiate contact. These approaches most often lead to mutual dissatisfaction with the match and premature termination: about 70 percent of matches with such volunteers met only sporadically and ended within nine months.

Mentors who take the time to develop trusting relationships with youth (which generally takes about six months of regular meetings) are much more likely to foster the changes that directive volunteers pursue. To develop trust, effective mentors tend to do the following:

- Involve youth in deciding how the pair will spend their time together.
- Make a commitment to being consistent and dependable, a steady presence in the youth's life.
- Recognize that the relationship may be one-sided for some time, expect silence and unresponsiveness in the beginning, and take responsibility for keeping the relationship alive.
- Pay attention to youth's need for "fun," not only as a key to relationship-building but as a chance for youth to have experiences not otherwise available to them.
- Respect the youth's viewpoint.
- Seek and utilize the help and advice of program staff.

In matches with volunteers who adopted these effective approaches, 90 percent met regularly and consistently, and only 9 percent had ended after nine months.

Q. What program structures are needed to maximize "best practices" among mentors?

A. Careful screening, orientation and training, and support and supervision of volunteers by program staff are the most influential program structures.

Most volunteers and youth cannot simply be matched and then left to their own devices. Programs need to provide some infrastructure that fosters and supports the development of effective relationships. Chief among the necessary program structures are:

A screening process that enables selection of adults who understand that their primary role is to develop, first, trust, and then a friendship with "their" youth; and who have the time to devote to consistent meetings over a lengthy period. Perhaps other roles may be found for volunteers with less time, and other programs for those interested in pursuing specific transformative goals.

Orientation and training in the practices of effective mentors. Training should direct volunteers toward realistic and rewarding goals, and give them the information and strategies they need to build mutually satisfying relationships with youth.

Ongoing supervision and support, which are crucial to ensure that pairs are meeting on a regular basis. Programs in which staff did not contact mentors regularly reported the most "failed" matches. In addition, when mentors experience the frustrations common in the early days of a match, consulting with professional staff or meeting with other mentors is particularly helpful. Programs unable to provide staff monitoring have tried requiring set meeting times and providing transportation to the pairs' meetings, but these structural elements are less effective than regular personal contacts with staff and other mentors.

These three elements emerged from the research as far more important to success than did **matching** the age, race and/or gender of the pair members. Certainly, respecting the youth's and mentor's preferences, in terms of demographic characteristics and preferred activities, is desirable, but not nearly as influential as the mentor's approach to building the relationship. Indeed, though our research did not specifically address the issue of same-race versus cross-race matches, all the evidence points to the conclusion that same-gender or same-race matching does not lead systematically to better matches or better results.

Q. Can mentoring be integrated into large-scale youth-serving institutions?

A. What we know at this point is that, as with stand-alone mentoring programs, institutional programs that do not provide resources for close staff supervision and support will fail to produce successful matches.

The only large institution in which we investigated this issue was the juvenile justice system. Some of the lessons of this pilot experience—in which only a limited number of matches met regularly and were sustained over time—may be useful to other settings.

The primary problem was that casework staff were expected to add mentor supervision to their existing responsibilities. They had neither the time nor appropriate preparation to take on the additional tasks of training and supervising a corps of volunteer mentors. The staff also felt they had no authority over the volunteers and were therefore reluctant to follow up with them on missed meetings. And the amount of information on youth that staff felt it was appropriate to share with mentors varied according to whether staff viewed mentoring as extraneous to or part of the treatment plan, an issue that was never defined. Clearly, successful integration of mentoring into large organizations requires resources dedicated to operating the mentoring component.

Q. Is there a large number of adults with enough flexible time and emotional resources to take on the demands of mentoring at-risk youth?

A. At this point, nobody knows.

Despite repeated national- and local-level calls for volunteer mentors, we estimate that there are no more than 350,000 mentors currently working with a fraction of the 5 to 15 million youth who could benefit from mentoring. The largest program we studied, Big Brothers Big Sisters, supports 75,000 matches and has half as many youngsters waiting for adults to be found to match with them. The BB/BS experience is instructive: fewer than half the adults who called during the study period to inquire about volunteering actually applied and, eight months later, only 37 percent of them had successfully completed the screening and matching process.

Whether the number of mentors could be increased by providing additional resources to "best practices" mentoring agencies to attract, screen, match and supervise many more volunteers is also unknown.

Critical Issues Remain

Quality Control. Mentoring is only as good as the relationships that develop between the adult volunteers and the youth with whom they are matched. As the number of mentoring programs continues to grow, the issue of quality looms as a paramount concern. The field lacks an agreed-upon set of standards or benchmarks that could be used to guide the development and monitoring of quality programs and effective mentoring relationships. Such standards should be developed, so that both programs and funders can track implementation; only thus can programs and their funders draw inferences about a program's likely impacts and make whatever adjustments may be called for.

Implications for Public Institutions. Volunteer mentors are not the only adults with whom youth in public institutions interact. We need to address the issue of how to incorporate the principles of effective mentoring (like the importance of building trust and friendship) into the practices of all adults who work in these settings.

Scale and Cost. As new efforts to develop large-scale mentoring initiatives move forward, we have much yet to learn about how to increase the number and size of programs and what the threshold cost for supporting quality mentoring really is. Unfortunately we learned little from the ambitious efforts of the late 1980s, which faded without approaching their initial goals. It is vital now, with the resurgence of interest in mentoring, that we learn 1) how a locality can operationalize a massive expansion effort; 2) what type of staffing and resources are needed to recruit, train and support a large cadre of volunteers; and 3) what is the real cost of providing quality mentoring. (The BB/BSA estimate is $1,000 per match.)

