"It opened my mind, my eyes. It was good."

Supporting College Students' Navigation of Difference in a Youth Mentoring Program

by Joanna M. Lee, Lauren J. Germain, Edith C. Lawrence, and Jenna H. Marshall

Abstract

This paper uses a mixed-methods approach to investigate how the Young Women Leaders Program, a mentoring program for at-risk adolescent girls, supports mentor commitment, prejudice reduction, and increased understanding and acceptance of diversity among the undergraduates serving as mentors. The results suggest that particular mentoring program components can enhance college students' mentoring commitment and provide them with opportunities for interactions across boundaries of difference, leading to multiple benefits.

Colleges and universities are increasingly interested in university-community partnerships focused on service learning and diversity (AACU 2005; Hurtado 2003). Recent evidence suggests that diversity matters for student learning, prejudice reduction, and other positive psychosocial outcomes, and related empirical research provides a basis for action and policy in support of college diversity initiatives (Gurin 1999; Gurin et al. 2002; Hurtado 2003, 2005; Lopez 2004). Although the most-common formats for enhancing college students' competence with diversity are multicultural classes and diversity workshops (Hurtado 2003), another important but undervalued venue is youth mentoring. Individuals who sign up to mentor usually belong to a different race and social class than the youth seeking mentors (DuBois et al. 2002a), giving college students serving as mentors the opportunity for sustained engagement with

a population different from themselves. Thus, mentoring programs can potentially create and support optimal conditions for diverse interactions that can ultimately lead to prejudice reduction and other positive outcomes for college students serving as mentors.

An estimated three million youth participate in formal one-on-one mentoring relationships (Rhodes and DuBois 2006). Unfortunately, most programs have fewer adults volunteering to be mentors than youth seeking mentors, and it is common for youth to have to wait up to one year before being matched (Rhodes 2002). Given this shortage, some programs actively recruit mentors from the college population. College students, who typically have more free time than working adults, are uniquely suited to mentor youth because of their proximity in age (Tierney and Branch 1992). However, despite college students' potential availability and interest in mentoring, the field is skeptical about drawing mentors from this transitory population.

Although mentoring has been linked to positive emotional, behavioral, and academic outcomes for mentees (DuBois et al. 2002b), ineffective mentors may actually have negative effects on youth mentees (Grossman and Rhodes 2002; Rhodes 2002; Slicker and Palmer 1993). In particular, research indicates that mentoring relationships which are inconsistent or short in duration (less than three months) can actually be damaging to youth (Grossman and Rhodes 2002). Because college students have unpredictable academic schedules and their motivation to serve as mentors can be egotistic (Rhodes and DuBois 2006), their engagement in mentoring relationships may be inconsistent or short-lived. Indeed, in a study of six programs using college students as mentors, Tierney and Branch (1992) reported that average mentor attendance rates were 68%, and above 85% in only two of the six programs. To address the needs of youth adequately, therefore, programs must develop adequate safeguards against inconsistency and early termination by the college student mentors.

Beyond the concern with college student mentors, another ongoing debate in the mentoring field concerns matching mentors with mentees of different races or ethnicities (Sanchez and Colon 2005). Opponents of cross-race matching argue that racial minority youth will benefit most from mentors who have experience combating racism themselves (Ogbu 1990). Others have suggested that minority youth are more likely to experience cultural mistrust with white mentors (Grant-Thompson and Atkinson 1997). The youth may perceive critical feedback from mentors as indications of bias (Sanchez and Colon 2005). However, to date the findings are mixed about whether and how racial and ethnic backgrounds of mentors and mentees matter (Liang and West 2007).

Thus, although college students are available to mentor youth and they could benefit themselves from engagement with a diverse population, college life tends to make them inconsistent mentors, and they may have little prior experience engaging sensitively with youth culturally and ethnically different from them. The purpose of this study is to determine if a mentoring program specifically designed to address those issues can encourage college students' consistency as mentors and provide them with diverse interactions and training leading to prejudice reduction. The program of focus is the Young Women Leaders Program (YWLP), a research-based mentoring program in central Virginia that has served more than one thousand youth since 1997.

The Young Women Leaders Program

YWLP pairs at-risk middle-school girls with college women for an academic year in a unique combination of one-on-one and group mentoring (Lawrence et al. 2009). For at least four hours monthly, each college student meets one-on-one with her seventh-grade mentee to engage in mutually agreed-upon activities; for two hours weekly, they meet after school in a group of eight to ten mentor-mentee pairs and a facilitator. The curriculum of the school-based group sessions addresses critical aspects of girls' scholastic achievement, social aggression, and healthy decision-making (Lawrence et al. 2009). All pairs attend structured activities twice a semester on the college campus, and most groups have additional informal outings.

