

Recruiting college students to be youth mentors

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4-H Mentoring: Youth and Families with Promise

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Abstract

Mentoring programs are becoming an increasingly popular intervention to promote positive youth development. However, in the United States there are more at-risk youth than there are mentors. One concentrated source of mentors is students on college and university campuses. This article discusses the recruiting strategies employed by one Extension-sponsored mentoring program. The three strategies outlined have been instrumental in securing committed and caring college-aged mentors.

Keywords: mentoring, recruiting, at-risk youth, volunteer, college, students

Introduction

An integral component of any successful mentoring program is quality mentors. However, recruiting committed and capable mentors can be difficult. Although mentoring is now recognized as an effective strategy for youth development (Dubois and Karcher 2005, Jekielek et al. 2002), and most people think mentoring is a good idea, the overall rates of mentoring in America range from 11 to 33 percent, depending on the study and age cohort of respondents (O'Connor 2006). Yet, there may be an untapped source of mentors that have not been connected to a specific opportunity. In fact, a recent study reports that 29 percent of American adults (approximately 44 million adults) who are not currently mentoring a young person would seriously consider it, and only 31 percent of individuals ages 18-24 have mentored in either formal or informal settings (O'Connor).

This article highlights one program's successful strategies to recruit students on college campuses to be youth mentors. The Youth and Families with Promise program (YFP) attempts to enhance interpersonal skills and academic achievement and is grounded in Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, which asserts "The development of the child is enhanced through her increased involvement, from childhood on, in responsible, task-oriented activities outside the home that bring her into contact with adults other than her parents" (Bronfenbrenner 1979, p. 282). Increased developmental assets in YFP youth have been documented in interpersonal, familial, and academic contexts (Higginbotham et al. 2007).

The YFP program is administered statewide by faculty at Utah State University, and it is managed locally by county FCS/4-H agents. County agents are responsible for recruiting young-adult mentors for at-risk youth that are referred by school officials, juvenile court, and/or parents. The program is now in its 12th year of operation, and numerous recruiting strategies have been employed in an effort to "compete" for willing community volunteers. In one of the larger counties in the state, implementing the following three strategies on college campuses has been instrumental in recruiting approximately 200 youth mentors each year.

Strategy 1: Make it mobile

Successful recruitment of college students requires sensitivity to their schedules and transportation constraints (Jucovy 2001). While it may be common for youth-serving programs to require volunteers to come to a program office and attend a lengthy orientation, recruitment for YFP has been more effective when the location is mobile and the application process is flexible. A two-step approach is used to recruit college students to be mentors, first generating interest and second garnering a commitment.

Step 1: Generating interest. To generate interest in prospective mentors, county Extension staff organize a recruiting event on a college campus. Staff walk around campus distributing magnets with the YFP program name and contact information and giving brief presentations about the mentoring program. If interested, individuals can provide staff with their contact information. In addition, information is given about a short orientation meeting that will take place on a return visit to campus (step 2). To avoid having to process unnecessary paperwork for uninterested individuals, students are not asked to fill out an application or a release for a background check during the initial contact. Instead, students are invited to an upcoming orientation meeting. The goal with the first contact is simply to get the students excited about coming back to hear more and to weed out those who are not really interested. Use of this strategy has yielded a list of over 90 prospective mentors in just two hours.

Step 2: Garnering a commitment. To garner a commitment from prospective mentors, county Extension staff return to campus to hold an orientation meeting. Follow-up emails and telephone calls to prospective mentors (step 1) are simple: “Come and enjoy pizza and a brief movie about our mentoring program. Join us any time on [date] in [building, room].” In the email and phone calls, potential mentors are encouraged to bring a friend. To avoid scheduling conflicts an on-campus meeting room is scheduled for the whole day. The orientation repeats every half-hour with a 20-minute video presentation and time for questions and paperwork.

The recurring 20-minute presentation summarizes the program, the requirements, and most importantly, allows potential mentors to meet current mentors and to hear about the positive influence mentors can have with at-risk youth. The video features other students who are youth mentors with the YFP program.

Strategy 2: Dispel the myths and highlight the benefits

To successfully recruit college-age mentors, it is important to dispel common misconceptions and myths about mentoring. A primary concern of potential mentors is that they feel inadequate. Students ask incredulously, “What could I do that would make a difference?” To dispel this concern early in the recruiting process, Extension staff employ various techniques. For example, at the recruiting events staff wear life jackets. College students are intrigued by people walking around in life jackets and when asked, they are told that mentors don’t need to save lives, they just need to help keep kids above the water. Potential mentors are then introduced to a youth in the program, which allows them to visualize what type of children they would be working with. This approach helps dispel the myth that they have to be a “super-hero” or that they will be working with hardened criminals. Instead, they are introduced to a youth who simply needs a friend and some direction.