Utility of Mentoring for Other Age Groups. We believe that our research, which focused on mentoring programs for early to mid-adolescents, has implications for how to deal with children, older adolescents and young adults as well. For older youth about to enter employment or post-secondary education, friendship-oriented mentoring alone is likely not enough; but the trust between an adult and young person that effective mentoring implies may be a necessary condition of keeping an older youth involved.

Both the employment/training field and school-to-work efforts are beginning to incorporate mentoring principles into their programming, particularly the idea of long-term career mentors. The Commonwealth Fund's Hospital Youth Mentoring Program is one example of a program for high school youth, combining aspects of mentoring and career development. P/PV's study of this program will provide information on the utility of mentoring for older adolescents, and how its practices may differ from those in programs for younger youth.

Less is known about the benefits of mentoring for pre-adolescent youth, which we will explore in our upcoming U.S. Department of Education-funded work for the National Mentoring Coalition, a group of major mentoring programs convened by The One To One Partnership. In categorizing a wide range of mentoring programs for children, we hope to learn more about the structure and appropriateness of particular models and practices.

From the Foreword

by Gary Walker

Our overall conclusions after eight years of research are clear. First, it is possible to create, between an adult and a youth who were previously strangers, a relationship that markedly advances the youth's development, and markedly deters his or her detrimental behavior. Second, these relationships can be fostered with a high degree of success, in widely varying localities, without the presence of charisma or other special factors whose rarity is often cited as a barrier to expansion of effective interventions.

The simplicity, effectiveness and widespread applicability of mentoring should not seduce us into thinking that its execution offers no worthy challenges. Mentoring's potential for intimacy between previous strangers creates the possibility for benefits—and risks—that many more "complex" interventions simply do not contain. It works best within a supportive structure, and when the adult mentor behaves in certain ways.

Our best estimate is that there are now no more than 350,000 mentors, and at least several million youth who would accept and benefit from adult mentoring. Thus, securing the full benefits of mentoring depends in good part on its programmatic expansion. But securing those benefits also rests on the imaginative integration of mentoring's lessons into other youth-focused efforts: to make our schools more effective; to build a transition between school (or the street) and work; to lower the recidivism of young offenders; to reduce the attraction of gangs, violence and drugs; to reduce teen pregnancy and improve teen parenting. For it is unlikely that any initiative to assist young people will make much difference unless it is securely and determinedly rooted in building trusting relationships between them and adults. In a sense, mentoring is an excellent example of the puzzling disagreement in the youth field between those who conclude "We know what works, let's just get on with it," and others who say "Nothing works well for disadvantaged adolescents—social programs are too little and too late for that age group."

The truth lies in the rockier ground between: we do know a lot about what helps youth develop and transition effectively to adulthood. And much of what we do know is not esoteric but accessible to common sense—like the need for caring adults. The real issue is whether we can stimulate, create and expand these common sense conditions.

Mentoring has successfully traversed that rocky terrain. We should mine its possibilities to the limit.

P/PV's Mentoring Program Reports: 1988-1995

To order these publications, please send your request and payment to P/PV's Communications Department, One Commerce Square, 2005 Market Street, Suite 900, Philadelphia, PA 19103. Executive summaries, when available, are $1.

Mentoring: A Synthesis of P/PV's Research by Cynthia L. Sipe.
(83 pages, Fall 1996) $7.50

Big Brothers/Big Sisters Research

Making a Difference: An Impact Study of Big Brothers/Big Sisters by Joseph P. Tierney and Jean Baldwin Grossman with Nancy L. Resch.
(64 pages, November 1995) (Executive Summary available) . .$7.50

Building Relationships With Youth in Program Settings: A Study of Big Brothers/Big Sisters by Kristine V. Morrow and Melanie B. Styles. (126 pages, May 1995) (Executive Summary available) $7.50

Big Brothers/Big Sisters: A Study of Volunteer Recruitment and Screening by Phoebe A. Roaf, Joseph P. Tierney and Danista E.I. Hunte.
(48 pages, Fall 1994) $6.00

Big Brothers/Big Sisters: A Study of Program Practices by Kathryn Furano, Phoebe A. Roaf, Melanie B. Styles and Alvia Y. Branch.
(66 pages, Winter 1993) $6.00

Mentoring in the Juvenile Justice System

Initial Implementation Report by Jeffrey L. Greim.
(December 1992, 30 pages) $6.00

Findings from Two Pilot Programs by Crystal A. Mecartney, Melanie B. Styles and Kristine V. Morrow. (Winter 1994, 71 pages) $6.00

Other Studies

College Students As Mentors for At-Risk Youth: A Study of Six Campus Partners in Learning Programs by Joseph P. Tierney and Alvia Y. Branch
(December 1992, 56 pages) $6.00

Understanding How Youth and Elders Form Relationships: A Study of Four Linking Lifetimes Programs by Melanie B. Styles and Kristine V. Morrow
(Spring 1992, 74 pages) $6.00

The Kindness of Strangers: Reflections on the Mentoring Movement by Marc Freedman (Fall 1991, 79-page report, ... $6.00
Fall 1993, 162-page book) $22

Partners in Growth: Elder Mentors and At-Risk Youth by Marc Freedman.
(Fall 1988, 73 pages) $6.00