Although the one-on-one time helps develop relationships between mentee and mentor, the group format also helps hold mentors accountable for meeting consistency: an absence from the group is more noticeable to their peers than missing one-on-one time with a particular mentee. Additionally, the group meetings provide a diverse set of college women and middle-school girls opportunities to interact with one another. YWLP's recruitment efforts are designed to reach all undergraduate women at the university, especially racial- or ethnic-minority women, since approximately half the mentees are nonwhite. Approximately 30% of the mentors in YWLP are women of color, a percentage slightly higher than that of nonwhite students at the university (25%). Some evidence indicates that this type of structural diversity (i.e., representation of multiple sociodemographic categories) can itself facilitate diverse friendships (Fischer 2008); however, simply creating an ethnically diverse setting does not guarantee positive intergroup interactions (e.g., Solorzano, Ceja, and Yosso 2000).

YWLP mentors are required to take a two-semester college course taught by the program director. Class topics include girls'

cognitive, social, and emotional development, health issues, and critical issues in cultural competence. During group supervision, the college women focus on adapting the curriculum to fit their group's needs, relationship issues within the group or pairs, and connecting with one another. The supervision also provides the program staff ample opportunity to provide support. Course grades are based on attendance in class, supervision, the mentoring group, and one-on-one time; thus, college students take their commitment to their mentees and the program seriously.

The YWLP class and group supervision also create a context that facilitates intergroup connections and promotes tolerance among mentors. Historical work by Allport (1954) suggests four conditions needed for intergroup contact to reduce intergroup prejudice: equal status between groups, intergroup cooperation, common goals, and support for positive contact on an institutional level. Pettigrew (2004) identified multiple pathways through which prejudice reduction occurs when such conditions are present, including "learning about the out-group," "generating affective ties," "changing behavior," and "reappraising the in-group" (Pettigrew 2004, 773). Scholars also point to emerging research on the importance of "liking" as well as on anxiety reduction (Pettigrew and Tropp 2006): for example, some researchers have shown that increased familiarity can lead to liking (Bornstein 1989), while others have demonstrated that intergroup contact can reduce anxiety associated with perceptions of difference (e.g., Stephan and Stephan 2000). Both the YWLP class and the group supervision focus on decreasing mentor anxiety about interacting with youth different from them and on providing a diverse group of mentors the opportunity to bond with one another over the mentoring experience.

Summary

Current research on mentoring has not considered the benefits of intergroup contact for mentors. YWLP was chosen for this study because two of its program components were specifically designed to address the consistency and cultural sensitivity development of college student mentors: 1) a combination of one-on-one and group mentoring, and 2) yearlong weekly training and supervision for the mentors (Lawrence et al. 2009). The authors hypothesized that given the structural diversity, optimal conditions for intergroup contact, and ongoing supervision, mentors would a) report positive changes in tolerance of diversity compared to non-mentors; b) express both affective (i.e., emotional) and cognitive shifts related to diverse intergroup contact; c) identify aspects of program structure that facilitated those shifts; and d) show high rates of consistent participation during the academic year.

Methods

The present study employed both quantitative and qualitative data analysis to investigate those hypotheses (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie 2004). As part of a larger evaluation of YWLP, each fall and spring mentors and a comparison group of college women completed pre- and post-program surveys containing questions about academics, health-related behavior, self-worth, tolerance of others, and relationships. The survey was revised in fall 2008; thus, in the current study analyses of survey data include only the first three cohorts of women. Additionally, each mentoring group was observed weekly by a trained researcher, and at the end of the year most mentors and mentees participated in focus groups or individual interviews.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with volunteers from the 2008 cohort of mentors during the final weeks of the program in spring 2009. Interviews, which lasted approximately one hour, included prompts relating to participants' one-on-one mentoring relationships, the group mentoring environment, and interactions with other mentors. Of note, the interview protocol contained a question about similarities and differences between mentors and mentees, asked what each mentor learned from her mentee, and asked her to reflect on the overall mentoring experience.