Another common concern for potential college mentors is their financial and/or creative ability to plan fun activities on a weekly basis. To overcome this, Extension staff distribute a list of 100 low-cost to no-cost activities mentors can do with their mentee. In addition, schedules of upcoming program events that have already been planned are given to potential mentors. Care is taken that pre-planned program activities, such as ice skating or a college sports game, are of interest to both the mentor and mentee. By sharing “what” the next activity will be, potential mentors begin to see how much fun being involved in the mentoring program can be. This strategy is supported by literature on recruiting that recommends highlighting the personal benefits that mentors may receive via their participation (Clary et al. 1994).

Strategy 3: Ask the question! Don’t just provide information

Providing brochures, orientation meetings, and other sources of information are clearly viable recruiting activities. However, successful recruiting should also include direct requests to sign-up. Research and theory clearly indicate that one of the best ways to turn intentions into action is to ask potential mentors directly (Stukas and Tanti 2005). In fact, 50 percent of mentors in a national mentoring study reported “being asked” as the way they got involved (O’Connor 2006). In YFP recruiting efforts, program staff have learned to emphasize the positive aspects of being a mentor and to not be apologetic in their requests. A brief example highlights this point. At one program activity, a group of college-aged men and women were playing football nearby. Staff went over, introduced themselves, and asked if they could give a short presentation to the group. The young men and women were told what the YFP program was, what mentors do, why *they* needed to be mentors, and asked if they would be mentors. On the spot, the entire group of 20 agreed to mentor.

Even though college students make great mentors, most don’t volunteer unless asked. Only 4 percent of Americans aged 18-24 volunteer in formal mentoring programs (O’Connor 2006). In the YFP program, mentors themselves do a lot of the recruiting of new mentors. They are actively encouraged to invite their roommates, siblings, and friends, which is consistent with existing research that shows mentors are often the best recruiters. (See O’Conner 2006; Roaf, Tierney, and Hunte 1994.)

Implications

Increasingly, organizations, including Extension, are incorporating mentoring programs into their cadre of services (Kuperminc et al. 2005). College campuses provide a pool of potential volunteers that can more than meet the needs of mentoring programs. Jucovy (2001) has observed that “college students can bring unique strengths to a mentoring relationship. They are generally fairly close in age to the youth they are mentoring, and this can help the mentee see them as a supportive friend and role model” (p. 13).

However, volunteer-oriented students are often in demand and are typically quite busy. Success in recruiting students requires creativity as well as sensitivity to their competing demands. Consequently, recruiting strategies should make it easy for potential mentors to learn about volunteer opportunities and to enroll, while proactively addressing potential concerns or misconceptions that may discourage them from committing.

One of the most common and detrimental misconceptions is that mentors need to “save” or “fix” at-risk youth mentees. Sixty-eight percent of mentoring relationships with this misguided perception dissolve in less than nine months. In contrast, only 9 percent of mentoring relationships end in the same time period when the focus is on relationship building and providing support (Morrow and Styles 1995). Following the strategies described above, coupled with the on-going support of the mentors by Extension staff, 40 percent of the college-age mentors stay involved as YFP mentors for over a year (compared to the national average of 38 percent of mentors that continue for a complete year [O’Conner 2006]) and outcomes, as reported by youth and their parents, indicate positive youth development as the result of program participation (Table 1).

Table 1. Paired samples t-test results of youth and parent perceptions of academic achievement, social competency, and delinquent behavior.

Variable		Pre-test mean score (SD)	Post-test mean score (SD)	Mean change (SD)	<i>t</i>
Academic Achievement	Youth report N=82	23.23 (4.30)	25.13 (3.94)	1.90 (.42)	4.53*
	Parent report N=90	22.34 (5.32)	23.86 (5.11)	1.51 (.49)	3.10*
Social Competency	Youth report N=78	30.99 (5.67)	33.18 (5.56)	2.19 (.46)	4.75*
	Parent report N=90	28.47 (6.02)	30.37 (5.63)	1.90 (.33)	5.85*
Delinquent Behavior	Youth report N=78	10.15 (1.97)	9.99 (1.76)	-.17 (.12)	-1.40
	Parent report N=90	10.23 (2.15)	9.73 (1.41)	-.50 (.14)	-3.67*

* $p < .001$

Conclusion

Agents and program staff should feel confident to go to college campuses and ask students to be mentors. They should also encourage existing mentors to ask their friends to join in. Failure to do so is failure to use one of the best recruiting resources available. In a survey of mentors in America, 96 percent of mentors said they would recommend mentoring to others (O'Connor 2006). Prospective mentors should be advised that the benefits of mentoring are not limited to just the youth they serve. Although mentoring does provide a wonderful service to at-risk youth, it has also been linked to positive benefits to the mentor, including increased patience, feeling like a better person, and friendship (McLearn, Colasanto, and Schoen 1998). As more individuals seek mentoring experiences and more Extension offices begin to offer mentoring programs, experimentation, adaptation, and the sharing of additional recruiting strategies is encouraged.

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