Quantitative Analysis

Participants

The participants in the study were 499 female college students recruited from fall 2005 through fall 2008; of this larger sample, 256 (51%) were mentors. YWLP's recruitment efforts for mentors were designed to reach all undergraduate women at the university, especially racial or ethnic minority women, because approximately half the mentees were nonwhite. Applicants willing to make the time commitment and judged by staff as potentially excellent mentors received conditional acceptance, contingent on a satisfactory reference and criminal-history check. A comparison group of 261 women was recruited through announcements in undergraduate classes. In the mentor group 70% of the women were white, 15% African American, 7% Asian, and 8% from other groups. In the comparison group, 70% of women were white, 8% African American, 10% Asian, and 12% from other groups.

Procedure

All participants provided informed consent before participating in the study and completed self-report questionnaires in group settings (i.e., during or after class for the comparison participants and during or after the group meeting for the mentoring participants) in the fall and spring. Three measures are of interest to this study.

Measures

Mentor Consistency. To determine mentor consistency, the percentage of mentors who began YWLP in the fall and continued to meet with their mentors weekly for the academic year was calculated for each year.

Behavioral Change. A measure developed for the study assessed perceived changes in social, emotional, and academic functioning. YWLP mentors indicated the degree to which participating in the program led to improvement in one of fifteen areas, including "listen to people with views that are different from mine" and "talk with other people at school" by responding "yes," "no," or "maybe." Because change on this measure could be merely a function of a year in college, the college women in the comparison group were asked to indicate the degree to which being at the university led to improvements in the same fifteen areas by responding "yes," "no," or "maybe." The scale showed high reliability ($\alpha = .90$).

Tolerance. A tolerance scale was adapted from the "feelings thermometer" used by Henderson-King and Kaleta (2000) to assess participants' acceptance of various groups. Participants were asked to report how comfortable they felt around people from ten groups (e.g., "Asian Americans," "welfare recipients," "Hispanics/Latinos") on a scale from 1 ("very uncomfortable") to 5 ("very comfortable"); the scale had high internal consistency ($\alpha = .90$).

Analyses and Results

To determine mentor retention rates, the first analysis calculated how many college women began YWLP in the fall and continued with their mentees for the full academic year (i.e., eight months). The results are as follows: 2005–6 = 51/58 (88%); 2006–7 = 59/67 (88%); 2007–8 = 57/59 (97%); 2008–9 = 67/72 (93%). Over the four years of the study, the average completion rate for the college women mentors in YWLP was 91%.

Using the spring survey data, the second analysis compared mentors to the college women on self-reported behavioral change. A chi-square test revealed that mentors were significantly more likely than was the comparison group to report positive changes in their ability to listen to people with views different from theirs ($\chi 2 = 25.58$, $df = 2$, $p = < .05$); support their friends ($\chi 2 = 8.61$, $df = 2$, $p = < .05$); deal with problems ($\chi 2 = 5.98$, $df = 2$, $p = < .05$); and interact with people different from them ($\chi 2 = 23.34$, $df = 2$, $p = < .05$). However, the effect sizes were all between .12 and .25, which are considered small (Cohen 1988).

In the third analysis, the groups were compared on self-reported levels of tolerance using a repeated measures analysis of variance

(RMANOVA). Because that required two waves of data, participants were excluded if they completed only one wave, leaving a total of 261 (60%) with complete data. Chi-square tests revealed that significantly more participants with missing data were white ($\chi 2 = 13.68$, $df = 1$, $p < .001$). After controlling for survey year and racial or ethnic background (white or nonwhite), there was a significant change in levels of self-reported tolerance between the pre- and post-program surveys [$F (1, 260) = 4.09$, $p < .05$]. Additionally, there was a trend toward significance in how the two groups changed over time [$F (1, 260) = 3.66$, $p = .057$]. There was a small but significant increase in mentors' self-reported tolerance, while comparison group scores declined slightly over time (figure 1). There were no differences between white and nonwhite mentors in how tolerance changed over time.

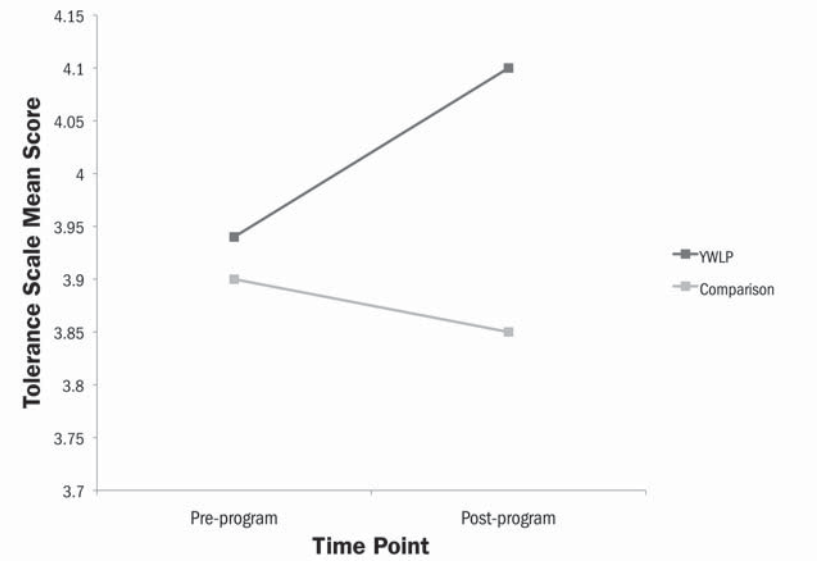

Figure 1. Changes in self-reported tolerance among YWLP mentors and the comparison group

Qualitative Analysis

Analytic Sample

Forty-one women (57%) from the 2008–2009 cohort participated in the interview and 80% of the interviews (n = 33) were analyzed based on the following inclusion criteria: the mentoring relationship lasted through the 2008–2009 academic year; the mentor was a traditional-age undergraduate student who did not serve as a group facilitator; and she had only one mentee. T-tests revealed that the interview

subsample did not differ from the non-interviewed sample in terms of race, year in school, grade-point average, or family income.

Analysis

All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and uploaded into NVivo 8 (2008), which was used for analysis. The initial step of the analytic process involved a holistic reading of all thirty-three transcripts and the extraction of all data relevant to the themes of this study. Next, we coded the data around the central themes of difference and development or learning. Although we approached the data with a set of a priori theory-driven codes, some codes were emergent as well.

Findings

Interview data support and expand upon the statistical results reported above. Participants describe the structural diversity of YWLP, the ways in which the program fostered their connections with individuals different from them, and the impact of these experiences (table 1).

Table 1. Frequency of relevant themes in interview data

Domain and subtype	Number of participants	%
Structural Diversity[a]		
Racial/ethnic	17	51.5
Religious	4	12.1
Cultural	9	27.3
Socioeconomic	10	30.3
Intergroup Contact Conditions[b]		
Intergroup cooperation	33	100.0
Common intergroup goals	32	97.0
Institutional support—class	12	36.4
Institutional support—facilitators	9	27.3
Institutional support—Big Sister group	25	75.7
Related Outcomes		
Intercultural knowledge	11	33.3
Intergroup friendships	15	45.5
Community engagement	12	36.4

Note: Based on thirty-three interviews from the 2008–2009 mentor cohort.
[a]Structural diversity refers to demographic representation (e.g., Gurin et al. 2002).
[b]As described by Allport (1954).

Structural diversity and learning. More than half the mentors commented directly about the structural diversity in the program. One mentor spoke generally: "In our group alone we had so many different types of girls: different ethnicities, different backgrounds."

Some described learning from the ways in which they differed from the other mentor:

> I learned that I can be friends with different people because all the Big Sisters are so different. And I know a lot of times when you go away to places like school you tend to stick with like the same kind of people within your group of friends like you're networking[,] but all the other Big Sisters are into different things and they're different types of people.

Mentors noted many forms of diversity among the college student mentors in YWLP: racial, ethno-cultural, political, and social diversity were mentioned most frequently.

All the mentors identified differences between themselves and their mentees. Although some differences noted were superficial or age related (e.g., musical tastes), others were socio-economic, racial, ethno-cultural, religious, or environmental. One mentor expressed the way that she connected with her mentee's culture at the beginning of their relationship:

> Well[,] we both come from very different backgrounds. She was full Mexican[,] so that was something that was new for me because it was a different culture and I got to experience it. One of the first things we did [together] was go to one of her festivals. That was really neat. . . . She danced and everything.

Many mentors told the interviewers about learning directly from such differences. One recalled a day at the mall when her mentee "opened up" to tell her about the many challenges in her family and home life. Here, the mentor recollects what she learned from that conversation:

> I was hearing a . . . thirteen-year-old speak about that part of her life and [how it has] made her become who she is. . . . I never realized that could even be possible[,] and it made me talk to other people in a completely different way. So that's what I've learned from her—that no matter where you grow up there's so many different types of people out there that just don't think like I do. It opened my mind, my eyes. It was good. That's what I learned from [my Little Sister].

Program-level support for intergroup connection. Mentors discussed the ways in which the program supported their connections with people who differ from themselves. Many noted the importance of class readings and discussions about diversity. Others remembered

connection-building activities, such as the "step into the circle" exercise, in which a prompt, perhaps "I identify as a person of color" or "My parents are divorced," is read and those who identify with the prompt physically move into the circle. That activity provided a visual representation of differences and an opportunity to talk about them.

Significantly, a few mentors spoke about the ways in which group facilitators or program staff helped them overcome challenges that cultural barriers present. One mentor noted a language barrier that was a challenge in the relationship because she was unable to connect to her mentee's parents and earn the trust required to spend time with her mentee outside the group. This mentor asked her facilitator, who spoke the same language as the family, to come with her to meet with them. The mentor described this meeting as a turning point for her, because the parents were able to "open up and express feelings that they've never been able to tell me." Thus, mentors note that the group and curricular components of YWLP played significant roles in fostering and supporting intergroup connections.

Mentors and the community. Five mentors brought up noticing community needs and becoming involved in public policy to effect change. Another discussed how she and her Little Sister could work together with YWLP to perform more service for their communities in the upcoming year. Overall, the majority of the mentors noted the ways in which their mentoring relationships or their relationships with other mentors helped connect them to the community and to people different from them. Nearly a quarter of the women also mentioned increases in their sense of agency within their own local communities.

Discussion

YWLP's combined one-on-one and group mentoring as well as its yearlong weekly training and supervision may provide a useful model for mentoring programs using college students as mentors. The findings presented above suggest that the model not only supports the longevity of mentor-mentee relationships, which is a critical aspect of effective mentoring, but also improves mentors' ability to interact with others across boundaries of difference. Learning to accept others and assume competence may be an especially important skill for mentors of adolescents, since teens' own developmental insecurities can make it difficult for them to tolerate differences in others. Although further study is needed to determine how much the YWLP mentoring experience versus required coursework contributes to the mentors' views on diversity, both provide college students with structural diversity and frequent opportunities for social

interaction at the group level, components found to be critical for meaningful diverse interactions (Gurin et al. 2002). Furthermore, both offer the optimal intergroup-contact conditions suggested by Allport (1954).

In terms of the internal mechanisms leading to the YWLP mentors' increased tolerance and prejudice reduction, the interview data suggest that the processes may be both cognitive and emotional. Mentors talk about "learning about the out-group," supporting the assertion that familiarity can lead to liking (Pettigrew and Tropp 2006). They also describe the cognitive shifts that are recurrent themes in work by other scholars (e.g., Gurin et al. 2002; Hurtado 2003). Affective connections were evident as well, and the mentoring relationships inspired many college women to become more engaged in projects connecting them to communities outside the university setting. Future research is needed to develop and test a theoretical model that characterizes the critical components (e.g., structural and interactional diversity at the macro level; optimal conditions for contact at the group level) and processes of change (cognitive or affective shifts) necessary for promoting meaningful intergroup contact in mentoring programs using college students as mentors.

Although both the quantitative and qualitative data reveal increased intergroup interaction and tolerance among mentors, this study has notable limitations. First, it is possible that students who volunteer to be mentors are motivated to interact proactively with diverse groups; hence, the changes reported in the surveys could have occurred over the course of the year even without service as a mentor. Moreover, preexisting differences between mentors and the comparison group could be ruled out only if this were a randomized control design. Next, a large amount of data for the tolerance measure was missing, so we cannot be sure that women who did not complete those items were the same as women who did. Similarly, the self-rated measure of behavioral change used different prompts for the mentors and comparison group; collecting the data at multiple points in time with the same measures for each group would provide a more valid assessment of change. Finally, the interview data represented only a very small sample of mentors, leaving open the possibility that other mentors' views about diversity and intergroup contact were not the same.

Despite those limitations, we feel confident in concluding that a college-based group-mentoring program such as YWLP can offer multiple benefits for mentors. The combination of one-on-one and group mentoring helps hold the mentors accountable and provides group support as mentoring relationships develop, while weekly

training and supervision provide college students with an important connection to one another and critical course work on adolescent development and cultural sensitivity. Empirical and anecdotal evidence suggests that on college campuses, volunteer or service-learning opportunities often lead to relationships that cross racial, ethnic, religious, or socioeconomic boundaries (Hurtado 2003; Keen 2006; Keen and Hall 2009) and produce benefits evidenced in academic, personal, and civic domains (Swaner and Brownell 2008). In its pairing of the academic component with the opportunity for community engagement with diverse youth positions, YWLP stands as a beneficial service-learning program for college students interested in learning how to navigate boundaries of difference.

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